

Hey, it is Ezra. So we are working on a bunch of other episodes about Israel Palestine, and we also have some great shows that were recorded that were supposed to come out if my book leave had lasted as long as I had intended for it to last on some other topics.

And we're going to be releasing those as events warrant.

So this one felt important to do right now. It's between my colleague Carlos Azada and McKay Coppins on Mitt Romney. McKay, of course, wrote the big new buzzy Romney book that is out. I think it shines some important light on what the Republican Party has become and what that has meant for people who just a couple of election cycles ago were literally the Republican Party's leaders watching Romney closely and seeing what has happened to him and then where he has moved in response. I think it's a really interesting way to understand actually how far the Republican Party has shifted, even though it is still called the same thing. So I think there's a lot of insight here and hope you enjoy it.

It's a weirdly fitting moment to examine the life of Mitt Romney.

Romney has been a governor and a U.S. Senator as a member of the Republican Party.

He was even the party's presidential nominee. And yet what he may be most remembered for is the moment when he broke with the GOP. In February of 2020, Romney voted to convict Donald Trump in his impeachment trial on the charge of abusing his power by attempting to persuade Ukraine's government to investigate the Biden family. In that moment, Romney became the first Senator in U.S. history to vote to remove a president of his own party from office.

McKay Coppins, a staff writer at the Atlantic, goes deep on that decision and many others Romney has faced in his new book, *Romney A Reckoning*. The book is in part the product of dozens of personal interviews as well as access to the Senator's private journals, emails, and text messages. At a time when the Republican Party took weeks to even choose a House Speaker, and when it seems eager to nominate a twice impeached and four times indicted former president as its standard bearer, Romney's story feels retro. He's the consummate institutionalist

in an anti-institutionalist party. And yet what's fascinating about Coppins' book is that the author pushes Romney to wrestle with his own role, even his own complicity, in what his party has become. As always, you can email the show with your thoughts and guest recommendations at EsraClineShow@nytimes.com. McKay Coppins, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me. So I have to read a lot of political memoirs and political biographies by journalists and historians for my job. What I love about this book is that you've written a book about the evolution of Mitt Romney, his principled stance, his implicit compromises along the way. But it's also a book about the evolution of the Republican Party. And there's some jaw dropping moments here and there that I want you to explain in greater detail. But first, let's start with some basics. So the book is *Romney, A Reckoning*. But I feel like there's multiple reckonings going on in the book. What reckonings are you focused on?

It's a good point. And I think that that subtitle was deliberately sort of multifaceted, right?

Perfect, yes. Because the way that this book began was that I had covered Mitt Romney for a while. I had covered his 2012 presidential campaign. I covered his speech at the Republican Convention in 2004 when I was a senior in high school. So I could say that I've been covering Mitt Romney for almost 20 years if you go back to my 17-year-old. You've been covering Mitt before it was uncool. Yes, exactly. That's exactly right. But I had profiled him for the Atlantic and I had kind of stayed in touch with him. And after January 6th, I could tell that he was kind of going through something. There was a kind of reckoning happening.

He was grappling with difficult questions about what his party had become, what was happening to the country. And I sensed, though he didn't make this explicit at first, his own role in all of this, right? Like whether he had played a role inadvertently in allowing the party to get to this point. And so when I approached him, I basically said, I think you might be in a unique position to be a really interesting subject for political biography. I only want to do it if you're ready to kind of fully tell all the stories, right? Be candid, be straightforward, not protect your future reelection or whatever. And he very luckily, for me, sort of took that as a challenge and started giving me his journals and his emails. And obviously in the last few years, he was known as this guy who was courageously standing up against Trump and was sort of one of the last remaining bulwarks against the spread of Trumpism and the Republican Party. I knew that was going to be a crucial part of the story, but how he got to that from being kind of known as a cautious, calculating politician was the story I was sort of most interested in at first.

I want to get into that sense of his personality, right? That he was this cautious, calculating guy. You have a great description early on of Mitt. You call him a walking amalgam of prep school manners and Mormon niceness and the practiced cool of the private equity set, which just stuck in my head. It's like, yeah, that's Mitt Romney. But you also raised something else that I hadn't thought about in connection to Romney at all. And that is his anger, right? There's more than a few moments when you talk about sort of this deep well of anger, his temper he has to control. When does that manifest itself and where does it come from? That actually was something that I was surprised to learn about because the couple moments that we've seen him be angry in public are sort of notable for how out of character they seem, right? I mean, one of them is on the Senate floor on January 6th, standing behind Josh Hawley as he's giving this speech. And there's this kind of famous clip of Mitt Romney sort of glaring at him from behind two masks that he's wearing. What I learned from talking to him and from reading his journals and talking to people around him is that he does have this temper. It was one of the early impediments to his kind of ability to win political debates as a candidate. So when he was running for governor, he would do these mock debates with his advisors. Because in part, he had smart advisors like Beth Meyers, who in Massachusetts kind of became his right hand. And she realized, I'm going to try to get under his skin in these mock debates and see what happens. And he would get so angry. She would, you know, try out these like attack lines. One time he threw his notes on the floor. Another time he said, well, if that's what it's going to be like, there's no way for me to win. We shouldn't even bother. He would really get, you know, kind of angry. And, you know, I think part of it comes from his lifetime of privilege and wealth, right? He grew up in a kind of bubble where he wasn't challenged that often. He also has sort of a quasi aristocratic conviction in like manners and propriety. And he feels like when his sense of propriety is being violated by somebody else, it really makes him mad. There's like an indignation to it, right? Yeah, it's an indignation. And that's kind of what was interesting about him as a character, is that he has this righteous indignation, but he can also be kind of judgmental of people and loses temper. And it doesn't always manifest in sort of a flattering way. You had an enormous degree of access to Romney, just like his trove of emails. Those private journals are amazing, right? Why do you think he was ready to do this? And why do you think he's ready to do this with you?

I think it was a couple things. I think he realized he was at the twilight of his career, right? For so much of his political career, he was focused on becoming president one day, right? And he now knows that's never going to happen. So that's part of it, being freed from the constraints of trying to become president. That matters. He also was increasingly isolated in Washington and alienated from his party. Something I learned about Mitt Romney is he really is a team guy. Like naturally, he wants to be part of a team. He cultivated this close inner circle of advisors that stayed with him for decades. He's a partisan in the sense that he wants to pick a side and then be with that side in some ways, but he just couldn't get on board with the Donald Trump era of the Republican Party. And because of that, felt increasingly isolated and was therefore not buffeted by the machinery of partisan politics that would prevent him...

Oh, which would preclude you from...

Yeah, that would prevent him from kind of telling me these stories, right?

He didn't really care what Lindsey Graham told him in the caucus meetings, or if Josh Ollie would get mad at him. I think that was part of it. But I will also say, it's not like he kind of arrived as a subject fully ready to go this far. It was a two-year conversation over 50 interviews that took sometimes me just kind of patiently listening, sometimes me needling him a little bit, challenging him. He also, I mean, to his credit, put in a lot of time considering and reconsidering questions that I asked. Sometimes he would come back to me a week later and say, you asked me this last week. I don't think I fully answered you and he'd have kind of more thoughts. But the other thing that's happened is that Mitt Romney, I write about this throughout the book, is a person who has had a very keen sense of his own mortality for a long time. And this goes back to a car crash that he was involved in as a Mormon missionary, as a young man. But especially, I think now he's convinced that he only has at most 12 years left. And I don't, I mean, sometimes these conversations would take morbid turns where I really didn't know how

to respond. But the men in his family have a history of sudden heart failure. His father is the one who lived the longest of any of them and he died at 88. So he's convinced he has at most 12 years left. But he's thinking more about how he'll be remembered and less about how whatever he'll do will play in the next day's new cycle. You use this term a few times, the Romney obligation.

What is that? Mitt Romney has this kind of story that he tells about his family, which is that the Romneys have this kind of overdeveloped, outsized sense of obligation to run toward a crisis and to try to solve the problem. That when they're called upon, or not even if they're not called upon, but when there is a crisis that needs to be addressed, they feel like they need to be there and be in the middle of the action. Even when it's risky and even when it's unpleasant. And he saw this in his father. He has stories going back through his genealogy of various forefathers who also had this. And he feels a strong sense of obligation, which has manifested in various ways throughout his career. I mean, one of the most obvious is his takeover of the Olympics in Salt Lake City. At this time was on pace to become a billionaire. Instead is convinced by his wife, Anne, and a couple of other friends that the Olympic games in Salt Lake City were in crisis. There had been kind of scandals around financial mismanagement and bribery allegations and advertisers were fleeing. And he decided, well, somebody needs to turn this around and needs to be me. And he walked away from really a lot of money. He could have made a lot more money. Instead took this. And that was kind of the argument that Anne made to him. What do we need more money for? We have all the money we

could

possibly want. And he went and took this kind of thinkless job that ended up propelling him to the Massachusetts governorship. But one of the most revealing things I found in research about this period was a quote that Anne Romney gave the Boston Globe at that time, which is, somebody asked, why is your husband doing this? Moving across the country to Utah to take over these games. And she said, he loves emergencies and catastrophes, which I asked him about. And he kind of admitted that on the one hand, there's this strong sense of obligation. On the other hand, he also has an adrenaline rush when there's a high stakes problem to be solved that he can't really get anywhere else. You mentioned his father. You dedicate a lot of time to George Romney, who seems by far to be the biggest influence looming over Mitt's life. And often it's this kind of inspirational presence. But in some ways it also felt like a little reproachful. Mitt is aware of the moments when he's not living up to George's legacy. How does George loom over Mitt? The way I think about it, as I've spent time with him, and George comes up all the time in our conversations, in his journals. All the time in the book. It's amazing. I mean, it really, I put a lot of George in there. I could put a lot more. I mean, there's a version of this book that it's like a biography of the two of them because they're so linked in Mitt's mind, at least. The way I think about it is that he's both inspired by and at times haunted by his dad's legacy. His father was pioneering auto executive, then became governor of Michigan, was then seen as the likely next Republican nominee for president, and happened to be running at a time when the Republican Party was taking its rightward turn, where you had Richard Nixon's campaign running the Southern strategy. White grievance became an incredibly important part of the new and emerging Republican coalition. But what makes George Romney so admirable is that he kind of emphatically stood against the rising tide of racism and white grievance and refused to indulge it, and in fact pushed back against it in ways that were pretty politically damaging to him. He refused to condemn the people who took part in the race riots in Detroit. While running as a Republican presidential candidate, and instead delivered an address about how we need to look at the root causes of these riots, and white America needs to look within itself. He launched his campaign with a tour of the American ghettos, speaking to the inner cities, posing with left-wing radicals, arguing that we can find common ground. His campaign ended up melting down, though, because of one interview that he gave, a radio interview in which he was asked about his changing position on the Vietnam War, and George said that, you know, I went over to Vietnam with a group of other governors, and the generals brainwashed me. And what he was trying to say is, basically, the American military and the State Department were selling us a false story. And we got spun, and now I've realized that I got spun, and I've changed my attitude, and now I'm against the Vietnam War. But that use of the word brainwashing became a massive story. George's campaign was actually already on the way down, but it was more the final nail in the coffin. But it was, you know, emblematic of George's problem as a politician, but also his most admirable trait, which is that he just sort of recklessly said what he believed. And what Mitt took away from that is both my dad was a hero and the embodiment of integrity and politics, and I wish that I could be like my dad, but also the way to get elected president is to do the exact opposite. George was great, but he blew it. But he blew it. And so what Mitt took away, and he really internalized this lesson and made sure everyone in his campaigns did, too,

was we have to be hyper disciplined. We have to stick to the talking points. We have to follow where our party's base is, and we're not going to try to heroically change the mind of Republican primary voters. We're going to do what's necessary to win. He took this so seriously that when he first ran for president in 2008, he pulled a thesis, I believe it was a BYU master's thesis, but somebody who had basically written about why George's presidential campaign failed printed it out and had all of his senior advisors read it. That was an amazing moment. I just didn't believe he had done that. But it shows how much George kind of loomed over Mitt Romney throughout his career. Yeah, here it says, the title of the 88-page paper was George Romney in 1968, From Front Runner to Dropout, Analysis of Cause. I mean, imagine like, in order to stop getting this 88-page master's thesis about, here's why my dad lost, and let's not do that. Right. But it's just important to understand because for most of his career, he essentially defined his approach to politics in opposition to his father. And really, I think the way he sees his turn during the Trump era is a chance to finally reach for his father's legacy and live up to it. Of course, the major overwhelming difference is that his father did that when the stakes were the highest when he was running for president. And that's something that Mitt didn't do when the stakes were the highest. And you know, it's funny, I think that haunts him a little bit. And this was one of those things where I was always kind of pressing him to think harder. You can tell, you can tell on the book that he, and he goes back and forth on it. He does. Some weeks, in our weekly interviews, he would seem like he was kind of confessing complicity and the parties capture by these kind of extremist forces, by indulging them or not standing up against them. But then the other, another week, he'd be like, yeah, but I think that might be too far. And he resisted for a long time. I mean, there's one important moment that I think listeners of this podcast will think about, which is Mitt Romney accepted Donald Trump's endorsement in 2012 when he was running in the Republican primary. They stood on a stage together in Las Vegas, had a whole event built around it. And this was when Donald Trump was becoming a right-wing political celebrity with this kind of conspiracy theory about Barack Obama not being American. I want to come back to that moment. I love what he says in the moment when he's up there with Trump. There are some things that you just can't imagine happening in your life. This is one of them. I love kind of witnessing other people's awkwardness in real time, you know, and that was just one of the most awkward moments in American politics in recent years. How did Romney rationalize that moment? Yeah, so he, you know, first of all, convinced himself that if Trump didn't endorse him, he'd endorse somebody else. And it's better for the party, better for the country if he wins instead of Newt Gingrich or Rick Perry. God, he hated Newt. Some of the meanest quotes, not just in the book, but that I've ever seen one politician say about another are about Newt Gingrich. If that's a plug for future readers, I don't go ahead. But, you know, he saw himself as running against kind of a clown car of lesser Republicans and felt like he needed to win, which is a very common rationalization in politics. He also believed that Donald Trump was not a serious political figure, right? If Bill Maher and Kanye West can donate to and endorse Barack Obama, why can't I have the apprentice host? Who cares, right? But the other kind of interesting wrinkle to this is that as he spent time with Trump at fundraisers and stuff throughout that campaign, he actually kind of liked Trump, you know. You said that. He sort of enjoyed having him around. He enjoyed the company. He still thought

of him as a buffoon, and he didn't take him seriously as like a businessman or anything like that. And he thought his conspiracy theories were insane. They have this kind of, there's this one scene where Mitt tries to like very patiently and logically talk Donald Trump out of the Berther conspiracy theory. He's like, no, no, no, what you don't understand about constitutional lies. And like quickly realizes that Trump like has completely zoned out. And he's like, all right, never mind. But in terms of just Trump as like one-on-one, you know, guy who would call him sometimes on the campaign trail, it was fun. And, you know, I found this journal entry from 2012 where he kind of Mitt kind of rhapsodizes about hanging out with Trump and says, you know, they just don't make him like Donald Trump anymore. And, you know, he says he's entertaining and, you know, lifts my spirits on the campaign trail or whatever, which I think, you know, when I brought it up with him, you know, I could tell he was kind of chagrined by it. But he also, you know, said, this does speak, though, to how Trump has gotten as far as he did with the party, right? You get in the room with him and he's fun to hang out with and he's charismatic

and gossipy and he seduces people. And, you know, he... It was the crews, he didn't take him that seriously though, right? Yeah. But that's the thing. He didn't think of him as like, certainly anyone who would run for president. He just didn't think, he thought he was like a... It's a gadfly. Yeah, he's a gadfly. And, you know, that's how he rationalized it.

This was, though, one of those things that I think, like, even now, as he went through this whole kind of reckoning process, we still, I think, you know, somewhat disagree on where he landed. Because as much as he's embarrassed by it in retrospect and as much as he, you know, wishes he could take it back, he just fundamentally doesn't believe that accepting Trump's endorsement and kind of welcoming him into the campaign in 2012 had that much effect on Trump's ultimate rise to power four years later. Do you think it did?

I think it's hard to say, but I think there's more of a case than Romney will acknowledge. I think that standing on that stage with him and making him part of the Republican campaign apparatus in 2012 introduced him to a lot of people in the party and I think just gave him a little credibility. I think Romney has a plausible case that, like, he ended up winning in this, like, writing this crazy once-in-a-generation populist wave and maybe that's true, but Romney won't fully say, I am, you know, responsible for Trump's rise.

There's an idea that comes up a lot in the book. It's rationalization.

And you see it throughout Mitt's life in different key moments, especially in the political realm. When did you first begin to understand that that would be a real theme of this book?

It's interesting because I both saw him doing it in real time and also listened to him discuss his own impulse to rationalize and so it became clear to me pretty early on that this would be an important theme of the book. It was also, frankly, part of what made the book timely and interesting to me because I think we are at this moment in American politics that we would not have gotten to if not for hundreds of maybe thousands of people rationalizing things that were in their self-interest. So, to answer the question more directly, Mitt, I had heard him tell student groups or his staff, if there's one piece of advice I can give you now with all this hindsight that I have the benefit of now, it would be don't sacrifice your principles at the altar of ambition, it's not worth it. A lot of this, like, believe me, I know it's not worth it, kind of like there's an acknowledgement that that's something he did. Absolutely. And in fact, that was one of the early conversations we had. I asked him,

I've heard you say this a bunch of times, can you give me some examples of when you did rationalize something in your own self-interest or sacrifice your principles? And that became the beginning of a long-running conversation that kind of ran over the next two years because he started with, he had some immediate ones that came to mind. And not all of them are, I acted more right-wing than I was. In fact, when he was running for Senate in Massachusetts and in for Governor of Massachusetts, he told me I pretended to be pro-choice when I really wasn't, and he walked me through in kind of fascinating detail how he rationalized the position that he took. He dug into Mormon discourses on the issue and looked for loopholes that he could find and really convinced himself that this was an okay position to take. But then later, there were a bunch of times when he was running for president where he acted like he had these right-wing positions that he really didn't. And part of it for him was that he is not somebody who actually, I think, he disagrees with me slightly on this, but I write in the book that he's not somebody who places a high premium on unwavering dedication to certain policy positions. He thinks that on most issues, there are a range of reasonable positions and what really matters is the execution. I think implicit to that is if it helps me get closer to the White House, taking one position over another, what's wrong with that? It's very pragmatist to me. I think that's part of why he was always tagged with this flip-flopper attack because he's not an ideologue. He doesn't have a firm set of policy positions. I remember Anne Romney's convention speech when it wasn't about his beliefs as much as no one will work harder than Mitt Romney. It was basically saying, he's just going to outwork everyone because that's the kind of guy he is. So what kind of Republican was he and then what persona formed as you put it? I think naturally, coming out from where he came from in Michigan and watching his dad, he would have described himself in the early 2000s as probably a moderate, pragmatic pro-business Republican whose forte was budgetary issues, fiscal issues, and stimulating job growth in his state and hopefully in the country. In 08, when he started running, he thought of himself as like, I'm going to make the campaign about the things I want it to be about. I had this kind of quaint idea that the presidential campaign should be about the biggest issues that affect Americans and it's going to be about what I think is important and what he very quickly realized on those stages was that that's not how you win a Republican primary. That's not how you win a presidential election. You end up having to sell yourself out little by little and reshape your persona. I don't think that everything about him as a 2008 presidential candidate was false, but I do think he was responding to crowds and he kind of positioned himself as the Reaganite, right-wing, even kind of culture warrior because that was the path for him in that primary race and it came off as inauthentic. One of the most interesting things that I found in his emails was a long thread among his way too many Republican political consultants who were working on that 2008 presidential campaign where it was toward the end, it was clear that McCain was going to win, Romney was going to have to drop out soon, and so it was now like recriminations among the consultants, blaming each other. This is why the campaign didn't work and what was really interesting is there was a contingent of consultants who were saying we need to do more to position him as the heir to Reagan. He's, claimed the Reaganite conservative mantle and then Stuart Stevens, who was his longtime advisor, said the problem with that is that he's not a movement conservative and people can tell. He comes off as inauthentic when we position him that way. We need to stop doing that.

So there was this kind of tug of war between these two sides. I think in 2012 when he decided to run again, he got to run a campaign that was closer to what he wanted it to be about because economic issues worked top of mind, but still there were all kinds of moments in that campaign that he wishes he could take back. I think it's the 2012 campaign where Romney still thought that this campaign could be about principles and expertise and competence and Stuart Stevens is no, this campaign, where the party is right now, this is about identity and tribalism and grievance and if we're going to win, we're going to have to steal this nomination. That was a remarkable statement because I think that there were instances where Romney is still thinking that the budget, he was like, the Tea Party is really about fiscal discipline. I'm like, for real? Are you for real? And even Stuart Stevens is like, no, that's not what this is about at all. And so 2012 felt like that hinge moment where Mitt didn't quite understand or didn't want to understand what the party was becoming. People say that it's remarkable that after Barack Obama, the country like Donald Trump, I think it's even more remarkable that after Mitt Romney, the Republican Party nominated Donald Trump. That transformation. The most polar opposite kinds of candidates with polar opposite worldviews in a lot of ways. And the same party.

And the same party in a lot of the same vote. Obviously, most of the same voters.

That idea that I titled that chapter heist because that really was Mitt Romney's campaigns approach to the 2012 primaries was the only way we win is by stealing this from voters who really don't like Mitt Romney, right? He's a Mormon in an overwhelmingly kind of evangelical primary base. He's a Massachusetts moderate in a very conservative party.

And the only way we're going to escape here is through redirection and a misdirection and trying to take voters minds off his various deficits. And he ended up pulling it off. He won the nomination by the skin of his teeth. But in the process, I think did so much damage to himself that it was hard to then win in the general election against Barack Obama.

Why do you think he wanted to be president? Is it just the Romney obligation? Just like, I'm the guy who can fix things. There's a great scene when he's mad at his campaign staffers for not coming up with like a message, right? He's like, Obama has this whole like, move forward thing. It makes me look backward. That's really smart. Where's my message? The message should come from the top, right? Don't you have an idea of why you want to do this? He thought of the kind of lofty campaign message as just like another thing you could outsource to your consultants, right? And the reality is the reason you're running needs to come from the candidate, right? Yes, the consultants can help you dress it up and come up with the slogan, but like, you need to have the reason. And I think the reason they struggled with that was because ultimately his reason for running was that he just thought he was better than everybody else at fixing fiscal issues, right? And that's just not like a, it's not a rallying cry. It's not hope and change. It's like, you know, put the consultant in charge for four years. He'll turn things around. But the thing is that was genuine. It's interesting. His most active period of journal keeping was in the 2012 campaign. And I think it's because he thought he had a pretty good shot at becoming president. He wanted to be, you know, ready to write a presidential memoir one day if he needed to. And so he kept a very detailed day-to-day journal, which started out in sort of travelogue form where it was like, I had these meetings, went to the state, whatever, and then quickly became a medium for like venting and catharsis. Like at the end of a long day, he would, it was great for me. At the end of the day, he would take out his iPad. That's where

he would write and just kind of write all his frustrations with his primary candidates and his staff and Barack Obama and, you know, super interesting stuff there. But you could detect in those journal entries a genuine desire to help people. I mean, part of the kind of campaign apparatus was like, they would bring out these people whose small businesses had been destroyed or who had lost their homes. And so he spent basically that whole year meeting with people who were really struggling in the aftermath of the 2008 recession. And he really felt for them. And he knew that he couldn't really like emote in public because it would come across as phony and he wasn't that kind of politician. But he did feel for them. And this is kind of the difference between people like him and me, frankly, is that he has just this enormous outsize confidence in his own abilities. Like he really believed that he could fix the U.S. economy if he was just given the chance. Not only that he could, that he was the only one. The only one. Right. Exactly. Yeah. I remember I was reading this book and I turned to my wife at one point and I was like, I know why Romney wanted to be president. He just thought he'd be really good at it. You know, like, like, like that was, you know, that was kind of it. There's a moment much earlier in the book that is another one of those jaw dropping moments. He's talking to a group of, you know, evangelical leaders in South Carolina. He'd been kind of realizing that, like, people think Mormonism is kind of weird and maybe this is hurting me. And then one of these guys says to him flat out, like, if you become president, you will kind of normalize Mormonism and therefore more people will go to hell. Yes. And not like go to hell is a metaphor. You know, he means like go to hell, capital H. And I kept wondering, you know, to what extent did he come to conclude it was a hindrance overall in his political ambitions, but to what extent did it also drive him? It's interesting for all of the flip-flopping he's accused of and all the kind of disposable policy positions that, you know, he's demonstrated throughout his life, that his faith has been non-negotiable from the beginning, right? He had advisors in 2007 when he was running for president the first time who said, you know, why don't you just say, Mormonism is part of my heritage. It's, you know, passed down by... You wanted to give a speech, kind of minimizing it, right? Yeah, why don't you just say, like, it's not really, you know, I'm a Christian, you know, but like even Mormon stuff is just kind of part of my family history. And he was like, no way. That's not happening. Even as he was having these conversations, with evangelical power brokers and ministers and voters who are making very clear that for them, it was non-negotiable, right? Like voting for a Mormon to them, there was no way. And that 2008 primary was kind of traumatizing for his family. I mean, I interviewed all of his... I talked to all of his sons and his wife and they have stories about just some of the things people would say to them on the campaign trail in Iowa or South Carolina. It was kind of the first time that they encountered kind of like visceral anti-Mormon sentiment from people. Because they lived in that community for so long, right? Well, they lived in Massachusetts where there's not a lot of Mormons, but it's also a pretty, like, progressive, inclusive place. Like, I know this because I grew up as a Mormon in Massachusetts and you would get the occasional polygamy joke or whatever, but it was really just, you know, first of all, mostly secular and people just didn't really care that much about your religion in places like Iowa and South Carolina. People care a lot about your religion. And on the one hand, he wasn't going to disavow his religion, but he also had to keep seeking the

endorsements and votes of these people who manifestly hated his religion. And it's a, you know, strange kind of indignity of politics that I think a lot of candidates are called upon to endure. I mean, I think of Barack Obama, certainly, you know, campaigning in 2008, in a country as diverse and pluralistic as ours, we ask our candidates to endure a lot. And there's another scene later in the book where he goes to the Values Voters Summit and he has to speak right before this guy, Brian Fisher, who's like, you know, raging, like, anti-Muslim, homophobic guy who's also said, you know, terrible things about Mormons. And Romney finds out that he's speaking right before him and decides like, I need to push back against this rhetoric and adds a couple lines to his speech, pushing back against it. It gets a terrible response in the room. He ends up coming in near last place in the straw poll at the Values Voters Summit and he writes in his journal afterward, this is my seventh time coming to this summit, smiling because it'll be my last. And it kind of gives you a sense of just like, how much he hated that part of campaigning. And yet, in a generic sense, wouldn't like, Values Voters be midst people? That's what's so ironic about all of this. Like, a Mormon Republican is about as value-centric as you can have. And he lived a life where he was, you know, father of five, doting husband, never been any controversy or scandal about his personal life, doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, you know, like he should have been the model candidate for these people. But because of their their theological differences, they just couldn't get past it. It's interesting to me how clearly Romney despises campaigning, like throughout the book. He hates Iowa. And then he's like, when he has to go back to Iowa again, he's, he's so miserable, you know, like in some ways he's such an awkward fit for politics. I remember there's a great moment early on, which like, talk about like, what if scenarios, you know, where he's in college and he thinks he wants to get a PhD in like English literature and wants to study Steinbeck and Dickens for the rest of his life. And some professor is like, you'll be so poor, just like go to business school, you know, and you'll have plenty of time to read books, like go to law school or business school, choose one of them. And then of course, he went to both. Yeah. But I mean, I do think that speaks to like Romney very at home in a conference room, a boardroom, right? I think would have actually probably enjoyed a life of, you know, reading books and teaching. He's really not at home on the campaign trail. And in fact, he's now pretty self aware about it. There's a funny moment. I don't actually think this is in the book, but where he was watching Ron DeSantis campaign

early in the current primaries. And he told me, you know, that guy looks like he's getting ready to go to a, you know, dental appointment or something. And then he kind of paused and said, kind of reminds me of myself, actually. Oh my gosh. He just, he never liked it. He knows he's awkward. He can feel himself being awkward. But he also, the other thing is that like, some of it is people assume a level of inauthenticity that actually isn't always there. You know, when he ran for governor in Massachusetts, they ran this ad called Ann that was about his like teenage romance with Ann and his like doting affection on his wife. And voters hated it and they pulled it like very quickly because he came off as like plastic and too perfect and fake and people were like, there's no way that's real. It actually was real. That is what he's like with Ann. And what he said to me is, I guess I'm, I'm the candidate who's authentically inauthentic. He comes from a long line of wife guys. The Romney men love their wives performatively, but also authentically. Last night in preparation for this conversation, I watched, I watched several old Mitt Romney speeches. And one of the ones I watched was his 2016 speech

denouncing Trump, right? He almost seemed like he was having fun. And let me put it very plainly. If we Republicans choose Donald Trump as our nominee, the prospects for a safe and prosperous future are greatly diminished. But you say, wait, wait, wait, isn't he a huge business success? Doesn't he know what he's talking about? No, he isn't. And no, he doesn't. He's got this little smile half the time. He like waits for people to laugh at his one liners, you know, like sometimes they don't, sometimes they do. But he just, he absolutely eviscerates Trump. Donald Trump is a phony, a fraud. His promises are as worthless as a degree from Trump University. So given that, how on God's good earth does he take the meeting to become Trump's secretary of state? It just seems like such a contrast to everything he'd been doing. He'd been like behind the scenes, machinations, trying to like get Cruz and Rubio in Kasich to figure out a plan. I mean, he'd been doing everything he could. You know, he decided this guy was this pernicious force, a con artist, dangerous to the Republic. And then like, well, you know, but maybe I can go work for him. Like how did he come around to that process? I see that offer or kind of the dangling of the secretary of state job in front of Romney as sort of the last temptation for Romney, right? Like he had taken this, you know, defiant stand against Trump and really reamed out his Republican friends who got on board. Reince Priebus at one point I write about goes to mid and says, okay, well, now that he's the nominee, like, can we get you on board? And he laughs and Reince's face and says, Trump is nuts and like won't do it. So then Trump calls after he wins and says, we want to meet with you about Secretary of State. Actually, Mike Pence calls him. Who he also despises. He hates everyone. Make a whole grudge. I said he's judgmental. So I think a couple of things were going on there. One was it's hard to remember back then, but the immediate weeks after Trump won were genuinely scary for a lot of people. Like it felt like the world was going to spin off its axis, right? Like we've never had like a truly just crazy person. This is the view of a lot of people in the Oval Office. Like what's going to happen during that transition period? During that transition period, there was a very strong sentiment of we need adults in the room. Like whatever you thought of Trump and his campaign, we need to get as many adults in the room as possible. There were a bunch of people who joined the administration in the White House at that time with the very explicit goal of containing Trump and making sure that the country stayed on track, right? So that definitely was part of it, I think, and that speaks to the kind of Romney obligation, right? It's going to be embarrassing if I do this, but I have to do it. And I should say, I write about how he got calls from multiple former Secretaries of State, including Hillary Clinton, saying if they accept this job, you have to take it. But there's another side, which is he wanted the job. He wanted the power. There's a quote in the book where he says to me, I wanted to be president. If you can't have president, Secretary of State's a pretty good consolation prize, right? And so he was clear-eyed about that with me now that like he was tempted by the position. And ultimately, he wasn't willing to do what Trump and his camp kind of demanded of him, which was you need to fully retract everything you said about me and say that I'm going to be an amazing president. But he did. He did say some far as he could. Here's the page 189. So this is after he has the meeting. He comes out, right? And he speaks publicly. He says, what I've seen through these discussions I've had with President-elect Trump, as well as what we've seen in his speech, the night of his victory, as well as the people he selected as part of his transition, all of those things combined give me increasing hope

that President-elect Trump is the very man who can lead us to that better future. Now, you put that statement alongside the speech he'd given just months earlier, denouncing him in every possible way. And it's just hard to believe it's the same guy.

Yeah. Well, once again, I think the rationalization instinct kicks in, right? He basically convinces himself, I need to be in this room. I need to have this job. And so I'm going to go as far as I can to try to get this job. And that was his kind of audition, right? He gives the speech. He gets a call right, you know, shortly thereafter from Trump basically saying, that's not enough. You need to go further. Romney can't go further. And that's ultimately where it falls apart. Now, subsequently, people would claim that Trump was never going to offer him the job. This was just to toy with Romney and to embarrass him. My reporting suggests that's not true. I think that Trump was seriously considering him in part because if he could get some of his most vocal critics on board, then he would look good. But I think that episode was sort of the last temptation Romney had to join the Trump train, right? And after that point, after he doesn't get it, and then after seeing what the first 100 days of the Trump presidency bring, he's basically fully committed to being a Republican critic of opponent of bulwark against Trumpism. When Romney decides to run for Senate, he reflects on the Yates poem, the second coming, and the best like all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity. Did he see himself as the best? Did he see, you know, did he see the Trump crowd as the worst? What did that mean to him? That was the very explicit reference to that poem, and that line in particular was that the way he described it to be is the Matt Gaetzes of the world, and the Charlottesville marchers, and the very worst elements of the Republican coalition are empowered and on the rise, and the people who know that racism is wrong and who know that authoritarianism is wrong and who believe in the constitution and democracy and pluralism are being silent because they're scared and they don't know what to do. And Mitt Romney saw himself

as somebody who could come in and be a voice for those people, and hopefully in his mind, empower them to speak up. You know, he still thought, let me get into the Senate. I was the nominee not that long ago, you know, I was the standard bearer of the Republican party. Let me see if I can get these guys to come back to their senses and speak up in defensive traditional Republican values, and that ended up being a little more difficult than he thought it would be. Of course, the other famous moment in that poem, right, is things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world. Did he think of himself as holding up the center, or was he still thinking of himself as a sort of partisan?

The center, I don't think he meant the center of the political spectrum. He probably saw it more as like the center of the Republican party, the kind of mainstream establishment of the party, that's what he was representing. Though this brings up, I think, an important point. Part of why he, Romney, ultimately was able to kind of find his voice in these last few years is because the stakes of American politics changed, and the terms of the debate changed such that the things that we were debating as a country were not marginal tax rates or deficit reduction. It was like, do you believe in a pluralistic society? Do you believe in freedom of the press? Do you believe in kind of these fundamental things that weren't really up for debate a few years ago and now seemed like they were? And Romney, while he doesn't hold strong partisan positions on most issues, does hold strong positions on those issues. And so I think that's part of why he now seems so kind of animated. There's a moment when he's campaigning,

and he's asked in a rally or in some event, you know, so like, so like, are you gonna try to shut down, you know, CNN and the New York Times? You know, he's like, no, no, why would I do that? Like, he still seems constantly surprised. He's very generous with the benefit of the doubt. He wants to think the best of people, and he wants to assume that everybody has good intentions. I think it's why some of his critics might say he was ill-suited for this moment in politics, because assuming bad faith in people doesn't come naturally to him, but it is true that in, so that was when he was running for Senate in Utah, and it was actually a clarifying moment for him because this woman asked like, what are you gonna do to shut down major American news organizations? And there was applause for that sentiment, and it was kind of a moment where he realized the trickle-down effect of Donald Trump as president is that these Republican voters, even in Utah, which was a state that was, you know, for a red state pretty averse to Trump in 2016, these anti-democratic ideas were taking root among Romney supporters, and it made him realize how precarious this moment was for America. One thing that really stuck out at me is that once he becomes a senator, his relationship to rationalization changes, right? You know, you write that, you know, maybe after so many years of allowing the petty indignities and moral compromises to pile up, he'd finally reached his limit. Also, you say the path to higher office was closed now, moral tests mattered more than they once did. I didn't know what to make of that because in some ways, it's great to see sort of Romney unleashed, you know, a senator. You know, it's like his bull worth mum. He's just sort of saying what he really believes, right? But to say that, well, now that the stakes are lower, right, now that I won't be president, I can really say what I think. And that to me conflicted with this other thing that Romney says to you, which is that he was less pissed off at sort of true believers than he was at people who were just kind of hiding what they really thought, you know? And yet, hadn't he been doing that, right? Implicitly, he's admitting that he had because he's saying, well, now that I'm in the Senate, now, you know, and now that sort of any other high office is closed off to me, now I can really kind of like say what I think. He might take issue with this characterization, but to me, it's clear that part of the reason he's so judgmental of his colleagues who say one thing in private and then take a different position in public is because he recognizes a little of his past self in them, right? I think we're often most judgmental of those who commit the sins that we know we commit, right? And I think that that's part of what is going on with him. But I mean, implicit in this whole project that he embarked on with me was the idea that he acknowledged he hadn't been fully candid or fully honest with himself during those earlier years of his political rise. And so, you know, I think you could ding him for that, but it's also true that as he's now taking stock of his career, he's being honest about where he fell short. And I think it would be great if a lot more people would do that. She says it to you. By the way, I'll just put it out there. If anybody else wants to, you know, embark on a two-year, you know, therapy session with me and then let me write a book about it, I would love to. McKay Coppins is available for regretful politicians everywhere. He does say it to you in a way that sounds like Mitt Romney. He says, I think I recognize now my capacity to rationalize decisions that are in my self-interest. There's a power in the admission, even if it's kind of a late in life admission. Well, when he said that to me, it was when I asked him, would you have taken the same lonely, principled vote to impeach Trump if this had been, you know, decades earlier? And he thought about it. And I remember we were sitting in his hideaway, his Senate hideaway

office, a little windowless room in the capital. And he thought really hard about that. And he gave me that answer, which I thought was, you know, kind of remarkably honest, you know. For a lot of his career, he was able to do what he thought he needed to do to win by convincing himself that what was in his best interest was also the right thing to do. So last night, I also watched his shorter 2020 speech voting to convict, where he explains his vote to convict Trump in the Senate impeachment trial. It is a remarkable speech. It's so different from the 2016 speech where he's condemning Trump more broadly. You know, that speech was, it was almost fun. But this speech, it is somber, it is emotional. When he talks about his faith, he chokes up, he has to stop. I'm very serious. As a senator juror, I swore an oath before God to exercise impartial justice. I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am. I take an oath before God as enormously consequential. I knew from the outset that being tasked with judging the president, the leader of my own party would be the most difficult decision I have ever faced. I was not wrong. It is a statement of high principle. I think it's a speech people are going to remember more than his convention speech or his campaign speeches or that speech condemning Trump. I think that's, that's the Romney speech. And one thing I was so struck by was something that happened just before the speech. Ward kind of leaks out that he's going to vote to convict. And he's going to explain, and he gets a call from his former running mate, Paul Ryan, right? And the moment you bring that up in the book, I naively assumed that Paul Ryan was going to be like, Hey, Mitt, I heard you're going to do this. I'm sure you wrestled with it. This is probably a really hard thing. I just want you to know that like, I've got your back. I'm here for you. Like follow your conscience. But no, no, the call was like, Hey, you know, I hear you're going to take this principle stand. Do you really want to do that? Like, is that smart? Is that savvy? Should you? Like I was shocked by, and maybe I, maybe my, my expectations or aspirations for Paul Ryan or for the kind of running mate relationship were too high. But I just, I couldn't believe that that happened. What did he make of that call? So I should say first, Mitt was not the one who told me first about that call. Somebody else in his orbit who knew about it told me about it first. And then I, you know, brought it up with him. And I brought it up with Ryan too, who confirmed the call, not necessarily the characterization, but the essential details. The fact that that's what he, yeah. And that episode is so interesting to me, because it showed truly how alone Mitt Romney was in that, in that vote. Right. This is his former running mate. And somebody he really loves, like a son in some ways. Like Paul Ryan. People didn't want him to pick Ryan, right? No, no, no. He liked Ryan. He liked Ryan. He respected him. He felt like they had a kind of kindred spirit thing going on. Like the policy wonkiness. Yeah, exactly. The budget. The budget, yep. And even, you know, like Paul Ryan would have like blended in with his like sons. There's like kind of a dark haired, blandly handsome, you know, like guy. He really admired and respected Paul Ryan to the point where he was much less judgmental of Ryan's capitulations to Trump than he was of other Republicans. Sort of convinced himself like,

you know, he was the speaker of the house. He kind of had to do what he needed to do to get his agenda passed and, but to have this moment, I think where Paul Ryan calls him, Paul Ryan wasn't the speaker of the house anymore. He wasn't in office anymore. He had really no reason to, you know, whip votes for Trump. So to do that, I think showed just how out on a limb Romney was. There's another moment right before that where he tells his senior staff, Mitt Romney, that he's going to vote to convict. And one of his senior staffers, she just puts her head down in her hands and doesn't look up for the rest of the meeting because she's so like disappointed in him or disappointed in what this is going to mean for his, you know, place in the party and maybe for her future, you know, career prospects. But like, Romney was really, you know, did not have a lot of allies in this vote besides, I should say, his family, which is ultimately what I think buoyed him throughout this whole process. Like in fact, there's a moment because he goes, I have his journals from when he's throughout that impeachment process, that trial, and he's agonizing every day over how to vote. And every day he's considering the evidence and he tells Ann, he calls Ann and tells her, I think I'm going to vote to acquit. And she says, I'm surprised by that. And she doesn't say anything else, doesn't, you know, no renders, no judgment, doesn't argue with him. But he immediately is like, oh, I need to go back to the drawing board because he, so much of him, his life has been kind of dedicated to winning and keeping Ann's respect. And to a lesser degree, but still important, his sons. And he had talked it over with his sons and his wife and they all supported him in this, but really not that many other people did. Yeah, it's interesting how many things he tried to do behind the scenes, right, to stop Trump, both in 2016, also in 2020. He approached Joe Manchin about forming a third party. He was very active in that, in that effort. It's funny, it's one of those things whenever a Republican kind of speaks out against Trump, the immediate kind of cynical response from a lot of people on the left is, well, why, why didn't you do anything about it? You know, like words are cheap, you should do something. And I understand that sentiment. There's been a lot of that. Mitt Romney is somebody who's actually done quite a lot, not just, you know, the famous vote to impeach. But behind the scenes, you can, as I kind of show in this book, he was constantly hustling to stop Trump in both campaigns. And I think the same is true in this campaign as well. So you conclude with this scene about his father's obituary, right? Some years ago, I think his daughter-in-law gave him the New York Times Book of the Dead, which is a collection of sort of notable obits the paper had run throughout its history. And he says, she knows I'm fascinated with this stuff. Among the hundreds of obituaries covering celebrities, presidents, entrepreneurs, and civil rights leaders, he looked for his dad's. For Mitt, no man loomed larger in history than George Romney. He was an icon, a legend, the embodiment of integrity in public service. But George's entry was nowhere to be found. It bothered him at first. Eventually, he made his peace with it. Even if history only writes one line about you, he tells me you'd like it to be a good line. And when I read that, it struck me on its own. But then later, when I watched his Senate speech, he ends with a very similar sentiment to your final line in the book. He says, this is Senate speech when he's explaining why he's voting to convict Donald Trump. I will only be one name among many, no more, no less, to future generations of Americans who look at the record of this trial.

They will note merely that I was among the senators who determined that what the president did was wrong, grievously wrong. We are all footnotes at best in the annals of history. But in the most powerful nation on earth, the nation conceived in liberty and justice, that distinction is enough for any citizen. That distinction is like the one line, right? You just want your one line to be a good one. So I have no doubt that this book will go a long way to shaping how we perceive the legacy of Mitt Romney. I hope that unlike his own concerns, he has many, many more years of life remaining. But what do you think the first line of Mitt Romney's obituary will be? I think history is a ruthless editor. I think that the more distance that we have from his life, the less and less will be remembered about it. I do think though that whether it's his obituary or history books 30, 50, 100 years from now, if he comes up, it will be for that moment of conscience toward the end of his political career.

That speech on the center floor, I agree with you, will be the thing that if there's one scene that people remember from Mitt Romney's life and career, it'll probably be that. I obviously think there's a lot more to say about him. I wrote a book about him. But I think that if we could all be remembered for eventually reaching the best version of ourselves, I think that would be wonderful. And I think that that would be fair for him. Okay, this has been a real pleasure. We will end as all episodes of this show end by asking you for three book recommendations. Okay, I've got the three recommendations here. A mix of sentimental and plugging for a friend, and then a little bit of self-indulgence. So first, I'm going to recommend *The Last Politician* by Franklin Foer. My colleague at the Atlantic just came out last month about the first two years of the Biden presidency. I think uncommonly well written for an inside the White House story and revealed things about the president that I didn't know and kind of his character that have stuck with me. Number two, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. This is a shout out to my fifth grade daughter, my oldest daughter, who read this book last year. And it's about a Jewish family's escape from Denmark during World War II. She started reading this book in school, was obsessed with it and said, Dad, you have to read it with me so that we can talk about it. So I started reading it with her and a lovely book, like really just a really touching story. And I would just say like also given current events like understanding the persecution of Jews and anti-Semitism for a child, it was a kind of a good opening point for those conversations. The last one I cheated, but I feel like it's okay because I've heard you, I think others have cheated on this question too. It's actually three books all on the same theme. *The Plot* by Jean Humph Coralettes, *Hell of a Book* by Jason Mott and *Less* by Andrew Changrier. All three novels published in the last few years about writers embarking on book tours. Very different stories. I've read less. It's amazing. It's very funny and heartwarming and beautiful. And some of them murders happen. And some of them existential crises happen. And some of them moments of enlightenment occur. *Less* is the one I read most recently. I just couldn't put it down. I read the sequel, *Less is Lost*. But as a author embarking on a book tour, I'm now hoping that I have as exciting an experience as these three fictional characters. McKay Coppens, author of *Romney or Reckoning*. Thank you so much for being on the show. Thanks for having me, Carlos.

This episode of The Ezra Klein Show was produced by Roland Hu, fact-checking by Michelle Harris. Our senior engineer is Jeff Geld. Our senior editor is Claire Gordon. The show's production team also includes MFA Agawu and Kristen Lin. Original music by Isaac Jones.

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