

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / The First GOP Debate and The Elephant Not In The Room

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

On Wednesday night, Fox News and the streaming platform, Rumble, host to the first Republican presidential debate.

Tonight, the race for the White House takes flight.

Welcome to the first debate of the 2024 presidential campaign, live at Five-Serve Forum in Milwaukee.

Eight GOP hopefuls who made the cut.

There were a lot of governors and former governors on the stage.

North Dakota governor Doug Burgum, former governor of Arkansas Aisa Hutchinson.

Senator Tim Scott, former governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley.

Former New Jersey governor Chris Christie, former vice president Mike Pence, the biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, and finally Florida governor Rhonda Santos.

Of course, missing from that list and missing from the stage was Donald Trump, who refused to attend the debate.

Instead, he sat down with Tucker Carlson.

It's debate night, but we're not in Milwaukee.

Mr. President, thanks for joining us.

Thank you.

A move that allowed both men to flip the bird.

One, Trump to the RNC, and two, Tucker, who was fired from Fox a few months ago.

His interview with Trump aired exclusively on X, or the platform formerly known as Twitter, and more than 74 million people tuned in.

As much as I have come to loathe politicians, I got to say I love a debate night.

And we were up until the wee hours at the free press discussing it all on Slack and getting up a report from Milwaukee, which is authored by our own Olivia Reingold, who joins me now.

Hi, Olivia.

How are you?

I'm feeling good.

I mean, riding the waves of excitement.

It was thrilling, honestly.

Amazing.

We can't wait to hear more about it.

Well, Olivia is also joined by Peter Savodnik, senior editor at the free press.

Hi, Peter.

Hey, Barry.

And also joining us is friend of the free press and Newsweek opinion editor, Batya Angar Sargon, who looked very glam last night on News Nation, offering her commentary.

Batya, thanks for joining us.

Thanks so much for having me, Barry.

It's great to be here.

Okay.

So let's jump right in.

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With Trump missing from the debate stage last night, there was only really one reason to tune in at all.

And that was to see if there's actually a viable candidate in this race.

A not Trump option, because polling has consistently shown that people are desperate for an alternative

to another Trump v. Biden face off in 2024.

And I wonder, did last night give us a clear contender?

Was there a winner?

Batya, let's start with you.

So the debate that we have up at Newsweek today and our daily debate is about who won the GOP primary debate.

And the two competing answers we got were the winner of the GOP debate was Donald Trump and the other one was the winner of the GOP debate was Joe Biden.

So clearly our debaters did not feel that anyone on the stage really stood out.

You know, there were some moments, I think, that really sort of defined the evening.

One of them was the foreign policy debate between Nikki Haley and Vivek Ramaswamy.

I'm not on the boards of Lockheed and Raytheon, but the fact of the matter, Boeing came off of it, but you've been pushing this lie, you've been pushing this lie all week, Nikki.

You want to go and defund Israel?

You want to get defunded.

Okay, let me address that.

I'm glad you brought that up.

I'm going to address each of those right now.

This is the false rise of a professional politician.

There you have it.

So the reality is, let's say you have no foreign policy experience and it shows.

You know what?

The foreign policy experience that you all have shows in the world.

Which was sort of, you know, the old GOP versus the new Trump GOP positions really going at each other.

But I think that Vivek's credibility really came into question in that moment in a way that surprised me, you know, as somebody who's sort of much more in the America first foreign policy mode than I am in the kind of Nikki Haley American exceptionalism.

You know, let's make sure that we're policing the world mode.

I did find myself sort of admiring the way in which she took Vivek to task despite the fact that I agreed with what he was saying.

And so I'm obviously still processing those emotions personally.

But I think that really speaks to a question of credibility, bringing a level of humility to these big questions that Americans are really debating.

So I think that moment really stood out in terms of thinking about who made an impression.

Vivek had the right lines, but I think Haley's deportment and her credibility and her experience, despite the fact that I don't agree with what she's done with it, really came through for me.

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I love that Bacchia is having an identity crisis about liking something that a neocon has said.

Peter, let's go to you.

Who stood out to you?

Yeah, I mean, I think it's obvious that Vivek had the best night.

He had the best lines.

He had the most energy and the momentum.

The problem is that he's trying to be Trump, and ultimately the question I guess for him, which no one asked, is if you are such a fervent supporter of Trump, why are you running?

And ultimately, I think this is going to lead to his own kind of unwinding.

Because I think he clearly last night had a great night.

There were five or six career politicians who he laid to waste.

I think that Patti is right, Haley demolished him on the foreign policy front, and he's playing the Trump playbook, and in 2016, foreign policy just was not as much front and center, and it was easy just to kind of rail against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Today is a totally different geopolitical landscape.

China is much more frightening, and I think that Vivek is not the reassuring kind of avuncular presence or kind of like gravitas that I think Americans crave.

A lot of people I was watching with last night watched Vivek and thought to themselves, what's this guy's actual agenda?

Does he want to become president, or, and I think this is sort of the emerging consensus, is he actually running to be Trump's vice president?

I wondered if you guys had a feeling about that.

I have strong feelings here, if it's okay to jump in.

Yeah, Olivia, jump in.

So, Olivia, you were actually there in the room last night during the debate and in the spin room, so I'd love to hear from you on this.

I was there in the debate, and then I also caught his campaign was calling it a party.

I would call it maybe more of a rally.

It didn't feel that personal, I suppose, but before the night before the debate.

And I truly believe this is a man who wants to be president.

He hasn't even tried to hedge the VP claims.

He has just said, I don't want it.

I'm not running for that.

Also, if you listen to interviews with him, he has been talking about 2028 for months now.

He literally says sentences like, well, in my second term, dot, dot, dot.

And so this is someone with massive ambition and just the way he was interacting with voters.

I mean, I didn't quite see kissing baby behavior, but it was a hunger in his eyes.

The ambition is real.

How did it feel like in the debate room last night?

Did it feel like Vivek had had the standout night when Nikki Haley drew blood at that foreign policy moment that I want to get to?

Did it feel that way?

When you walked out of the room, did you think there's a clear winner and it's Vivek Ramaswamy,

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a total political neophyte?

Absolutely.

A lot of being in the actual media filing room is like schmoozing.

You see old colleagues, you see people you know, and a lot of those people came up to me, you know, people at CNN and Politico, and they were like, I think Vivek could be our next president.

But I think it was the first time that a lot of that crowd had really heard of this guy or maybe they had heard of him, but weren't taking him seriously.

Vivek, I think his dissent can be explained by his authenticity or perceived authenticity like he's gone.

He has a knack for going viral and he's gone viral a few times for engaging with hecklers.

It's very hard, I would say, to be authentic on a debate stage.

I think you saw a lot of other candidates using pretty canned or rehearsed lines.

But Vivek, I got the sense that often he was improvising and he took positions that you know, the crowd booed a few times and he did not hedge at all.

Let us be honest as Republicans, I'm the only person on the stage who isn't bought and paid for so I can say this, the climate change agenda is a hoax.

He maintained his position and I think that that's what people admire about him is that they feel like they're getting someone who's actually honest about where they stand.

He's not trying to water things down.

It's the same Trump cocktail.

It's like you say a bunch of stuff that's patently untrue, but in a way that's like really entertaining and kind of colorful and like newsflash, the USSR is dead.

Vice President Pence, I have a newsflash.

The USSR does not exist anymore.

It fell back in 1990.

You talked about the communists and the real communists that we have to address right now.

You don't have any idea what Vladimir Putin's aims are.

You already spoke.

Vladimir Putin has been saying he wants to re-establish the old Soviet sphere of influence.

That's a completely meaningless line.

It has no bearing on the debate that we're having now about like Ukraine and Russia, but it worked at the moment and then the reporters afterward get to talk about and sort of parse it and deconstruct everything you say and he said and talk about how he's wrong.

He's laughing sort of a lot of Trump and saying, well, like being right is for losers.

What matters is winning and capturing like sort of the zeitgeist and being entertaining.

But again, like he's not the OG Trump.

So why him?

Batya, the four of us, you're probably the most, I would say, inclined to be sympathetic at least toward Vivek's worldview, but my sense looking at your faces, you're not a big fan.

Tell us why.

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So there's such a hazard for us in the media cast sort of bringing our own emotions and impressions.

We know how wrong we are likely to get this just based on 2016.

And so I hesitate to even trust my own emotional gut response.

So I've been checking in with people, especially working class people, like how is this person coming off to you?

And they'll say a lot of what I actually am feeling, which is he's saying all the right things, but there is an ick factor.

I'm getting the sort of opposite feeling that Olivia is.

I feel like this is a person who if he thought the political winds were moving in that direction would have run as a Democrat, I think he will say anything to be famous.

And when I saw that video of him that he posted playing tennis without his shirt on, I thought, oh, this is why he ran for president because he thought 40 million people needed to see him playing tennis without his shirt on, making these very effeminate grunting sounds.

And I just, I think he's incredibly smart.

And so he is able, I agree with Olivia, to improvise, to come up with those lines.

But at the same time, I don't think he cares about anyone but himself.

And maybe I'm a fool.

But when Trump talked about decimated communities, when he talked about the destruction of the working class, I just think that there was a kind of authenticity that came across there that's really missing here.

But again, I say all this with caveats because I don't want to bring my own personal feelings and crowd out what the electorate is really looking for.

And the lines were good.

The lines were right.

You know, he didn't have a robust economic platform that didn't really, I mean, they started with that.

Nobody really shined there.

That's what I was looking for because that's really where Trump shines.

That's really where his voter base is at.

And that's really where all of his popularity comes from.

As far as I'm concerned, immigration, trade, foreign wars, and just the orientation the US should have, whether it should be focused on our people or on the rest of the world, that didn't come across.

But at the same time, in the opportunities he was given, Peter is 100% correct.

He did a great approximation of a kind of younger person of color version of Trump who was educated at liberal elite institutions and can talk that talk.

There was definitely a debate going on inside the free press slack last night about whether or not Vivek was sort of the walk away winner or whether actually the more we watched him and it's kind of shit eating grin, the more people felt he was sort of antagonizing and childish.

And there was a, there's still an ongoing debate about that.

Olivia, if you could briefly tell us, you spent the day sort of trailing Vivek on in

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Milwaukee on the campaign trail.

How are actual voters responding to him?

So what I heard from a lot of voters, and then I actually heard this from Candace Owens too, which I thought was very interesting because she is obviously pretty loyal to Trump and the fact that, you know, he is winning over admiration and support from people like Candace Owens.

I think it's definitely something to watch.

And she shared a belief that I heard echoed by voters earlier that day, which is that Trump was convincing to some people about everything that's wrong about America.

But what they see in Vivek is someone who says what could be right about America.

I will say though, Batya, that you are right that, that optimism that I think people really have admired in him in the various media hits, he's, I mean, this man has to do like three to four media hits a day.

The optimism that often comes through really, I think, was tarnished in honestly some pretty ugly and aggressive.

I definitely got the sense he was energized by the opportunity to kind of unload.

Well, Olivia, you wrote this piece today in the free press called Knives Out for Vivek, which I thought was a great headline.

And here's some of the things, Olivia, that you talked about in your piece that people said.

Chris Christie compared Ramaswamy to Obama calling him an amateur.

He had maybe the line of the night when he said, listen, listen, listen, no, hold on, hold on.

I had enough.

I had enough already tonight of a guy who sounds like chat GPT standing up here.

Mike Pence called Vivek a rookie.

He then said, now is not the time for on the job training.

We don't need to bring in a rookie.

We don't need to bring in people without experience.

It went on like that all night.

And I wonder, Olivia or Peter, do you think the other candidates were attacking Vivek because he's an easy punching bag or because they actually see him as a genuine threat?

I think more the former and was amazing about that is eight years after Trump, they haven't learned the lesson of Trump in 2016, which is that the old game is over.

And this idea that somehow resume matters at all to voters is astounding.

The GOP keeps looking for presidents who don't come from Washington and who are bulls in the proverbial China shop.

And Vivek played that role beautifully last night.

I still think ultimately he's not going to go anywhere, I think, because I don't see why any Trump voter in the end would migrate to the Vivek camp and leave Trump.

I also think that just touching on something that Bhatia said, I don't like him.

There's nothing about him that makes me want to have him over for dinner.

There's nothing about him that makes me want to just hang out or have a conversation.

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And I think it's something really important here.

Unfortunately, I think-

You don't think the M&M rapping is cool?

I mean, it's fine, but I think unfortunately that he comes across as a very smart whiz kid who is decided that at the ripe old age of 38 or 39 that his next big thing he wants to accomplish is the White House.

What he's missing is that when Donald Trump decided to run for president, there's a huge opportunity cost for him.

There are millions of things he could be doing besides putting himself through the ringer of White House politics in America, but he decided to run.

There's this sacrificial quality about it.

For Vivek, it's the next big thing that I'm going to accomplish because I'm all about accomplishing.

There's nothing about that that makes me feel like, oh, well, you're actually somebody I want to know or who I think might accomplish something.

You just seem like a jackass.

Let's dig a little bit deeper into the moment that I think Batya is having an identity crisis over, which is this foreign policy confrontation.

It's an area where Vivek really strays from the consensus, at least on the stage last night, leaving aside who the actual Republican voter is.

He was the only one aside from DeSantis who, when asked by the moderators if they would stop support for Ukraine, raised his hand.

Mr. Ramiswamy, you would not support an increase of funding to Ukraine?

I would not.

And I think that this is disastrous, that we are protecting against an invasion across somebody else's border when we should use those same military resources to prevent it across the invasion of our own southern border here in the United States of America.

We are driving Russia further into China's hands.

The Russia-China alliance is the single greatest threat we face, and I find it offensive.

And as we talked about before, Haley went hard in the paint against Vivek for having no foreign policy experience, and she really kind of dressed him down, I thought, extremely effectively.

You were on the boards of Lockheed and Raytheon.

I'm not on the boards of Lockheed and Raytheon, and Boeing came off of it, but you've been pushing this lie all week, Nikki.

But you want to go and defund Israel?

You want to get down to Trump?

Okay, let me address that.

I'm glad you brought that up.

I'm going to address each of those right now.

The false lies of a professional politician.

Under your watch, you were like, America, Lessa, you have no foreign policy experience, and it shows.

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And you know what?

The foreign policy experience that you all have shows in the world.

What I think is interesting is that Vivek and the sort of neo-isolationism, or if you want to put it more positively, the America First agenda, really represents the online new right crowd, right?

They seem to be telling us Vivek's view, DeSantis' view, is the new norm.

What shocked me is that Haley seemed to really win over the room when she went after Vivek.

And Bacha, I wondered what you made of that moment, because it surprised me, and it challenged sort of some of my new priors.

Yeah, me as well, because it's not really just the online right that agrees with Trump on the America First foreign policy.

As you know, I spent the last year traveling around the country interviewing working class Americans from both parties.

And aside from maybe two, every single one of them, on their own, brought up funding to Ukraine as this travesty, given how many problems we have here at home, the latest data shows that 55% of Americans say it's enough with the support for Ukraine.

They don't want any more aid going to Ukraine.

And I'm sure that if you looked at the income distribution there, the class distribution there, you would see that that was over-weighted in terms of the working class.

The working class is so sick of these foreign entanglements, and they are so sick of paying for it.

And they are so upset at the idea that given the struggles they have to achieve the American dream, they should be supporting the dreams of people from other countries, either here, legal immigrants coming here, or just sending that aid there.

And so that view is extremely popular in terms of just the masses.

That's where the American people are at.

And so I-

And how do you understand that moment?

So obviously, you can think about, all right, who would go to one of these debates and so forth?

But interpreting myself, right, when the weirdest thing that happened was, Vivek made me for the first, I have debated Ukraine with many experts, okay, because if you are in that Trump camp, if you are on foreign policy and you don't think we should, you think from day one we should have been supporting negotiations rather than war, you know, you've had a lot of debates on this subject.

And for the first time, Vivek made me ashamed of my own position, like hearing it come out of his mouth, which is a very weird position to have, because I've thought about it a lot.

Like, obviously, I still think that I feel compelled to represent that view, given that I know how much it represents the working class.

So I'm trying to analyze, like, what happened?

And I think that it was a failure of not just humility, because, you know, being humble before people's resumes and experience, like Peter said, come on, like, give me a break.

These are the expert class that sold us out, right?

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Like, we don't owe them any humility.

But there was an arrogance there and a refusal to even admit that good people could have the other position here.

And I really took to heart, you know, for myself, like, look, if you really believe that view, you have a responsibility to speak about it in a way that doesn't erase the truth of the other side, right?

That Putin is a murderer, you know, and that Ukraine is struggling for it, you know.

That's the crux of it.

You know, as an unrepentant neocon, just kidding, but slightly, like, I have to say, I think the reason Nikki Haley won that moment is because common sense is on the side of Nikki Haley.

In other words, it is an incoherent worldview to say about China.

We should feel rightly, and I think this is where we would maybe all agree, the threat of a sort of, like, aggressive imperial China.

To me, it follows from that, that we should be against Russia and on the side of Ukraine.

Because when the U.S. doesn't fill the vacuum, others will, our enemies will.

And I just feel like—

Can I just say, though, the idea that Putin has the ability to see Russia as an imperial conquering force is belied by the fact.

I mean, obviously, we don't have to get into a debate about Ukraine here.

But, you know, the greatest punishment for Russia would be if Russia were actually able to take over Ukraine and then had to actually rule over it.

He cannot afford that.

So she's wrong about that.

She's wrong about, I think, the ability and the power that Russia has to fulfill these imperial—

To be clear, I don't think it's about Russian power.

I think what it's about is America's role in the world.

And it's an incoherent worldview to suggest that this one war is one we should stay completely out of and has nothing to do with us.

But this other conflict is one where we should be an aggressive world's policeman.

Like, I don't know—

Can I just ask you, what if it turns out that that is the view of 55%, 60% of Americans?

Like, would that change your mind at all about that?

Change my mind that it's incoherent?

Or that we should—

Would you still feel that we should follow the view of America being that role of whatever it is, like American exceptionalism, please, whatever?

I don't have to call it a den or anything, but, you know, if you found out that most Americans were on the side of just, all right, we've done enough, we're stepping back, now it's time to negotiate, would you still feel that we shouldn't do that, even if that represented where most Americans were at?

I believe in democracy and I believe in the consequences of elections and the consequences of there being a debate about ideas.

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And clearly, you know, those of us who supported, say, the war in Iraq, as I did, for what, at the time, seem legitimate reasons, are wrong and have been humbled by that.

I'm simply trying to point out, though, that—and, Peter, I want to let you jump in, because I think you and Batya disagree on this—that I find it really hard to understand how to square a person that says, America should be an unbelievably aggressive, muscular, world policeman, hegemon, whatever you want to call it, in this one arena, but not in this other one, when they're clearly, in my view, deeply interconnected.

No, it's totally a name and I think the reason that, like, Hailey dominated on that front last night is that she made sense and the emptiness of his, you know, so-called argument was laid bare.

He was playing again, like, the 2016 game, where you say something which is just sort of, like, provocative, but also just untrue, or you imply something untrue, like, it won't actually matter, like, American power vis-a-vis China won't be affected at all by what we do in Ukraine.

That's patently untrue.

And then you throw out some zinger, and the crowd is sort of, like, you know, moved by that or they're talking about it, and that's where all the excitement is.

And what happened is, I think, like, Hailey, in a very smart way, and I think she was helped here by being a woman, and, you know, she had quoted Thatcher earlier, and she came across, in my mind, as very smart and thoughtful and also more reasonable, and there was that seasoned and experienced element, and instead of flaunting her resume with the kind of the sanctimony, and the kind of noxious sanctimony of, like, Pence, and it was, like, just enough, is insufferable, she came across as just, like, as smart, and, like, I think she was the person you wanted, you know, in control.

And I think he came across as, yeah, like, sound like Trump circa 2016, except we don't live in that world anymore, and that's frightening.

And I think the idea that that's going to be the commander-in-chief is frightening.

So I think that's why she performed so well.

And of course, there's a bearded debate about geopolitics and U.S. foreign policy and all that, but I think just on the question of, like, who came across as more reasonable, more measured, more thoughtful, more responsible, undeniably, Hailey.

Let's do a round two on Ukraine at a later date, because I actually think this could be really fun.

Let's stay on Nikki Hailey, though, for a minute, because if the broad consensus, at least among the pundits, that it was Vivek's night, Nikki Hailey, I think, also emerged as a clear contender, and not just in that moment with Vivek over foreign policy.

From the very start of the night, she came out swinging.

She started the night, and this really surprised me, by attacking her own party for blowing up the debt.

Here's what she said.

The fact is that no one is telling the American people the truth.

The truth is that Biden didn't do this to us.

Our Republicans did this to us, too.

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When they passed that \$2.2 trillion COVID stimulus bill, they left us with 90 million people on Medicaid, 42 million people on food stamps.

No one has told you how to fix it.

I'll tell you how to fix it.

They need to stop the spending.

They need to stop the borrowing.

They need to eliminate the earmarks that Republicans brought back in, and they need to make sure they understand.

It's the taxpayer dollars.

It's not their dollars.

And while they're all saying this, you have Ron DeSantis, you've got Tim Scott, you've got Mike Pence.

They all voted to raise the debt, and Donald Trump added \$8 trillion to our debt.

And our kids are never going to forgive us for this.

And so at the end of the day, you look at the 2024 budget.

Republicans asked for \$7.4 billion in earmarks.

Democrats asked for \$2.8 billion.

So you tell me who are the big spenders.

And I think it's time for an accountant in the White House.

I thought it was really interesting that that's where she started off the night.

And Olivia, what was the response in the room?

And then Batya, what did you think of that strategy?

Yeah, she also just quickly to note she took a similar approach when abortion came up, which I thought was interesting too, you know, when it came to the abortion discussion.

And she was bringing up the balance of the Senate, which really impressed me and had a lot of depth in comparison to the ways that other candidates were discussing the issues.

But how did she land?

That was super smart, I thought, but...

I honestly, I don't know that she made that much of a splash as she didn't come to the spin room, or at least I didn't see her there.

She didn't have surrogates wandering.

So I honestly didn't hear much chatter about her.

Okay, Batya, what did you think of the strategy to sort of come out swinging?

Trump definitely did some things like that early on.

And I thought it was interesting she took a page a bit from his book.

Yeah.

I mean, it was a way of talking about the economy that set her apart, right?

It was a sort of gambit to be like, let's all take responsibility, you know, where both sides are at fault for inflation, right?

That's essentially what she was trying to say.

I mean, I think that she really is a throwback to not just on foreign policy, but on economic policy as well to the kind of pre-Trump Republican party, the kind of more chamber of commerce, free trade version of it with a slight shift on immigration and kind of nod to his accomplishments.

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You can hear the disdain in Batya's voice.

I'm trying so hard to match that.

And really, I think any of them could have really stood out had they shown up and answered to that first question about why all of our Anthony is the anthem of our times just said the word NAFTA, right?

And there was just an inability to, not inability, a lack of desire to really answer the call for a pro-working class economic agenda.

But I agree with Olivia on abortion.

I think that Nikki Haley showed the Republican party the way forward on abortion for them, which is a very tricky issue because the majority of Americans are in this kind of interesting place on abortion.

If you ask people, they say that they're against abortions, but they are also very against abortion bans.

And that leaves Republicans in a very tricky position in terms of how to respond to Democrats.

And I just want to read her quote because I just thought it was extremely moving.

And I just wish that this was the approach that we brought to all of the issues on which there's so much consensus in America.

So what she said was let's find consensus.

Can't we all agree that we should ban late term abortions?

Can't we all agree that we should encourage adoptions?

Can't we all agree that doctors and nurses who don't believe in abortions shouldn't have to perform them?

Can't we all agree that contraception should be available?

And can't we all agree that we are not going to put a woman in jail or give her the death penalty if she gets an abortion?

Just treat this like a respectful issue that it is and humanize the situation and stop demonizing the situation.

And that was a very courageous thing for a pro-life candidate to say.

But finding that consensus, like that is the only way we get out of this morass.

And so it was very moving.

And, you know, Olivia, I don't know how it felt in the room, but at least watching from home, it seemed like that really landed with the audience.

And I know just from the working class people I spoke to, that's really kind of where they're at.

I heard from so many people, like, I would never get an abortion, but I will never vote for an abortion ban.

Yeah, Olivia, I'm so curious.

One of the most interesting moments of the night was this back and forth between Mike Pence, who talked about opening up a Bible and knowing that the cause of life had to be my cause.

I mean, this is his issue.

After I gave my life to Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, I opened up the book and I read, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

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And see, I said before you, life and death, blessings and curses, now choose life.

And I knew from that moment on the cause of life had to be my cause.

And I've been a champion for life in the Congress, a champion for life as governor and as vice president.

Trying to say that Nikki Haley is a squish on the issue and there was this sort of back and forth over it.

How did that feel in the debate room?

Who did you feel got the better of that argument?

So I'm sorry to burst everyone's bubble, but this crowd could not have been more jaded.

These were people who were laughing during the national anthem.

So I think the cynicism could not have been higher.

So I don't think any of it landed for many of the media attendees, but who got the better of the exchange.

I mean, I think Pence fell flat.

I think that he relied a lot on just his own, either personal anecdotes or just his own religious belief.

And I think where Nikki Haley was coming from, the push for consensus was really powerful.

And unfortunately, I don't know how much the average voter is interested in consensus over kind of the aggression that Vivek represents.

But I think Pence was trying to make an emotional claim that kind of fell flat.

That's been one second on the Thatcher moment because I thought it was also quite interesting.

And Batya, I was really wondering, coming into this conversation, what you think about it.

She's the only woman on stage.

She clearly came ready to deploy this one particular line.

And she found her opening when Vivek and Christie were sort of squabbling back and forth.

And she steps in and she says, this is exactly why Margaret Thatcher said, if you want something said, ask a man.

If you want something done, ask a woman.

And the crowd cheered.

And this is a crowd, ostensibly, that hates identity politics.

You know, is this sort of like the GOP embracing hashtag?

The future is female, hashtag girl boss?

Or is it just the exception is Nikki Haley?

Like what did you guys, anyone please, like make, how do you make sense of what happened in that moment?

I guess a few things.

One, I actually brought that line up to a media friend of mine and they rolled their eyes and they were like, don't you know she uses that line all the time?

I mean, Barry, you already conceded that, you know, it felt like she had it in her back pocket.

Peter, I'm dying to know.

I imagine that was probably alienating to men.

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No, I don't think so.

You don't think so.

Okay.

No, I think, look, the thing about Haley is that Haley was all about last night, like I'm conservative, but I'm also about getting things done.

Yes.

And when she confronted Pence about the Senate calculus, that was all about, look, look, like you're playing an old playbook, you're stuck in the nineties or the eighties, like you think that somehow like being, you know, the most righteous on the stage is somehow going to win the base.

And in case you didn't realize, Donald Trump won in 2016 with evangelicals being fully aware that he was the most sinful of all the sinners on stage.

Like there's no doubt in anyone's mind that, you know, Trump was, you know, morally flawed. Somehow like that memo didn't reach the vice president or the former vice president.

It's a strange, it was very odd to watch.

And Haley comes along and says, and that's why the Thatcher line works so well.

It's all about, yeah, look, look, we're all more or less in agreement here that abortion is, you know, lamentable, but look, what can we actually actually get done?

And if you look at like, you know, what happened in Kansas, if you look at, you know, like debates going on in her own state or elsewhere in another kind of like red bastions, people are tired of the old original culture war that stretches back to the early seventies.

And so I think she very deftly tapped into that, just like what's the line about attacking the GOP in the very beginning, it was her way of attacking the swamp without identifying it as the swamp.

I thought she was just very, very smart in a very kind of, you know, like almost coded way.

Yeah, I think that the phrase has become overused, but it felt like she was putting herself forward as like the common sensical candidate.

Yeah, that's right.

Okay.

So it took about an hour into this debate before Donald Trump really came up.

We are going to take a brief moment and talk about the elephant not in the room.

Former President Trump.

Brett Bayer, one of the moderators said he wanted to take a moment to address the elephant not in the room.

And of course, that was Donald Trump.

You all signed a pledge to support the eventual Republican nominee.

If former President Trump is convicted in a court of law, would you still support him as your party's choice?

And then the candidates proceeded to spend 15 minutes going back and forth about Trump, his behavior, the four indictments today, by the way, he's turning himself in in Fulton County, Georgia.

Now Chris Christie, whose entire candidacy is riding on attacking Donald Trump, got

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an auditorium's full of booze after he said,

Someone's got to stop normalizing this conduct.

Hayley went on to say that no one wants a rematch between Trump and Biden, that he's the most disliked, speaking of Trump, politician in America, and that he will cost the Republicans the election if nominated.

And then of course, there's our friend Vivek, Trump's biggest fangirl who defended Trump's honor and crowned him.

He's the best president of the 21st century.

And I wonder what you all made of this moment.

Like I want to put the morality and the ethics of this aside for a moment.

Let's just talk political strategy.

Looking at where the Republican voter base is, is Vivek's strategy actually the right one for winning?

And is Christie's the wrong one?

Peter, let's start with you because I know you're no fan of Trump.

If he's the greatest president of the 21st century, then why would we vote for anyone beside the greatest president of the 21st century?

I thought like again, Hayley was absolutely right.

She's the only one who actually got it right when she said no one wants a rematch.

She's right.

Like a large majority of Americans do not want a rematch of 2020.

And Chris Christie, I think, made a very compelling argument and he struck me a little bit as like the RFK junior for a moment, like of the Republican Party.

He was saying something that in a general election would travel very, very well, but it's going to sink his campaign now.

And he's targeted all these MAGA voters whom he needs if he wants to win the nomination. So politically, he's unviable.

Vivek, I think, made himself less viable.

And Hayley in a kind of smart, deft way, again, was able to tap into like what people are thinking and feeling.

Batja, what did you think?

To me, the most relevant statistic here is that the majority of Republican voters think that Trump did something wrong and that they're still going to vote for him.

So they do not like his behavior around these issues and they do not find that disqualifying.

I thought it was great TV.

I thought they had to ask that question, but I think the answer, it's sort of unanswerable because like Trump, because his accomplishments were so vast on behalf of the working class, he had a real responsibility not to give the people who were out for his blood an excuse.

He did do that.

He was not quite careful enough and yet to ask people to not vote for a man who immeasurably improved their lives, who made this country feel like it cared about them for the first time in generations, who put money in their bank accounts and for the first time made the American dream feel like something they could start dreaming about again, to ask him

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not to vote for him because the people who vowed to destroy him from the minute he won because he represented them are coming after him again and again and again.

It's not just ridiculous.

It's immoral.

And so I think that's how they see it like stop asking me to judge this person who helped me on your standards that sunk my children's future, right?

That's kind of I think how it's viewed and with every additional indictment, it becomes more and more ridiculous and more and more apparent to them that this is what's happening.

So, you know, great TV.

They had to ask that question, but to me the answer is really just none of these people were able to quite understand the complexity.

Like these people are not voting for Trump because they think he's moral.

They're voting for him because it is undeniable what he accomplished and because he represented their future.

And that is why he is the target of this now at this point bipartisan elite infrastructure.

Well, talking about Trump gave Pence sort of his big opportunity to get on the soapbox and Christie and Scott and Haley all applauded him for his refusal to buckle under the pressure of Trump on January 6th.

And Pence leaned hard into this moment.

You know, it's not about looking back at January 2021.

It's about January 20th, 2017.

I put my left hand on Ronald Reagan's Bible.

I raised my right hand and I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States.

And it ended with a prayer.

So help me God.

It was a promise that I made to the American people, but I also made it, it made it to my heavenly father.

And he said he took an oath to the Constitution and his heavenly father.

And he quote said, everyone on this stage needs to make it clear whether they'll do the same.

Now, taking a step back, this is just like the riddle of Mike Pence.

You look at him.

He was the governor of Indiana.

He, you know, has the perfect hair.

He's got the tan.

He was vice president of the United States.

He's like very hardcore objectively on every conservative issue.

And yet he's pulling it like 4%.

So is the problem that Mike Pence is just so uncharismatic or that there's something about his brand of conservatism that's just not relevant anymore?

The GOP base is the working class and the working class is not hardcore.

They are extremely tolerant.

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I mean, they're conservative by and large on social issues, much more so than Democrats, but they are deeply, deeply tolerant people.

And the class issue unites them much more than a political identity.

And you know, this is something that I think is very hard for people to understand.

Like working class conservatives hate the Republican Party.

Like they hate, hate, hate the Republican Party.

And Mike Pence really represents that thing that they hate.

And so I don't think it's surprising at all.

I do think what's interesting is that we've gotten 45 minutes in and have not even mentioned Ron DeSantis, who for so long, right, was the front runner.

Let's get to Ron DeSantis.

This is exactly where I want to go.

The biggest loser to me, I think was Ron DeSantis.

You know, six months ago, we were told by everyone that the Florida governor was the man to beat.

He was hailed as the future of the Republican Party.

He raised \$20 million in the first six weeks of his campaign.

He was definitely the favorite among the donor class who were looking for an alternative to Trump.

He was the strong horse.

He's now polling at 15.2% down from 40.5% within two percentage points of Trump in January.

That's where he was.

Now last night, he tried to kind of trumpify himself a few times.

He said things like,

The deep state bureaucrats lock you down.

You don't take somebody like Fauci and coddle him.

You bring Fauci in, you sit him down, and you say, Anthony, you are fired.

He blamed the corporate media for the decline of America.

He called out George Soros and liberal DAs saying,

These hollowed out cities, this is a symptom of America's decline.

And one of the biggest reasons is because you have George Soros funding these radical left wing district attorneys.

They get into office and they say they're not going to prosecute crimes.

They disagree with the inmates start running the asylum.

The inmates are running our asylums.

I'm sure he rehearsed all of those lines, but like none of them stuck.

I'm not going to remember any of them 24 hours from now.

A lot of people are saying it's lights out for Ron DeSantis.

He's done.

Okay.

Peter Batia, what happened to Ronnie D and is there any chance of making a comeback, Peter?

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I don't think so because look, the whole DeSantis play from the very beginning has been one word, which is competence.

And it's not that I'm going to out trump Trump.

It's that I'm going to enact the Trump agenda and the whole campaign is premised on the assumption that MAGA voters, that the Republican base cares deeply about the Trump agenda. And I think that's wrong.

I think what they really care about is that they want the proverbial bull in the China shop.

They want the person who's going to muck everything up.

That's what they love about the VEC.

That's what they responded to last night.

I think that's why even like Kelly's line about like, you know, a woman getting the job done is why that resonates well with voters.

It's like a, it's argumentative, it's brash and DeSantis lacks all of that.

And I think like one other thing that's worth bearing in mind here is that like, and this is true of Pence as well.

People forget that with like career politicians, you might be very good at one thing, running for Congress, running for governor.

It's a whole different game when you're running for the White House.

And I think that what we saw last night was, you know, like a bunch of people who have long fashioned themselves or looked in the mirror and imagine themselves future presidents or not.

And this is their image of themselves for many, many years.

And it turned out that that's just not who they are.

It's not their stuff.

But yeah, anything you think Ron DeSantis can do to get back in a strong position or is he kind of fading out?

So I disagree with Peter.

I think that Ron DeSantis misunderstood the Trump voter in exactly the same way that the liberal media does.

He assumed like the liberal media that people voted for Trump because they were anti gay or suspicious of blacks.

And so, you know, his campaign retweeted this very anti LGBTQ video and he started defending saying that slavery had benefits.

And the truth, I think, is the exact opposite.

You know, the Trump voter is very pro gay like Trump, you know, they're suspicious of the trans agenda.

They're also not suspicious of black people.

There's a lot of unity around that.

And they're very eager to show that they are tolerant and have moved on from that stereotype about Republicans.

So to me, the thing that draws Trump's voters is the economic policy that's geared towards the working class.

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And the reason Ron DeSantis will not be able to recover is because he doesn't agree with Trump about creating an economy that does that.

His donors don't agree with Trump about creating an economy that does that.

There is a huge divide in the GOP between what the donor class wants, which is the fight against wokeness and what the voter base wants, which is an economy that works for the hardest working Americans.

And you can't fake your way towards wanting to build an economy like that because everything that the GOP stands for pre-Trump and now is trying to get back to post-Trump if their donors have their way is an economy that rewards the rich at the expense of the working class.

And so he could tomorrow wake up and say, you know what, I am going to, you know, do, for example, what Trump suggested yesterday, which is impose a 10% tariff on everything coming into the United States.

He will never do that because he fundamentally is in that Chamber of Commerce model of the GOP.

And that's why he was never able to take off with the Trump base.

Okay.

One last question about the debate.

And then I want to turn to Trump's interview with Tucker Carlson that I watched this morning, some very funny moments.

You know, when I think back to the Republican Party pre-Trump, just on the issues and where it is now, I am just kind of blown away by how changed it is, just fundamentally changed on core issues.

You know, to even have a single candidate, let alone a few, and the frontrunners say that we should be not supporting Ukraine is quite shocking considering the Republican Party that we grew up knowing.

Having watched it last night, what are the biggest changes?

And you can just pick one, and Batya, maybe your answer is the economy issue.

Like, what are the biggest changes that each of you see in the party judging from the debate last night?

If you think to yourself, wow, I could never have foreseen 10 or 20 years ago that this would be the perspective of some mainstream Republican candidates, contenders for the presidency.

What are they?

Peter, maybe let's start with you.

I think that the most important shift has been a migration away from ideology toward the practical.

I think the Republican base, Republican voters more than ever want to know what works, which is why you can throw out seemingly crazy ideas or take positions a la Vivec or Trump that are not aligned with kind of conservative bedrock principles.

And no one, Bats and I, no one thinks that there's anything kind of wrong or politically inept about that.

And I think that's why, you know, Haley had, I think on balance, a good evening.

And it's why like, you know, Pence and to a lesser degree, Burgum and the other kind

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of forgettable candidates, Scott, et cetera, just seem completely clueless.

Batya?

I love how Peter put that, the move from ideology to practicality.

I think that the realignment along class lines to where the Republican party has become the party of the working class and the Democratic party has become the party of the very rich and the dependent poor has resulted in exactly that.

There is a kind of desire for autonomy, a real desire for tolerance, but also, you know, protecting the innocence of children, the American family, the American dream.

That's what frustrates me.

The most is you have all of these Republicans running against wokeness and so few of them explaining how they're going to run for the American dream and bring that back because that's what their voters are hungry to hear is, how are you going to make homes more available? How are you going to make healthcare more available?

Something you'll never hear from a Republican, but which is actually extremely important to Republican voters.

How are you going to create an economy that rewards our hard work instead of making us feel like idiots because we're competing against either illegal immigrants here or Chinese slaves in China?

So I would say that's the biggest change for me.

And Olivia is the youngest person here.

What about you?

I think the fact that the real momentum in the party seems to be on the side of isolationism, that surprises me.

I mean, I personally think the sickest burn of the night was when Vivek turned to Nikki Haley and was like, I wish you well when you sit on the corporate boards of Lockheed Martin or something.

And I think growing up, I always assumed that the right had accepted a certain coziness with the, quote unquote, military industrial complex.

And I think a skepticism about the military and our involvement in, quote unquote, fighting other people's wars does really surprise me.

That the momentum in the room seemed to be on the side of really drawing a distinction, you know, much like therapy speak these days where people say, oh, that's a you problem.

You know, that's not a me thing.

You know, that that seems to be the GOP approach of the moment where it's like, oh, Ukraine, like that's a you problem.

I think that really, really surprises me.

Okay, let's take a quick break and then we'll be back to talk about that elephant, not in the room.

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OK guys, so Trump went on a tape Tucker Carlson interview for 45 minutes during the same time as the debate was happening.

Mr. President, thanks for joining us.

Thank you.

Why aren't you at the Fox News debate tonight in Milwaukee?

Well, you know, a lot of people have been asking me that, and many people said you shouldn't do them.

But you see the polls have come out, and I'm leading by 50 and 60 points.

And you know, some of them are at one and zero and two.

And I'm saying, do I sit there for an hour or two hours, whatever it's going to be, and get harassed by people that shouldn't even be running for president?

Should I be doing that?

But during Tucker's interview with Trump, and I assume you guys have watched it, it didn't really feel like a presidential conversation.

They were chatting about things that I'm very interested in, like Jeffrey Epps.

Do you think Epstein killed himself sincerely?

I don't know.

I will say that, you know, he was a fixture in Palm Beach.

Yeah.

Hillary Clinton.

It's been Hillary Clinton.

It goes crazy.

Every time she talks, she says, he's not the president.

There was a very memorable exchange about Kamala Harris rhyming things.

She speaks in rhyme.

It's weird.

It's weird.

But she has bad moments.

In rhyme?

Well, the way she talks, the bus will go here, and then the bus will go there.

Because that's what buses do, and it's weird.

But Trump barely dinged a Santas.

He didn't mention Vivek.

Do you think this is a winning strategy?

Like, can he actually just sail his way to the nomination and not even engage with these debates at all?

Like, is this how he's going to play it?

I think not.

In retrospect, I think it was not advantageous for him to not attend last night's debate.

Because without him being there, they didn't have to differentiate themselves from him.

I think if he were in the room, it would have been really uncomfortable for them to challenge or contradict him.

And so, yeah, I think that that interview surprised me because it had the cadence of

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someone who, like you said, is not really in campaign mode.

I mean, it really, they were kind of exploring their own personal fancies of, oh, yeah, that's kind of interesting.

You know, at one point, they brought up, they had like a one to two minute tangent.

I think about Chris Wallace's dad.

This was in front of, probably not a friend of yours, Chris Wallace.

He was the moderator.

Not a friend.

I said, why is he wants to be Mike, but he doesn't have the talent?

It's one of those little...

Ditchy little man.

He wanted to be his father, but he didn't have the talent of his father.

His father was great as father.

He's a little fussy man.

His father interviewed me in 60 minutes.

It was actually a 10, can you believe it?

No, I totally...

His father had talent, at least.

I may have been the only guy that he gave a good 60 minutes, so he was rough.

Really?

His father was tough.

He was great, though.

He was great at what he did.

Trump was saying, oh, he was a great reporter on 60 Minutes, and they were both like, huh, that's so interesting.

So I wonder, though, this morning, if Trump feels like he is in campaign mode now, if he feels like, okay, I have a real challenger in the race, because perhaps that's the approach of someone who thinks that they're really up against DeSantis, you know?

I mean, I got to say, I looked at it, and I'm like, look at the poll, just like, let's look at the numbers.

He is just so far ahead of all of these people.

Let them duke it out.

They'll split the vote, and he'll walk away with it.

I don't know.

It's obnoxious.

It is, as Trump is, totally ignoring standard etiquette, standard politics, the way we've always done things.

But again, maybe that's the smart strategy.

Peter, what do you think?

I think that's obviously the strategy, sitting on a 55% lead, or that's the piece of the GOP base that he controls, or at least is in his camp right now.

But I think I don't see that working long-term, or over the next five, six months in the lead up to the first primary in South Carolina, because what Trump seems to be forgetting

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is his own lesson of 2016, which is you have to fight for the nomination.

While all the other candidates back in 2016, the 15 or so who are right against him initially, were riding on years and years of their political careers and their various successes or elections. Trump was actually making a case in his own blustering, bombastic way for a totally different politics.

It was a fight, and I think voters really resonate, or that message I should say really resonates with voters, hanging out with your media friends.

I don't see how that ultimately wins, and I think what happens is that people will begin to look at candidates like Vivek and think, maybe he is a better alternative.

I don't see Vivek ultimately capitalizing on that, but I do see it weakening Trump, and then the question is, can someone who's more reasonable or with a broader, more ecumenical appeal like a Haley, could someone like that then actually become viable?

I hate myself for feeling this way, but as I was watching the Trump-Tucker interview, I felt like this is more entertaining objectively than what's happening on the debate stage in Milwaukee.

I wondered if you felt the same way.

Other people I was speaking to felt like Trump seemed more tired than usual.

Do people still have the appetite for what Trump is offering?

I think Trump probably thought that it would make a bigger splash, and I think he was probably hoping to dominate the headlines, and the headlines really were very much about the debate.

Trump is a human ratings machine.

He's very rarely wrong about where the populist energy is flowing.

Him praising Vivek, for example, on Truth Social this morning, that signals to me that he really does not see him as a threat at all.

Maybe they've spoken about VP or something, but if he was worried about him after last night, I don't think he would have been saying nice things about him on Truth Social.

There were a few moments during the Tucker interview where you really saw a different side of Trump that I think doesn't come out a lot because he's often in fight mode.

For example, at one point he said, Tucker was sort of revving him up to talk about division and divisiveness.

Do you think we're moving towards civil war?

There's tremendous passion and there's tremendous love.

Every sex was a very interesting day because they don't report it properly.

People in that crowd said it was the most beautiful day they've ever experienced.

There was love in that crowd.

There was love and unity.

I have never seen such spirit and such passion and such love, and I've also never seen simultaneously

and from the same people such hatred of what they've done to our country.

And he also said at some point, here's the quote.

You have great people in the Democrat Party.

You have great people that are Democrats.

Most of the people in our country are fantastic and I'm representing everybody.

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I'm not just Republicans or conservatives.

I represent everybody, I'm the president of everybody.

I'm the president of everybody.

And to me, that was the Trump that we could have had if the other side did not declare war on him from the minute he got into office and just decided he was an illegitimate president despite the fact that he won that first election in 2016 fairly, that there is a side of him that I think very accurately sees his policy agenda as a uniting one, which it is.

And yet he was locked out of being able to partially, because of his personality, right, but also partially because of just the immense pushback he got from American institutions, which are staffed with elites who just could not bear the idea of this mass uprising that he represented, was locked out of being able to be this person who could take responsibility and take the credit for having these uniting policies on trade, on immigration, on foreign policies.

So I think there was a little bit of pathos for me watching it in that sense.

I mean, he sounded a little bit like Marianne Williamson and not Donald Trump at certain moments in that conversation, which I thought was hilarious.

Okay, final question.

Let's say the numbers are correct and they hold.

No one else gets into the race to challenge Biden because it doesn't seem like they are, although I know Peter is thinking that's going to be Dean Phillips.

Maybe it will be.

Maybe it'll be Gavin Newsom.

But let's assume it's Trump v. Biden.

Olivia, who's your money on?

Okay, it's Trump v. Biden.

Yes, Olivia, it's Trump v. Biden.

Oh, man, you know, I think it's going to be Trump simply because that really makes it a referendum on Biden and I just don't think people are pleased enough with his performance to reelect him.

Okay, Peter, Trump v. Biden.

It's Trump because you don't have COVID.

That was what undid him in 2020 and, you know, the only caveat there is, of course, like Trump is his own worst enemy when it comes to, you know, politics often and he commits some unforced error, but otherwise it's Trump with actually, I think, a sizeable margin.

Bacha Angersargon, last word.

Well, you know me.

I don't like to prognosticate because I am always wrong, but I have to say I really, really don't know, but I am excited to find out.

I mean, I thought the debate last night was really interesting and I think that this is just a really interesting election cycle in terms of thinking about the future of our nation and in terms of it being a referendum on how we see ourselves as Americans and what our priorities are.

So I'm looking forward to it, whichever it turns out to be.

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / The First GOP Debate and The Elephant Not In The Room

So elegant, so diplomatic, sounding a lot like Nikki Haley, a woman she was shocked to have fallen in love with last night.

Olivia Reingold, Peter Savodnik, Bacha Angersargon.

Thank you so much for coming on.

Thanks, Barry.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thanks for listening and my thanks, of course, to Olivia Reingold, Peter Savodnik and Bacha Angersargon for joining me.

Did you watch the debate?

Did you agree with our takes or did you think Ron DeSantis and Tim Scott had an amazing night?

Well, talk about it with your friends and share this episode and use it to have an honest conversation of your own.

Last but certainly not least, please check out the free press's website today, VFP.com, to read Olivia Reingold's piece from Milwaukee.

It's called Knives Out for Vivek.

And if you want to support our work, there's one way to do it.

It's by going to thefp.com, T-H-E-F-P.com, and becoming a subscriber today.

We'll see you next time.