

So the Republican 2024 race is off in earnest. As of this week, there are now 12 candidates declared. It's become in a big field, but only two of those candidates are polling above single digits. Donald Trump, who you may remember from such presidencies as the one right before this one, he's polling in the mid fifties and Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, who is polling in the twenties. Now, I've not always been on the DeSantis bus in the way some others are. You may remember that my post midterm podcast was titled, I don't quite buy the DeSantis narrative. I didn't think his win in Florida was more impressive than Mike DeWine's win in Ohio, say DeWine won by more or Jared Polis's win in Colorado. The idea that out of 2022 DeSantis was some unstoppable juggernaut. I didn't see the evidence for it, but I now think the situation is flipped. And if anything, he's being underrated. I've been listening to DeSantis give speeches and listening to him give interviews. And I don't think he's as unlikeable or robotic on the stump as liberals have kind of been telling themselves he is. There's a lot of anti DeSantis glee and his glitchy Twitter spaces roll out, but that doesn't really mean anything for his candidacy. And this is a guy who has won tough races before. He's a guy who knows the story he is telling and he's pretty good and precise at telling it. It's a story, I think if you listen to it closely, that is going to scare liberals. And the question is whether it's going to actually thrill conservatives. So what is that story? And how does he tell it? I seem to be a bit weird about this, but I'm a believer that you can learn a lot by reading the books politicians released during presidential campaigns. A lot of people dismisses as poll tested committee written fluff, which is fine. They often are. But these are books where the politician gets to craft and shape their own story at length. And how somebody wants you to see them. That tells you a lot about how they see themselves. It tells you a lot about how they see you. And so I've been reading Ron DeSantis' book, The Courage to Be Free, Florida's Blueprint for America's Revival. And I wouldn't call it a good book, exactly, even by the standards of this genre, but it is a very revealing one. And so I wanted to talk about it with someone who is expert at reading these kinds of books. My colleague Carlos Azada was a long time Pulitzer Prize winning nonfiction book critic at the Washington Post. He even wrote a book about other political books. It's called What Were We Thinking, in which he read the torrent of Trump era political books and tried to understand the meta narrative that emerged out of them. And he's not only read DeSantis' most recent book, but he won up me by reading his little known 2011 book, Dreams from Our Founding Fathers. So he's a sense of the way the DeSantis story has changed over the course of his career. I should note too, Carlos is one of the co-hosts of the great new Matter of Opinion podcast, also produced by New York Times Opinion Audio, which you should check out if you haven't. But he joins me for a deep dive into the Ron DeSantis texts. Now, as always, my email as reclinedshow at nytimes.com.

Carlos Azada, welcome to the show.

Thanks for having me, Ezra.

So Ron DeSantis' book is called The Courage to Be Free. It opens with a quote by Winston Churchill. Courage is rightly considered the foremost of virtues for upon it, all others depend.

So what is the kind of courage DeSantis is describing, or more to the point, what is the kind of courage he's claiming to have shown?

It's the courage to go after his enemies. This book is by and large an enemy's list.

And for DeSantis, that's the news media, which he always prefaces with like, you know,

the corporate media or the legacy media. It's big tech, which he calls the censorship arm of the left, the administrative state, or it's sort of COVID era spin-off, which is the biomedical security state led by Anthony Fauci, and the elite universities that he attended, such as Harvard and Yale. There are a lot of kind of convenient boogeymen in this book. And the biggest one, of course, is wokeness. Florida is where what goes to die has become his go-to line. And I count every five or six pages, there's a reliable assault on the woke or on wokeness. And so in terms of courage, that's his courage, the courage that he's a beating his chest about is the courage to assault these various enemies.

I'm always interested in these books as the politician in question begins to try to build their worldview for you. Where do they go off the beaten path? And I think your description of the book is an enemy's list is deeply true. And one thing that he does, which caught my eye very early on, is try to cohere those enemies into something more united, and something that makes him look like the underdog standing against unbelievable forces right against him. And he does it by referencing this sort of weird essay written by Angelo Codavilla in The American Spectator a long time ago, 2010 now, where Codavilla tries to describe this idea of a ruling class. Were you familiar with that description of it? And what did you make of that?

Well, I mean, I wasn't until I read the book, but that argument about the ruling class, about the elite, recursed throughout DeSantis' book, but it's basically a standard populist playbook.

What is the definition of populism, right? The first thing about it is that it's anti-elitist.

There are these forces at the top who are running the commanding heights of everything, and I stand here against them. And that runs through all of what DeSantis is talking about in this book. The other aspects of populism is that it's anti-pluralist, right, is that I represent the people, and that it's exclusionary, that only some of the people are counted as the people. And so really the anti-wokism of DeSantis, that's sort of the badge of honor for him, that's just another way for a different audience of talking about this anti-elitism.

So I went back to read that essay, and I was fascinated by it, because it of course has the problem this kind of politics always has, and this kind of essay always has, which is how do you describe a ruling class that doesn't include all the people who agree with you but literally rule, or they have huge amounts of political power or economic power or media power?

And in that essay, Codevilla's solution, I think it's a one DeSantis adopts right as book, is to say the ruling class is defined, quote, above all by a certain attitude.

And so, and now I'm not quoting him, and so if you share that attitude, you're part of it.

And if you don't, no matter how rich you are or how powerful you are, you aren't.

So then you can be President Donald Trump or Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas or the highest-rated anchor on Fox News or the governor of Florida, and not be part of the ruling class, because culturally, you don't share their attitude or their alliances.

And this feels to me like an important thing DeSantis is doing repeatedly, because otherwise, he actually looks like the bully using the entire power of the government of Florida to crush his enemies, but he's up against this weird ruling class, he doesn't.

How do you think about that move he's making?

I mean, I think that there absolutely is a sense in which cultural elites and political elites talk down to the masses of American society.

And I think that's a nonpartisan hazard of inhabiting that elite.

DeSantis makes his entire platform, however, all about fighting that.

When he looks at what he accomplished in Florida, it's entirely that battle, right? It's about Florida schools, about, you know, fighting against the teaching of systemic racism. It's about gender identity, transgender athletics in women's sports, woke capital. Why should Disney get to speak up against what I'm doing here to defend you, the people? So I think it can be both true, it can be both real, a thing that happens, and it can be taken to an extreme, such as DeSantis is doing, where it's not just true, it's the only thing. And I think that's probably where he crosses a line of even how most people live their lives, right? People who would find reasons to be resentful of the ruling elite. That's not like all they eat and drink and sleep every day. But that's the only message DeSantis has. So I want to keep this framework in our mind. And I want to jump forward in the book to, as DeSantis begins his real political journey, particularly to Washington, and the way he describes that story as playing out, he writes this book about how Barack Obama was betraying the vision of the founding fathers. And it kind of comes out of nowhere in his description. He's deployed for a bit, he's gone to law school, he's not really described himself as political. And then all of a sudden he's hanging out and he decides to write a book about Barack Obama's constitutional betrayals. I think you've taken a look at that book, and I haven't. So I wanted to see what you took from it, how you would describe it. I read it. It's actually much better than the courage to be free. It's called Dreams from My Founding Fathers. Get it? Yes, it is a pretty overt and unsubtle dig at Obama's Dreams from My Father, the memoir he wrote in the 90s that then later when Obama became a big deal, the memo really took off and became kind of a signature part of his story. So it's an attack on Obama. This was, as the country was gearing up for the 2012 re-election campaign, the Obama-Romney battle. It's both an attack on Obama and at the same time a sort of love letter to the founders in particular Madison and Hamilton. And essentially he argues that the Obama agenda of transformation and of redistribution is irreconcilable with the principles of the founders and that Obama is driven by his father's anti-colonialism, by Jeremiah Wright, by Saul Olinsky, and not really by the vision of the founders. He says, James Madison was a freedom man. Obama is a government man. That's basically the message. Now, it shows a fairly deep reading of the Federalist Papers, of the debates around ratification of the Constitution. It's something that if it's a made up, contrived interest, it was very well done. It probably is something that matters to him. But what's interesting to me is that in some sense, the Ron DeSantis of circa 2010 and the Ron DeSantis of 2023 don't really get along. These books feel to me like they're in somewhat of opposition to each other. In The Courage to Be Free, DeSantis is far less driven by any kind of constitutional ethic, as he would call it in the earlier book, and more by fighting people whose agendas are different from his own. There's a thread, there's a kind of an intellectual coherence to the first book, whether you agree with it or not, that is missing in the second. It also struck me just when I was looking at the coverage around the first book and looking at its framing that there's, for lack of a better term, a conservative trendiness to DeSantis. And he's not alone in this. I mean, it's a normal politician thing to tack with the center or the energies of your party. Joe Biden does it. But DeSantis likes to talk about himself as completely unpoletested,

just a leader from his own gut. But that book is framed exactly around the aesthetics of the 2010 Tea Party moment. And then DeSantis makes this big turn towards MAGA and Trumpism, famously has

this ad when he's running for governor in Florida, where he's reading his children, Donald Trump books to go to sleep and building a wall with them at the blocks. And there's just a funny way in which for somebody who, so much of his political aesthetic is his bullheaded independence for him to shift from the Tea Party constitutionalist, revering the founding fathers thing in 2010, to the aggressive populist hates the ruling class, will stop at nothing to destroy his enemies version that he's presenting in 2023. It makes him look very sensitive actually to the winds of his party. You're right. This book is full MAGA. I hadn't thought about that transition the way you described it. But what's interesting to me is that he doesn't quite capture each one. He's very earnestly trying to be Mr. Tea Party in the first book. And he's trying to ride the MAGA wave in the second, but he just seems slightly off in both cases by focusing so zealously on the constitutional basis for the Tea Party and the return to first principles.

He missed a lot of what was going on, a lot of the energy that was surrounding the Tea Party. And here, even when he tries to be MAGA in the second book, he's got the talking points down, right? He's a cultural warrior, but he kind of wants to be a competent cultural warrior. It reminds me of when Hillary Clinton was asked in 2016, so are you a moderate or progressive? And she's like, I'm a progressive, but I'm progressive who likes to get things done.

And here, Ron DeSantis is kind of like the culture warrior who wants to get things done. And he says, in the epilogue to *The Courage to Be Free*, he says, clearly our administration was substantively consequential. And I don't know that make America substantively consequential has the same kind of ring to it.

It's what Trump senses as a weakness in DeSantis, rightly or wrongly, in his, I think, both revealing and slightly doesn't roll off the tongue nickname DeSantis, which is that both then and now DeSantis is the grind. He's never in on the joke that something about Trump and DeSantis likes to sort of contrast like the entertainer versus the people get things done.

But something Trump understands about MAGA is it is a show, is that there is a kind of joke. You are supposed to wink a bit, not because you don't believe it, but because the energy, the vibe of it, is this riotous, anarchic, angry, free thing. It is supposed to be fun, to be part of Donald Trump's movement. And the Tea Party had a bit of that energy in its own ways too, the people with their tricorner hats. And if you went to any Tea Party rallies at that time, they were these high energy things. I mean, they were apocalyptic also, but they were a festival.

DeSantis was not a major Tea Party figure then. I mean, we'll talk about his time in Washington in a second. But I think something he has struggled with, and he seems to be struggling with a bit now and struggled with then, is that he takes himself and these movements much more seriously in a way than the people in them do. He takes them extremely literally.

What I've always thought about the Trumpist energy, as you describe it, is that it's not about necessarily believing the things he says. It's not about belief. It's about allegiance. Even believing or claiming to accept a proven lie or something on which Trump might change his mind,

and so you change along with him, shows that it's not really about holding on to a true core conviction. It's about showing what team you're on and about sticking it to the other side.

I think you're right that that kind of energy, which I suppose can be fun in the right hands, is missing from DeSantis' writing for sure. His case against Trump, you brought out the entertainment aspect of it. He says that a lot. Politics isn't about entertaining, about brand building and being great on social media, but in some ways it is. He showed his failure on social media when he announced on Twitter with Elon Musk, but I think throughout the courage to be free, there is a case against Trump. It's a subtle one. It's not very in your face, but he tries to say, for instance, we have to expand the base. We can't just rely on those who got us here. He doesn't mention January 6, but he says, the executive must govern within the confines of the constitutional system. He criticizes officials who want to, quote, perpetuate themselves in office. He says, I don't place loyalty to me as my overriding concern and place loyalty to the cause. These are all little ways where he tries to draw distinctions between himself and Trump without being very overt. It's almost like he's waging this proxy battle. So I want to come back to Trump in a couple of minutes because I want to go here to when he gets to Washington. He writes this book, he runs a Republican primary, he wins the Republican primary, he wins the general election, and now he's coming to Washington. He's a congressman, you know, coming to the swamp, although it didn't get called that in the same way back then. How do you describe the way DeSantis presents or narrativizes his time as a member of Congress? He does a couple of things. When he highlights his positions during that time, it's all Trumpy or proto-Trumpy in a sense. He says that, you know, that he argued for a border wall, that he highlighted the threat of radical Islam, even that he was calling for the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem. And one thing he tries to do, and again, not to bring it all back to Trump, but he brought up how DeSantis had that ad about his support for Donald Trump, where like his baby's in a MAGA onesie and they're building a wall with blocks. When he looks back on his time in Congress, he's basically saying that he and other Freedom Caucus members pave the way for someone like Trump to emerge. You know, we identified the shortcomings of the modern GOP establishment and, you know, paved the way for an outsider to come to power. So he's basically saying, yeah, Trump says that he made me. Well, I kind of made him as well. And that's how he kind of looks back and interprets or redefines part of what was going on during his years in Congress. So one thing I found valuable about a section on DC is that it lays out a lot of his national political structural thinking. And I want to read a couple pieces because one thing I kept noticing was what I would call projection. DeSantis keeps describing dynamics that I would say describe him. But the way he understands it is they describe the ruling class or everybody else. He writes, quote, the media also serves as a de facto enforcer of party discipline for Democrats and as an instigator of party dissension among Republicans. A Democrat has no incentive to buck the party to work with Republicans. All the organs of the progressive left will go on the attack and the media will channel those attacks against any Democrat. Then he goes on to say, a Republican who joins with the left against the party will be the subject of glowing profiles in legacy newspapers and magazines and seemingly endless TV bookings on CNN. One piece of this is it's weird. I'm part of the media. I know exactly the dynamic he's talking about, but it is a very bipartisan dynamic. It's true that John McCain was beloved on the Sunday shows. So is Joe Manchin. So is Joe Lieberman. The media has always loved these crossover figures. But something that it triggered

for me in thinking about DeSantis' book is I've read a lot of campaign books. I think they're actually pretty revealing. But almost every one that I've read when I think about Joe Biden's book, Hillary Clinton's book, Barack Obama's book, Bill Clinton's book and a lot of others, they're really focused on showing their bipartisan credentials. That's what all those books on some level are actually about. And DeSantis' book is one of the first of these that I've read that I can remember that really doesn't try to do this, right? The thing about that, that is at the very least I think a gamble, is when you go back in recent American political history and you think of politicians who ran for president, won the nomination and let's call it won the popular vote at least once. In general, they try to take that mantle of the center. They try to take the mantle of bipartisanship and they do it in different ways. But he never tries to say, and here's a place where I cross the aisle or here's a place where I understand what the other side is thinking and I'm kind of sympathetic to it. I mean, it is just I will crush them and I will hear the limitations of their families. That's it. Yeah, I sense the Conan the Barbarian moment there, Ezra. The pivot they would always make and that they don't make anymore is you run for the primary

for the nomination in that way and then you pivot, right? You move to the center to try to capture a bigger slice of the electorate. And that's the part that I think Trump killed off. And I can't imagine Ron DeSantis running a red meat primary and then a soup and salad kind of general election. I think if he were to win the nomination, he would probably go even deeper. The strategy was essentially to run counter to what the Republican autopsy said, that you have to expand the base, different kinds of voters. For Trump is about turning out more of the base of people who were probably too disaffected to vote before.

So I think DeSantis is following the Trump playbook in that sense. I don't know if that's enough to say that the old playbook is over. The last thing that struck me as interesting about the section is that a fair amount of it is devoted to explaining why Ron DeSantis has no record of legislative success whatsoever from his time in Congress, right? Part of it is him saying, you know, he was a reformer and they were never going to put him on the good committees and never

going to fast track his bills. I mean, he was on the Judiciary Committee. It's not a terrible committee assignment, among others, to be fair. And the only bill he really mentions, authoring and passing, is called the Puppy's Assisting Wounded Service Members for Veterans Therapy Act. Cause. Right, yeah. Which nothing against dogs for wounded service members. I think it's a great cause. But if that's the mark you made on Washington, if you're having a brag in your campaign book, and luckily he's governor next and we'll talk about that and does have a record to run on there, but it is relevant that he actually was pretty bad at working with Congress federally when that was his job. I mean, if you're in your campaign book bragging about how

you put the dogs for wounded service members issue on the map, what you're really saying in a way is that you didn't put any issues on the map. I mean, he tries to frame himself as involved in the immigration debates and the, and a bunch of others, but he wasn't, I mean, I was covering Washington, then he wasn't really known as a major figure on any of those.

No, he wasn't a player. I mean, the question though is, to what extent is legislative achievement a banner on which you run for even higher office anymore? The notion of people coming to serve in the house because they want to get X, Y, or Z particular things done versus I'm coming to

Washington and I'm going to have a comms strategy. I'm going to be on Fox. I'm going to rile the base. I'm going to get on TV. I'm going to be active on social media. There's a different ethic of service in Congress, especially I think on the right, but not solely on the right, that makes that gap that you've highlighted from his record and from this book, I think less important than it might have been before. Also, I wouldn't, this is a small point, but I wouldn't, you know, minimize the, I don't mean that particular piece of legislation, but just anything that can get you on the side of veterans. He talks a lot about his service in Iraq and in the Navy. He puts that all together as part of that story, but bottom line, I think legislative achievement is not all that anymore when it comes to your, your time in Congress. And look, if all he had was his time in Congress, we wouldn't be having this conversation, but he then runs for governor and I would say the structure of the book takes this huge change right here because I would describe the way he explains his time in Washington as he hates the place. He doesn't like the people. He's frustrated. And if you read between the lines and all, he's not getting much done. But then when we move to his time as governor, chapter seven, which really opens that has a title taken from one of the federalist papers written by Hamilton, and it's called energy in the executive. Yes. And I think if I were going to title his book, try to give it an app title that is what he's really saying he is, I think energy in the executive is like the right title for this book. So tell me a bit about the case he's making there.

It's the most kind of conventional political story, I think, that he tells about himself. You know, he has his blueprint for a bold agenda that he outlines, right? And that's fiscal responsibility, education policy, you know, for school choice, accountability in government, you know, combating illegal immigration. It's a litany of policy choices that would not be out of bounds in a far more conventional sort of non-Trump era Republican governorship. That to me was part of watching him explain that record as governor. He retroactively transforms it into much more of a culture war interpretation for everything. But if you look at the array of issues that he was engaged in, it didn't seem to me to be that unusual for his party.

I took some of what he's doing in these chapters as a way of both explicitly, but also implicitly, making a critique of Joe Biden, but also Donald Trump. Descentus is running in the primary and in the general, if he makes it to the general, against two much older men who a knock on both of them fairly or unfairly, is that they've lost a step. I mean, Trump famously really wouldn't come over from the residence over to the Oval Office before about 11 in the morning. He's distractible.

He likes watching a lot of cable news on his own time. And around that, and this seems to be something Descentus is folding into the idea of energy, he's undisciplined. He doesn't read the briefing books. He doesn't do the work. He doesn't know how to work the levers of government. Then, of course, the broad view of Biden on the right, but someone on the left too, if you look at polling, is that he's getting too old for the job. There's worries. He's misspeaking. Maybe he's lost a step. And so I took a lot of the energy and the executive framing as being a way of trying to make the age critique, but make it by saying, I have this more intangible, but also necessary asset these other guys lack, which is energy, vigor, attention, discipline.

I think that is part of the implicit case he's making, certainly about Trump, but you're right, likely about Biden as well. He doesn't really have to say it very much. Seems a lot older to me. We're the same generation. There you go. There you go. By the way, he mentions you twice in the first book. Oh, really? Yes. Positively, I'm sure. Now, he's very upset with you because you don't

sufficiently respect the founders or the constitution. We'll see. Just FYI. I've not had any confusion as to whether or not I was going to be on Ron DeSantis' enemies list. I mean, it's a case that he doesn't have to make. He's younger. His wife is younger. They go out there together. They look like a young couple. And I think that the less overt he is with it, the more he lets other people make that case for him, the better off he is. There's something very unsubtle about energy in the executive as a title, as opposed to whom? Obviously, as opposed to Trump as opposed to Biden. He's not making that case on the stump when it comes to Trump. He's making it about Joe Biden. I was listening to one of his early speeches post-official announcement in New Hampshire, and he does open it. So Joe Biden recently tripped over a sandback. He did see, I think a lot of people saw, he had a fall at this Air Force event. And I don't know if he sustained injuries, but I just want to say that we hope and wish Joe Biden a swift recovery from any injuries he may have sustained. But we also wish the United States of America a swift recovery from the injuries it has sustained because of Joe Biden and his policies. And it's such a mean-spirited little riff. It's such an overplaying of the hand. In some ways, I thought Ron DeSantis was overvalued as a political prospect right after the midterm. My post-midterm podcast was about this. Right now, I think he's undervalued as a political prospect. I think he's better on the stump and in interviews than a lot of liberals have convinced themselves he is, and he does have a story to tell. But there is something about him where he can't resist throwing the full punch. He can't just seem like a decent guy when he's talking about people he doesn't like. And that's a tricky thing, right? You've got to be careful with these age arguments. You've got to be careful with these things about taking advantage of somebody else getting hurt. And he's not careful. He's very careless. And I mean, no one should take political advice from me. That's not the line of work I'm in, but it seems utterly unnecessary. Everyone else is having that conversation. The front page of The New York Times is having that conversation. You don't need to come off in that gratuitous, mean-spirited way where you're literally a 40-something guy beating up on an 80-year-old guy. And it's not particularly classy. So it seems unnecessary as part of the story, even with that really kind of ham-fisted pivot from like, well, maybe he's uninjured, but the country's injured. I mean, it's just unnecessary. He's obviously far younger than Trump and Biden. And it just seems entirely unnecessary for him to do that. So the place where I think DeSantis makes a case around energy that is more substantive, less of a kind of nudge-nudge that these guys are old. And I think this case is, by the way, substantiated. I think it is real. I think it is a genuine case for his candidacy, if you believe in what he believes in, is that he has had the energy and the discipline and the rigor to pay attention to what he can do and do it to the utmost of his abilities. He writes, One of my first orders of business after getting elected was to have my transition team amass an exhaustive list of all the constitutional, statutory, and customary powers of the governor. I wanted to be sure that I was using every lever available to advance our priorities. We talked to political experts in Florida about DeSantis, so we weren't just existing within his own rhetorical universe in the book. And they said, every one of them, that he has really controlled the legislature, that he has really very effectively wielded the powers of the governor, the powers of the agencies, to his benefit. And again and again, I think he really makes his case, and I do think this ends up being a critique sub-rosa or not of Trump, who is terrible this kind of thing, of he figured out how to dominate the structure of the government he was

in control of in order to pass his agenda and to punish his enemies. And that that's part of the energy of the executive. The energy of the executive is in part to master the government, and he's got both the energy and the discipline to do that.

I'm glad you raised that because that's one of the places where his critique of Trump, I feel, is pretty overt. He describes a moment after Hurricane Michael hit Florida in late 2018 where he is asking for increased federal aid, especially for the northwest of the state, and he meets with Trump, and he tells him, look, this is Trump country. We really need some help, and Trump responds with his sort of Pavlovian enthusiasm when he's told that these are his voters, and he's like, oh yeah, I won 90% of the votes out there. What do they need? So Trump ostensibly promises to boost federal aid, but then DeSantis writes about how Mick Mulvaney, who was the acting chief of staff, pulls him aside after the meeting and says, look, don't announce that yet because he has no idea what he agreed to. He doesn't understand the price tag. He was just having a conversation with you, and so then he had to negotiate with Mulvaney about when he would be able to announce that he was getting more federal aid, and what he's doing there, in the book, you could say he's thanking Trump for increased federal assistance, but he's really showcasing how Trump had no idea about even the basics of governing, and that anecdote struck me as a pretty obvious contrast that he's drawing between what you describe, you know, his mastery of the possibilities of government, and the way Trump ran his White House. I thought the story is about Trump. There's another one where he is asking Trump for some normal, picky-une thing, and as he's leaving the room, Trump says, Ron, you better make sure I win Florida. I would say the only place in the book where DeSantis is even mildly funny, I mean, it is a book just unbelievably without a sense of humor, but the stories of Trump are quite funny. I mean, they're very normal. They're kind of the stories everybody tells about Trump, but the thing that they are repeatedly showing is that Trump was disengaged, as you're saying, and not just disengaged, right? Not just not paying attention, but almost congenitally unable to pay attention. I would say what they're really showing is Trump is a narcissist in a way that DeSantis frames himself as not being, this is something you pointed out in your column, but DeSantis talks about hiring people who are loyal to the cause, not to him, hiring people who are not just going to tell him what he wants to hear, but who are, at least as long as they're coming from a philosophically conservative place he approves of, you know, actually be there in conversation, in agreement, in disagreement with him. And he frames Trump as unable to get out of his own story about himself, whereas he frames himself as, in the way he runs government, in the way he staffs government, as not interested in bootlickers. I mean, whether it's true or not, I don't really know, but interested in people who are going to get the job he wants them to get done, done. Yes, he's the culture warrior who likes to get things done. The other thing about how DeSantis describes himself, though, that I found interesting in this book, is that unlike, say, the constitutional semi-t-party conservative of the first book, here he has very generic explanations for what his kind of underlying beliefs might be, right? He says, a governor has to have a sense of the true north to guide him, willingness to lead with conviction. These are meaningless terms, right? These are words that have no depth to them. He says he's God-fearing, hardworking, America-loving. Reminds me of this cartoon book that my kids have where there's a politician saying, I am four things that are good and I am against things that are bad. And someone in the crowd saying, God, finally, someone who gets it. And that's kind of the way DeSantis talks about himself. The path forward

is not difficult to identify. It just requires using basic common sense and applying core American values to the problems of the day. There's no there-there to what's actually animating him. So here's the final line in his book. The Florida Blueprint is a simple formula. Be willing to lead, have the courage of your convictions, deliver for your constituents, and reap the political rewards. This is a blueprint for America's revival. It's a blueprint for nothing, right? Like those are terms that don't mean anything. And that's kind of where he ends up. I found this entire book disappointing in the sense that you don't get at the core convictions of a candidate for president. You do get a sense of how he, as you said, he's getting better at seeing which way the winds of the party are blowing, but he's not driven by anything in particular beyond perhaps ambition and beyond the desire to harness the feelings of his party in his effort to win. I'm going to be more on the DeSantis side here. I thought there was more thickness in his description of himself as governor. And I thought that I'd say two things about it. One is that the way I read a number of the stories is really interesting. And this, I think, also has to do with what the political structure of Florida was in this time, but a little bit like Trump too. DeSantis is not in a fight with the Democratic Party. His opponent is not the Democratic Party. It's the media. And I think this is clearest. And his description of the way he understood an issue and the way he tried to navigate it is thickest when he talks about COVID. And the way in which, at least the way he saw it, he was standing up on behalf of Floridians to an almost overwhelming backlash driven by the media, the public health establishment, the whole ruling class, so to speak. And in a lot of ways, both here and in speeches I've heard him give, you would think that he's running against Anthony Fauci, right? Not Donald Trump, not even Joe Biden, Fauci, right? That he's running against Fauci. But similarly, he talks about with his own head advisor on this saying, look, I don't even know what you're doing lately, but I see you're getting a lot of crap from the mainstream media, so I know you're doing something good. And he describes with Fauci this sort of ruling class, this public health regime, overwhelming even President Trump, right? Trump is the one who has Fauci in that position during this time. And so this is, in a way, a funny part of DeSantis' campaign. On the one hand, I don't really think you can run in 2024 on your COVID policies from 2021. But on the other hand, it is a place where to give him, something like credit. He really did stand in the way he says he will against criticism, against what a lot of people were telling him to do. And Florida's COVID outcomes, if you adjust for age and comorbidities, they're middling. And it doesn't look that different when you adjust for what we know how to adjust for to see what the death rates are. So his case on that is not that bad. I saw the attacks on Fauci and his recap of his COVID record, a little more broadly. Like, yes, I think he has a record to run on. I think the further away we get from the pandemic, the less Anthony Fauci as a sort of supervillain will be useful as a campaign talking point. I thought that he was essentially waging a proxy battle against Trump, but he didn't want to bring up Trump. So he was using Fauci as kind of a stand in because a lot of the contrast that he's drawing is from that first year of the pandemic, which was under Donald Trump. So he says that it's Anthony Fauci, who was one of the most destructive bureaucrats in American history. Our cities became Fauci-villes, like Hooverville's. Fauci is the destroyer of jobs and freedom, the architect of a Fauci in dystopia. It was Fauci, not Trump, in this telling who was at fault here. And Florida stands in the way of

that, right? He says that as the iron curtain of Fauciism descended upon America, Florida stood in the way. It was the West Berlin. So I took it as sort of a, it's the courage to be free, but he really had the courage to attack Trump only through the proxy of Anthony Fauci.

That's how I saw that moment.

To go back to the conversation we were having about energy, the critique DeSantis is making of Trump here. One thing DeSantis says, and again, the reason this part of the book read differently than others is that, look, he didn't buy the mainstream take, including the mainstream epidemiological takes on COVID. He went out and found his own experts from Stanford and other places that were analyzing this. And he came himself to different conclusions. And he describes different reasons he did and different studies he was relying on. There's a thing about the decay rate of COVID waves. And there's another thing about how they were targeting into senior citizen homes, because if you really looked at who was dying, just the comorbidity of being elderly was huge. And so you could have a much more targeted approach. And I see that as making sort of two critiques of Trump. One is the one I think you're getting at, which is Trump was overmatched by his own government. If you want to take the more blameless version for Trump, as opposed to Trump actually agreed with Anthony Fauci, you know, you could just say that on this, as in many other places, Trump was not in the details enough and did not have the mastery of his own bureaucracy to put his sort of person in charge and to be able to assess what was being told to him and be able to assemble the staff who would tell him what he needed to hear, but he, Ron DeSantis, did. And then similarly, you know, I think his other major argument, and this is, I think, where the courage to lead becomes his theme. Nothing else he does, I think, really takes any courage in the book. At least as a public official going to Iraq, certainly takes courage. As a public official, he's beaten up on the LGBTQ community. But on COVID, there really was a lot of pressure to do mask mandates, to close schools.

But where he's saying that, listen, when I think this whole establishment milieu is wrong and is cramming their big government and their biomedical security state down your throats, I will stand in their way and I will not agree and I will find my own sources of information and I will keep my own head. I think it's kind of his best case. In a way, I think it's a problem for him because his best case is over. But I do think that his critique of Trump and his argument for himself in this way, that the reason COVID, I think, is so important to him is that it's where they unite. I think it's kind of the crucible for him of his governance, where his self-conception clicks into place, and where his critique of Trump clicks into place, because it's the place for him where Trump basically betrays his own ideas and maybe even what Ron DeSantis thought Donald Trump was, and Trump bows to the ruling class and basically runs

the government the way he thinks a liberal would have run it.

I think that last point that you made about the critique that Trump was bowing to the ruling class is what puts DeSantis' COVID record at the center of his argument. It's completely in keeping with the anti-elitism that undergirds the whole book. Anthony Fauci, the National Institutes of Health, the Biomedical Security State, the We Know Better Nanny State, that is what Ron DeSantis is fighting.

And unlike his record in Congress that we talked about, this is something real that he can show.

I stood up to the elites who were telling me there was only one way to do things.

So I think it's powerful. Yes, it recedes with time because COVID recedes with time,

but it's powerful in the sense of like, here is how I manage a crisis. That's what the presidency is about. It's about the unexpected thing that hits you in January of 2020, and you have to decide who you're going to be, how you're going to govern. And so I think that's a powerful message, and it fits perfectly into the populist anti-elite argument that DeSantis is making throughout his book and in his early campaign. The flip of that, the place where I think a real weakness opens up for DeSantis in the book as I read it, and it's particularly actually a weakness against Donald Trump. One of Trump's advantages right now is that people trust him on the economy.

He's much more trusted than Joe Biden on the economy. People remember the, particularly the end of the Trump economy is pretty good. He did preside over a fairly large boom.

There is almost nothing about economics in this entire book. I mean, I don't know what he thinks about wages and wage growth. I don't know what he thinks about inflation and how to tame it. I don't know what he thinks about healthcare. I mean, I know some of his record from Congress, but he's really got no record on that in any big ways, but he's running for president now at a time of high inflation, where Trump's biggest advantage is former businessman who ran a strong economy, whatever you think of them, and nothing. That almost felt like malpractice.

Well, I mean, you go to war with the army you have, right? I mean, it's not an area where his record has been distinguished or active. I mean, there's very little about foreign policy and international affairs in this book either. And he talks about Taiwan, and it's almost, I mean, it's pathetic. He knew some Taiwanese kids when he played in the Little League World Series,

right? And that's what he draws upon in the book. It would have been better if he'd said nothing at all. Trump has the benefit and the drawback of having been president, right? And so he can say that he had a powerful economy in the first three years, and then he can claim no blame for how it went down the tubes during COVID. He has a record managing an economy for better or for worse. All that DeSantis can really point to is that a lot of people move to Florida. He brings up those indicators a lot throughout this book. People want to be here. We must be doing something right. He talks about taxes and the lack of an income tax, as if that had been something that he had accomplished on the stump. That's a standard line. He's kind of grasping for what he can in those cases. But you're right. That is a void, and I don't know how he can get around it. I mean, it's not the only void in this book.

So the other major theme, then, for him of his own governorship is his fight against what we'll call wokeness here, what he calls wokeness, actually more to the point. And what he never defines, how do you understand what he thinks wokeness is? Yeah, it's usually pretty generic. I counted how many times the term comes up in the book. It's 46 times, either woke or wokeness. And the context is usually, it's like an insult. It's an add-on. The Democratic Party is a woke dumpster fire. The corporate media lives in a woke bubble. The woke mob is trying to impose its will on us. Even he says the meaning of the term is not entirely clear. He writes that what constitutes woke is open to debate. But for the left, a fundamental attribute of wokeness is the subordination of facts and evidence to anecdote and ideology. Now, maybe so. That's also the description of any political or cultural movement or tactic where you try to shape some kind of political narrative to suit your ends, right? The subordination of facts and evidence to narrative is not the sole province of the so-called woke left. The only places where I think he does try to get more specific is, for instance, education. The teaching of systemic racism and systemic forces like

racism, you know, that's something he refers to overtly as wokeness. Wokeness in terms of the gender identity debates, he really focuses on woke capital, right? On the ability of corporations to not just impose, you know, environmental and social and governance standards, but also of CEOs to get on the woke bandwagon, so to speak, and spread those values across the world. So those are the few cases where he tries to put some meat on it. And of course, exhibit A in the woke capital thing is his battle with Disney. So I'm glad you brought up education there. My big takeaway from the book, my prediction, is that Ron DeSantis' campaign is going to be about education. And the reason is that unlike COVID, which has declined dramatically as a major political issue, what education does for DeSantis is it unites his three areas of either accomplishment or focus. So one, it is, I think, his strongest ground on COVID, which is that he kept his schools open, or at least reopen them very quickly. And so when California was still substantially closed, when New York was, everybody was guaranteed a full school week back in Florida. And I think that decision looks pretty good now. Many people thought it was a good decision at the time. It looks better

now. So that gives him a way of talking about what he did right in COVID that I think is pretty strong political ground. Then he also expanded school choice in Florida quite a bit. And school choice, we can argue about it, but it's a much more traditional conservative policy. That's a place where he has a conservative policy accomplishment that is significant, it is real, it is his, it is very appealing to the religious right, and he can run on it in a normal way. And then it's where he has chosen to fight a lot of his battles over what he calls wokeness. A lot of what he is fighting about is over what you can teach children in schools.

He calls discussing gender identity, sexualizing children, or he has fought against versions of the AP African-American studies course and has bills on what you can and can teach around systemic

racism. And he's really framing that as stating up for parental rights that you as a parent should have control and input and visibility into what your children, and he frames it usually as young children, although his bills have affected every level of education, what they should learn. And so education for him, as I read it, is like the trifecta. It's COVID, it's wokeness, it's conservatism, and it's where he's actually gotten a bunch of things done. It's also part of the anti-elitism argument, like who are these people to tell you what your children should be learning? I'm fighting the elites who are trying to indoctrinate your kids. You mentioned the lack of the economic story, the economic agenda. I think where he tries to tell that story in terms of his governorship is through his attacks on so-called woke capital. And if someone can marry the anti-woke argument of the right to a real economic agenda, then I think that would be something quite powerful. I think I'm channeling our colleague Ross Douthit here in part. I had a conversation with him about this. And you know, that's something that hasn't been successfully done in the party so far. But DeSantis' attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in the business world, his attacks on the way that Disney tried to get involved in the battles over what is taught in schools in Florida, he can kind of wrap those into a story of woke capital, business world gone awry, requirements and conditions for employment that no real American should have to countenance in terms of DEI training and the like. It seems very narrow, but I think that's a sliver that he is moving toward. The attention he gives is fight with Disney. And if people aren't familiar with this, Disney opposes what gets called the don't say gay bill, which is about what you can teach kids in schools about gender identity, sexuality,

LGBT issues, etc. And DeSantis responds by using the power of the state and a special session of the legislature to take away special self-governing status Disney has had in Florida for a very long time. And they're still locked in battle. It's something a lot of Republicans, including Trump and Christie, have been using to attack DeSantis. Disney is a pretty popular corporation. And the idea that they're grooming children as DeSantis' allies like to put it is it has a quality of like when McCarthy said the army was full of communists. It's like really, man, Disney doesn't like children. And so it's become, I think, a bit of a weakness. He really like he's ready to die on this hill throughout the book. And what's interesting about it is almost more so than any other single place, although there are a lot of places. This is where I think he is showing he will go somewhere Trump didn't and that a lot of Republicans wouldn't, which is to use the power of the state affirmatively to punish even private corporations doing things he doesn't like. I mean, he's got another area about trying to make it easier to sue big technology companies. But one thing that is different between Ron DeSantis 2023 and the Tea Party types that he

was one of in 2010 is this idea that the problem is not that the state is intervening too much in the private market. That's the problem that is making us no longer a free society.

That in order now for us to be a free society, the state has to intervene more and punish corporations

that are becoming too woke, becoming too outspoken, becoming too far from what the good right thinking, God fearing citizens of the American heartland want. And that's actually a very big shift. I think it's a fairly frightening one because I mean, for obvious reasons of having a president who wants to use the government that way, but it is something that DeSantis is putting right at the core of his appeal. I think the Ron DeSantis of 2010 would have some real words for the Ron DeSantis of 2023. What he is doing in the battle against Disney sounds so much like the very things he opposed about the Obama administration, getting too involved in reshaping the economy. This one is even more sort of specific and kind of narrow cast. The way he writes about it is like, Disney getting involved in this battle over parental rights and education is quote, the textbook example of when a corporation should stay out of politics. This bill has nothing to do with Disney's business interests in Florida. But who is Ron DeSantis to make that case to decide what is in Disney's business interests? He says they're alienating their customers, they're bending to the leftist rage mob, but that's what the marketplace does.

If they're going to suffer consequences, they will suffer consequences from their consumers.

They don't need Ron DeSantis making that case. And I think that this is something that could get him into real trouble in the primary debate. I can see people coming after him for this.

When he says that we shouldn't politicize the economy by having the CEO of Disney or a corporation like Disney taking these kinds of stances, he's the one doing the politicizing of the economy.

And he's essentially, he admits to revoking Disney's self-governing status just because he doesn't like their politics. And that's not just terrifying to you as recline recipients of criticism in Santa's first book. That'll be terrifying and concerning to just a lot of mainstream Republicans.

Let me, to be fair, try to read Ron DeSantis's answer or justification both to that and to probably what he would have thought in 2010. He writes, towards the end,

there is no doubt much to recommend this posture when the institutions in society are healthy.

But we've seen institution after institution become thoroughly politicized.

Many are actively trying to impose an ideological agenda on society. In this context,

elected officials who do nothing more than get out of the way are essentially greenlighting these institutions to continue their unimpeded march through society.

So that, to me, is in many ways a summation of almost the entire DeSantis case.

That if you do nothing, if you're just a typical small government conservative or you don't know what you're doing and you're overmatched by the government like Donald Trump was, you're essentially greenlighting the march of, well, capital of the ruling class or whatever you want to call it, to take over society. The only thing that will save you is some of the like DeSantis who understands how to weaponize the government against enemies internal and external. Like what he is saying in the way he governed Florida, in his ideological self-testament, and then in what he proposes doing or thinks the president should do

is that it is time for conservatives to take over the government and use the government to crush their foes. But that to do that, you have to have discipline, you have to have energy, you have to have a plan. And like the guy who's got all that is Ron DeSantis.

Which is why this book, as we said at the beginning, is an enemy's list. It's the list of foes who must be crushed. The way that I think that entire position falls apart, and maybe not falls apart for a Republican primary candidate, but falls apart sort of logically, is that the blueprint in the subtitle of the book, this is Florida's blueprint for America's revival, it implies something that's far more systematic and coherent than is actually present in the book. He is simply going after people who think differently from the way he does, right? Whatever his impulses and interpretations of the moment are.

When he goes after Disney's governance or tax status, he's not making a statement about how politics and business need to be separate. He just doesn't like the stance Disney took. I think the other place where DeSantis' fight against wokeness and his tendency to try to use a state against his enemies, he suspends a prosecutor he doesn't like using powers of Florida governor has, he increases penalties against rioters in Black Lives Matter protests, is his argument that he is holding back the tide of crime in Florida. That it's a big reason why people from New York and California are moving to Florida and that this is something he can really run on. I mean, he talks about crime being at a 50-year low. We looked into this. Florida has a higher homicide rate, as best we can tell. The status is not as good as one would wish it were. Then New York or California, which is probably the best proxy for violent crime that we have. But I was interested, by the way, you understood his narrativization of his record there. Public safety is, I believe, the first thing he brings up when he sums up his record as governor. It's public safety, woken indoctrination, protecting women's athletics, election integrity, combating big tech, et cetera. I don't think it's the one he devotes the most time to in this book, but it certainly, it's first among equals when he sums up his own record. This one, I think, is marginally related to the broader populist and anti-elitist case that he's making, but it's one where he can point to just a very specific outcome. People like to live here. People come to Florida because they think it's safe. Maybe they also come for low taxes, but that's something that the DeSantis certainly highlights. I don't know to what extent that will continue to be a major theme of the campaign. Then always our final question, what are three books you'd recommend to the audience? Right after saying that the bar is not high for political books, I want to recommend three books by former presidents. What unites them is that they're not really about their time as president at all. The first one I want to recommend is The Memoirs by Ulysses Grant. It covers his time at West Point, fighting in the Mexican-American

war, in the Civil War. It ends before he gets to the presidency. He wrote it in the last months of his life. He was ill. He needed the money. That's a big reason that he wrote this book.

It is a lengthy book, a remarkable book. It is funny. It is incisive. He settles scores, especially with Robert E. Lee, who he finds to be completely overrated and getting way too much good press, including in the North. It's just a wonderful reflection on leadership.

The next book I want to recommend is called *An Hour Before Daylight*. It's one of several memoirs that Jimmy Carter wrote. This is about growing up on his father's farm in Georgia in the Depression. It is a surprisingly beautifully written book. It was a Pulitzer finalist for biography in the early 2000s, which I didn't know until I picked it up recently. You see in part how he wanted nothing more as a child than to run the farm, this intricate machine, kind of clockwork machine that he saw his father and his workers run. You see a little bit kind of why he was considered perhaps a bit of a micromanager and in the weeds as president, because he reveled in the details of farm life. It's also an amazing book on pre-civil rights race relations in Georgia at a very complicated time.

And the last book is a book of letters. It's called *All the Best* by George Bush. And it is a massive book. It's about 700 or more pages. And Bush got a lot of criticism for not being particularly articulate for not capturing the quote-unquote vision thing, but you really see who he is through his correspondence across the decades from writing his parents when he's aboard that submarine that saved him when he got shot down in the war to writing his kids and grandkids decades later when he is watching his son win the presidential reelection. It's a surprisingly touching book for a president who was often dinged for being a bit aloof. So those are the three that I would recommend. Carlos Azada, thank you very much. Thanks, Ezra.

This episode was produced by Annie Galvin, fact-checking by Michelle Harris, Mary-Marz Locker, and Kate Sinclair, mixing by Afim Shapiro. The show's team includes MFA Agau, Jeff Gelb, Roger Karma, and Kristen Lin, original music by Isaac Jones, audience strategy by Shannon Busta. The executive producer of New York Times' opinion audio is Andy Roy Strasser, and special thanks to Sonia Herrero, Edwin Benton, Peter Bergeson, David Wallace-Valls, and Christina Semilowski.