Wednesday, Oct. 2, 2024 / Mr. Veep

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Noel, what did you do last night?

NOEL KING (host): I watched the debate!

SEAN: Oh my god, me too! They kept agreeing with each other!

NOEL: There was a lot of agreement.

SCORING IN <RICHARD GOES SKATING>

*<CLIP> TIM WALZ: … and I'm going to thank Senator Vance. I think this is the conversation they want to hear. And I think there's a lot of agreement…*

SEAN: There were even some tender moments.

*<CLIP> JD VANCE: Tim, first of all, I didn't know that your 17 year old witnessed the shooting. And I'm sorry about that. And I hope –   
TIM WALZ: I appreciate you saying that.  
JD VANCE: Christ, have mercy. It is, it is awful.*

NOEL: Do you think these guys like each other?

SEAN: I think they might.

*TIM WALZ: Well, I've enjoyed tonight's debate, and I think there was a lot of commonality here. And I'm sympathetic to misspeaking on things. And I think I might have with the Senator, but…  
JD VANCE: Me too, man.*

SEAN: But we should note, Noel, that, you know, a lot of policy came up, and they did have some firm disagreements.

NOEL: Yea. Despite all that, they still do love each other. The agreements and the disagreements, coming up on *Today, Explained*.

*<CLIP> JD Vance: If Tim Walz is the next vice president, he'll have my prayers, he'll have my best wishes, and he'll have my help whenever he, he, he wants it.*

[THEME]

*<CLIP> DEBATE MODERATOR: We want to welcome our viewers on …   
 PETER BALONON ROSEN: … Today, Explained …   
 DEBATE MODERATOR: … and around the world.*

SEAN: Sean Rameswaram here with Andrew Prokop, also from Vox. Andrew, was it me or was there a lot of policy on that stage last night?

ANDREW PROKOP (Vox reporter): There was a fair amount of policy, less wild name calling and bizarre insults than we saw at the debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, mainly from the Trump side of that debate. So, yes, it was an interesting tonal shift from what we've been used to in this campaign so far.

SEAN: Was it planned that way? Did we know that we were going to get more robust conversation about policy between the two vice presidential candidates?

ANDREW: I don't know if I expected that necessarily. But what I do think in retrospect is clear is that J.D. Vance’s strategy was not to be the attack dog. He was not really trying to nail Tim Walz to the wall.

*<CLIP> James David Vance: Honestly, Tim, I think he got a tough job here because you've got to play whack a mole. You've got to pretend that Donald Trump didn't deliver rising take home pay, which of course, he did. You've got to pretend that Donald Trump didn't deliver lower inflation, which of course he did. And then you simultaneously got to defend Kamala Harris's atrocious economic record, which has made gas, groceries and housing unaffordable for American citizens.*

ANDREW: He was trying to do two things. He was trying to first stick to the issues and specifically the Biden administration's record and blame everything that Americans don't like about the Biden administration's record on Harris. And he also wanted to put a kind of more reasonable sounding and seeming face on Trumpism. So he wanted to position himself as, you've heard all these scary sounding warnings about Donald Trump, but let me put your mind at ease. It's not going to be so bad, and this is why. And so he stuck to the issues mainly. That doesn't mean that, you know, everything he said about those issues was true. In fact, he said a fair amount of things that were completely untrue, wild misrepresentations. But, but, you know, it was not the kind of, like, absolutely knockdown, drag out smearfest that that a debate with Donald Trump usually devolves into.

SEAN: Well, let's get into it. They stuck to policy. So, so let's do the same, starting with climate, which I believe came up in the context of Hurricane Helene.

ANDREW: So I'm glad you started with that because, you know, though, this was an issues focused debate, I would not say it was a particularly smart or substantive or enlightening conversation about those issues. On this question about climate change, J.D. Vance started off by saying…

*<CLIP> VANCE: Donald Trump and I support clean air, clean water. We want the environment to be cleaner and safer*

ANDREW: But, you know, our Democratic friends are talking about this whole carbon emissions thing, this idea that carbon emissions drives all the climate change.

SEAN: He called it “weird science”!

*<CLIP> Oingo Boingo - Weird Science*

ANDREW: Then he went on to say that, you know, okay, let's say for the sake of argument that carbon emissions are causing climate change again, a debate that has been settled for decades.

*<CLIP> VANCE: The answer is that you'd want to reshore as much American manufacturing as possible and you'd want to produce as much energy as possible in the United States of America because we're the cleanest economy in the entire world.*

ANDREW: And, you know, that just is not the case. Like we if you want to address climate change and carbon emissions, you need to boost clean energy everywhere, including in China and other countries. We need a global shift away from carbon emitting fossil fuels towards cleaner energy technologies. So the solution that he put forward would not actually be anywhere close to the best way to addressing the climate issue.

SEAN: One issue we knew would come up because of J.D. Vance's history on the issue was abortion. And I guess the big question was how would Tim Walz maybe attack J.D. Vance or Donald Trump and how would J.D. Vance respond?

ANDREW: You know, I don't think Walz did a particularly good job at attacking Vance or really holding him and Trump accountable on the abortion issue. I mean, the reality here is that the Republican Party is a deeply anti-abortion party, and that includes J.D. Vance, who said in 2022 when he was running for Senate in Ohio that he, quote, “Certainly would like abortion to be illegal nationally,” and said in 2023 that he wanted to prosecute people who sent abortion pills through the mail. And he tried to rebrand himself as the this sort of I've listened and learned. I'm kinder and gentler. I know the public doesn't trust our party on this issue. And all we want to do is leave this topic to the states to figure out. And Walz responded.

*<CLIP> WALZ: The fact of the matter is, how can we as a nation say that your life and your rights as basic as the right to control your own body is determined on geography. That's why the restoration of Roe versus Wade.*

ANDREW: Vance did not engage at all with the idea that Trump is the guy who got Roe v Wade overturned. He just tried to, you know, soften concerns about the issue and speak in a, you know, friendly and understanding way. He was like, I know someone who had an abortion.

SEAN: And and he loves her.

*<CLIP> VANCE: And I know she's watching tonight and I love you.*

ANDREW: But he didn't grapple at all with, okay, so why have you pursued an agenda for years for trying to restrict abortion rights nationally wherever you can?

SEAN: It sounds a little confusing. One place where I think you won't dispute that things got wonky and policy heavy was healthcare. Do you dispute it? <laughs, quavering>

ANDREW: I again think that Vince was trying to dodge the question in a slippery way about, you know, what the Republican agenda on health care really is, because in part because they don't really have an agenda. You know, Donald Trump tried to repeal Obamacare in his first year in office. That proved unpopular and it failed. So they've tried to kind of, you know, walk away from that and pretend it didn't happen.

LINSEY DAVIS: So just a yes or no, you still do not have a plan?

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I have concepts of a plan. I'm not president right now. But if we come up with something I would only change it if we come up with something better and less expensive. And there are concepts and options we have to do that. And you'll be hearing about it in the not-too-distant future.

ANDREW: And now Vance claim that Donald Trump actually saved Obamacare.  
  
SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> VANCE: When Obamacare was crushing under the weight of its own regulatory burden and health care costs. Donald Trump could have destroyed the program instead. He worked in a bipartisan way to ensure that Americans had access to affordable care.*

ANDREW: And, you know, it doesn't really make any sense what he was saying. He didn't really, you know, put forward a convincing agenda for what the Republicans wanted to do on health care. Walz, this was one of his most effective moments in an overall somewhat rocky performance, in my view. He spoke pretty persuasively about, you know, how insurance markets work.

*<CLIP> WALZ: I think the idea of making sure the risk pool is broad enough to cover everyone, that's the only way insurance works. When it doesn't, it collapses…*

ANDREW: You know, you have to spread out the risk in what's known as the risk pool that, you know, Obamacare made a big difference for people with preexisting conditions who were denied coverage before it existed and that Trump was basically trying to return to those days, even if he and Vance would like us to forget that.

SEAN: On paper, these two have a lot in common. They're both family men. They both served in the armed forces. They, they’re both from the Midwest. They weirdly agreed on things quite a bit last night. But, but what do you think was clearly different about them?

ANDREW: They both rhetorically said a few times that, you know, “Like Tim said.” Or “Yes, I agree with JD on this.” I think for both of them, they know that their job is not to destroy Tim Walz or JD Vance. Like Vance, Vance's job on that debate stage was to make the case against Kamala Harris. And Walz’s job was to make the case against Donald Trump. So there were certain moments when Vance would say, I think, you know, Tim, you actually want to do the right thing here, but I don't think you're running mate wants to.

*<CLIP> VANCE: It is a disgrace, Tim. And I actually think, I agree with you. I think you want to solve this problem, but I don't think that Kamala Harris does.*

SCORING IN <All In Order>

ANDREW: So I think that, you know, if they were actually running against each other for president, I don't think Midwestern niceness would get in the way of them taking a more direct aim at each other.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Andrew Prokop. Vox dot com. Noel, what’s next? What do you got?

NOEL: Alright, Tim Walz and JD Vance embody two different types of American masculinity. It’s been that way the entire campaign, how did that showup in last night’s debate?

SEAN: Coming up next, on *Today, Explained*.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

NOEL: Dan Cassino is a professor of government and politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He writes about gender and politics and his forthcoming book is called Masculinity in American Politics.

**DAN CASSINO (Professor,** Fairleigh Dickinson Universit**y):** So what J.D. Vance is doing is embodying what we call hegemonic masculinity in America right now.

SCORING IN <Rowing Westward>

DAN: This is a masculinity that's based around being very aggressive, being dominant, and trying to basically bend everyone else to your will.

*<CLIP> JD VANCE: Kamala Harris is so asleep at the wheel that she won't even do an investigation into what happened. And she wants to yell at Donald Trump because he showed up. She can she can go to hell.*

**DAN:** JD Vance is also very much performing these sort of online masculinities that have become very popular, especially among young men through we call the online Man-o- sphere, the interconnected web of websites and web forums, you know, on Reddit and 4Chan and Twitter to some extent. And he's really talking about, you know, masculinity as a mastery of subjects, as I'm going to explain something at you. I'm going to mansplain things at you and you're going to take it, and I'm going to express my dominance because I know more about this than you do, and I'm going to try and shut you down.

**NOEL:** J.D. Vance also seems very invested in what is traditional.

**DAN:** So when we talk about traditional masculine America, there's three pillars to it. We've got procreation, protection and provision, right? You're supposed to have lots of children, you know, as part of proving your heterosexuality. You're supposed to provide for those children. You're supposed to buy a safe house in a nice neighborhood to have plenty of money, and you're supposed to protect them, you know, by living in a safe neighborhood and by, you know, doing every you can, including buying a gun. And this is traditional notion of dominant forms of masculinity in the United States, at least for middle class white people. And people always talk about, it's like, boy, he seems really concerned with women having children.

*<CLIP> JD VANCE: We're effectively run in this country via the Democrats, via our corporate oligarchs. Buy a bunch of childless cat ladies who are like.*

**DAN:** Why is this such a big deal? Because that's central to your conception of masculinity. You write that women are their job is to procreate, is to make children. There's also an element of this of what we call benevolent sexism. So we think of sexism normally as being aggressive, sexism. You know, women are bad, women are temptress, women are whatever. And J.D. Vance is doing very much the other for a section called Benevolent Sexism, which say, no, no, women are actually pure, women are great, and so they need to be protected and we need to put them over in this little box over here. And that's where benevolent sexism is really central to J.D. Vance's policy views and his arguments.

SCORING OUT

**NOEL:** And what kind of masculinity does Tim Walz embody?

**DAN:** So Tim Walz actually doing very much similarly that sort of hegemonic form masculine, but he's doing it in a different way. He's not doing in the form of online masculinities that we see now. Rather, he's doing it in more of the form of the rural masculinities.

*<CLIP> TIM WALZ: I'm of an age where my shotgun was in my car so I could pheasant hunt after football practice.*

**DAN:** He's talking about these things in a different way. So he's talking about protection. He's talking protection not for just his family from interlopers, from outside, but rather protecting the community. So it's a way of reframing these traditional masculinities, these traditional goals, reframing them in a way that fits better with what with what men can actually do. And that excuses a lot of the things that might be seen as being not masculine behavior. You know, we think of health care as an issue. You know, of course, issues don't have sex or gender, but Americans perceive health care, for instance, as being a feminine issue. So if a masculine can demand milk and it talks about health care that's seen as feminine, like, no, why is he doing that? He doesn't have issue ownership over that. Female candidates do. Except Tim Walz is doing his best to reframe it, saying no health care is about protecting people. It's about taking care of people.

*<CLIP> TIM WALZ: People know that they need to be on health care. People expect it to be there. And when we are able to make it and we are making it this way, when we incentivize people to be in the market, when we help people who might not be able to afford it, get there and we make sure then when you get sick and old, it's there for you.*

**DAN:** And by saying it's about protecting, taking care of people, now it becomes a masculine-ized issue, right? Because that's what I'm doing is my role as a man is to protect the people around me.

**NOEL:** All right. As you watched the debate through this lens last night, through each candidate embodying a certain type of masculinity. What did you see?

**DAN:** So what we didn't see was these sort of very aggressive versions of both of these candidates that we've gotten in the past.

**NOEL:** Right.

**DAN:** When they're talking at rallies. Both walls and vans are all about really showing I'm aggressive, I'm dominant. I'm going to make fun of the other side. I'm going to talk about how terrible they are. And both sides said, we're not going to do that here. You know, that that does tend to turn voters off. We know that that is red meat for the base. The base likes it when. You do that kind of thing. But moderate voters, people were don't pay a lot of attention to politics. That turns them off. They don't like that sort of negativity. And so both candidates retreated from that for the most part, although we did see certainly some flashes from Vance where he was a little upset and a little more aggressive. They had been throughout the rest of the night.

*<CLIP> TIM WALZ: You can't fire in a crowded theater. That's, that's the test. That's the Supreme Court test. JD VANCE: Fire in a crowded theater. You guys wanted to kick people off of Facebook for saying that toddlers shouldn’t wear masks….CBS MODERATOR: Senator, the Governor does have the floor…..*

**NOEL:** But as you said the anger was rare. The headline today is these guys kind of seem like they like each other and nobody expected that.

**DAN:** I think it's obviously a strategic move on the part of both candidates to try and look more like what we have to remember, most Americans still don't have strong opinions about either of these men.

**NOEL:** Hm

**DAN:** You know, vice president candidates now, they don't know who these people are. They don't pay a lot of attention. You and I pay a lot of attention. But honestly, if we're we're the weird ones, right? We're the ones. You've been following this for years. And so it's more important to be seen as likable and be seen as acceptable than to try and win. Because at the end, it's a vice presidential debate. If you destroy the other guy, well, it doesn't matter. There aren't any voters out there who are saying, yes, I want to vote for Donald Trump, but I can't because I don't like J.D. Vance. Those voters just don't exist. So there's no point in trying to tear down the other guy as much as possible. It makes more sense to just try and appear likable. And I think it's really telling that both these men have decided the form of masculinity, the sort of aggressive, dominant, domineering form masculinity just isn't likable. And if they want people to like them, they've got to tone it down a little bit.

**NOEL:** How have we seen masculinity present in the 2024 race broadly?

**DAN:** When it was Donald Trump versus Joe Biden? This was absolutely just a masculinity contest. In America, we still consider leadership traits to be masculine, traits to be agent-ic, right? You're going to do stuff. You're not going to retreat. You're going to be aggressive. You're going to be you're going to persevere. These are all masculine traits, traits Americans perceive as being masculine, but they're also leadership traits. And this means that in order to be perceived as a leader, candidates have to show these masculine traits. They also have to be masculine. And Donald Trump's big attack on Joe Biden, his very effective attack was that he is not strong enough. He's not massive enough to be an effective leader.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: He challenged me to a golf match. He can't hit a ball 50 yards.*

**DAN:** And the fact that Joe Biden wasn't able to demonstrate that masculinity, especially in that first debate, is really what doomed his candidacy.

*<CLIP> JOE BIDEN: Look, I'd be happy to have a driving contest when I got my handicap, which when I was vice president, down to a six.*

**DAN:** Now we flipped things. So Donald Trump saying, I am more masculine, I am more able to do these things. I'm more agentic, I'm more energetic than Joe Biden. And then suddenly he's running against Kamala Harris and he no longer looks to have that big advantage in the sort of masculine eyes traits. And so he has to retreat to saying, well, Kamala Harris can't be a good leader because she can't be masculine, because she's not a man.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: She's letting in people who are going to walk into your house, break into your door. And they'll they'll do anything they want.*

**DAN:** These are still attacks on masculine traits, even though she's a woman. She, as a female candidate, still has to demonstrate masking traits and at the same time demonstrate feminine traits. And we seen Kamala Harris doing her best to do that. And I think she's done a reasonable job. For instance, in the interview with Oprah from a couple weeks ago, she talked about owning a gun, which a lot of people say, why is she talking about owning a gun? I mean, she says if a someone comes into my house, like.

*<CLIP> KAMALA HARRIS: In my house, they're getting shot.*

**DAN:** Ma’am, you've got the Secret Service in your house. I don't think anyone's coming in. I don't think you need to pull a gun on people. But it's a way of showing. I am doing the mask. I think I am protecting my family. Right. And that sort of protection argument is important. We've all seen Donald Trump trying to also make the argument that she's not sufficiently feminine, that she's not she doesn't have biological children. That means she's not really feminine, saying she's not feminine, she's not masculine. So therefore, you can't trust her.

**NOEL:** The Democratic Party, as you know, has struggled in the polls with men this year, particularly young men. Do you think Tim Walz is the guy who can reach those men?

**DAN:** I… look.. if I put my political science hat on for a minute. We know that vice presidential debates and vice presidential candidates matter very, very little. What vice presidential candidates can do, however, is amplify the message. Right. And Walz has been a very good way of amplifying the message that Harris wants put out. He's considered credible when he talks about masculinity because he's got those masculine bona fides. He's can say, you know, football coach soldier, I don't know what else you want. Right. This is this is what this is the most masking you can possibly get from it for Midwestern men. And so he can come out and say, yeah, all these policies you're putting forward, these are actually masculine ised policies. You can sell it in that way in a way that Kamala Harris perhaps can't.

**NOEL:** So the two men were similar last night, but you laid out that they do have many differences in how they embody this. Which version of masculinity is more likely to be the dominant strand for this country in the next five years decade?

**DAN:** This election is doing a very good job of demonstrating the fight that we're having in American masculinity. Is masculinity about holding on to the old forms of masculinity in the face of economic and social changes that make them increasingly untenable? Trying to double down men saying I'm discriminated against and I need to do something about that. Or is it about changing the version being a more adaptable form of masculinity,

SCORING IN <A SONG TO BRING THE SUN BACK>

having men who say, Look, I need to work with women, with my wife, with community groups and make a new form of masculinity. Society is demanding a new form of masculinity. The question is, are men to be able to keep up?

**NOEL:** Dan Casino. He's a professor of government and politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University and author of the forthcoming book Masculinity in American Politics. Thanks so much, Dan.

**DAN:** Always a pleasure.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Our episode today was produced by Miles Bryan and Hady Mawajdeh, we were edited by Matthew Collette.

NOEL: Laura Bullard is our fact checker. Andrea Kristinsdottir and Rob Byers are our engineers. I’m Noel King. You are?  
  
SEAN: Sean Rameswaram! And it’s *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**