Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2024 / Is the Republican primary already over?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

*[BILLBOARD]*

*<CLIP> Presidential Candidate Donald Trump: Thank you everybody. Thank you. Woah.*

NOEL: New Hampshire Republican primary winner Donald Trump spoke to his supporters in Nashua last night

*<CLIP> Presidential Candidate Donald Trump: This is not your typical victory speech*

NOEL: It was not! The almost-certain Republican nominee talked as much about his opponent Nikki Haley and her outfits as he did about his win

*<CLIP> Presidential Candidate Donald Trump: When I watched her in the fancy dress, that probably wasn’t so fancy, come up, I said: what’s she doing? We won.”*

NOEL: New Hampshire was called Nikki Haley’s last stand, though it appears no one told Nikki Haley that. She’s NOT dropping out as some predicted / but continuing on / possibly betting that Trump’s 91 felony charges may at some point turn into a hindrance rather than the help they’ve been so far.

NOEL: Coming up on Today, Explained: New Hampshire too now has spoken.

*<CLIP> Presidential Candidate Donald Trump: I find in life you can’t let people get away with bullshit.*

[THEME]

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. James Pindall. The Boston Globe’s man in Manchester. That’s New Hampshire.

JAMES PINDELL (journalist): New Hampshire generally gives us some sort of surprise. It's part of the New Hampshire lore and American political lore. But really, we walked in knowing that Donald Trump was likely to win, likely win by double digits. He did. But we also come out of this New Hampshire primary with one big question: Is the Republican primary race over? Donald Trump thinks it's over. He got really upset during his acceptance speech.

<CLIP> *FMR PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Who the hell was the imposter that went up on the stage before and like, claimed a victory? She did very poorly, actually. She had to win. The governor said she's going to win. She's going to win. She's going to win. Then she she failed badly.*

JAMES: And Joe Biden agrees that Donald Trump is the Republican nominee and he's already pivoting to the general election. It's just Nikki Haley that says this race will go on, and I think it's something we're gonna be discussing over the coming days.

<CLIP> *FMR UN AMBASSADOR NIKKI HALEY:*  Now, you've all heard the chatter among the political class. They're falling all over themselves saying, this race is over. Well, I have news for all of them. New Hampshire is first in the nation. It is not the last in the nation.

NOEL KING (host): Trump won by double digits, you said. Were the double digits ten, 15, 80, 90. What did that look like?

JAMES: Around 11. Now, part of American politics when it comes to the presidential primary is all about the expectations game. Yeah, it's not exactly where you finish. Is did you surprise people? Did you do better than expected? And in this case, Nikki Haley was expected to lose by 20 points. So in that case, she's happy that it was only 11. Or you could say the polls were wrong.

<CLIP> *FMR UN AMBASSADOR NIKKI HALEY: And today we got close to half of the vote. We still have a ways to go, but we keep moving up.*

JAMES: But, nonetheless, this is the spot where Nikki Haley, if you looked on a map, where could she win? Anywhere in the country. All 50 states, all the territories. This was demographically made up for her to win, and she did not. So now she faces a map looking at the other 48 states, saying, sure. When she says New Hampshire is first in the nation, not last in the nation, and everyone should have a vote. Fair enough. I accept the premise. The question is, where are you going to win? Is there a single state you're going to win? Because at the end of the day, this process is about accumulating about 1200 votes you need or delegates you need at the Republican National Convention to become the nominee. And she's on a path to get creamed in that process. And so she's got to talk to her donors. I mean, if people are going to continue to fund her as a vehicle as the anti-Trump or not. And that's sort of where we're at for the next, I don't know, 2 or 3 weeks.

<CLIP> *FMR UN AMBASSADOR NIKKI HALEY: This race is far from over. There are dozens of states left to go and the next one is my sweet state of South Carolina! <cheers>*

NOEL: How many New Hampshire primaries have you covered?

JAMES: This is my seventh New Hampshire primary.

NOEL: Seventh time around. Was there anything different about this one?

JAMES: Absolutely. While the stakes were really high, it felt like everything was really low. Low energy, obviously a smaller field than we've ever had before, really. We're used to in a presidential primary here, very few events. We're talking about literally 1 or 2 events a day. Donald Trump spent more time in a New York courtroom than he did on the campaign trail in the New Hampshire primary week. Let's just point that out. And then smaller crowd sizes. I mean, you're putting things in context of this campaign. Oh, wow. We have 300 people or we have 400 people. I think Nikki Haley is closing rallies were 1,500. And the baseline, if you just go back to pictures from four years ago, Elizabeth Warren, the senator from Massachusetts who is running for president, came in fourth place, and she's getting 2500 to 3000 people at her closing rallies.

<CLIP> *SEN ELIZABETH WARREN: This is our moment to show courage, this is our moment to dream big, fight hard, and win. <cheers>*

JAMES: Andrew Yang was getting more people, in his closing rallies four years ago.

<CLIP> *ANDREW YANG: Thank you Portsmith, we need your support tomorrow. Let's make history tomorrow and leave a future that we’re actually proud of!*

JAMES: So there was this sort of inevitability here that, like, this race is decided and I've made up my mind and I guess it was driving it, but you had to kind of square, the low energy feel here, that was just not at all like the New Hampshire primary that we're used to.

NOEL: One of the things that surprised me about a lot of the coverage of the New Hampshire primary was that you couldn't really tell what the issues were, and I'm not a political reporter, and it's been four years since we've done this. But is that normal that so much becomes about can the second place candidate, can Nikki Haley take out the first place candidate? What's he saying? Who's he yelling at? Is she yelling? Do we never discuss issues in the New Hampshire primary?

JAMES: You are so astute to pick up on that.

NOEL: Hell yeah.

JAMES: That was another really, really weird thing. I mean, in the Iowa caucuses, not to go back to that, but it was kind of an illuminating moment where Ron DeSantis comes out for a flat tax and everyone looks around at each other like, really? He supports a flat tax.

<CLIP> *FL GOV RON DESANTIS: I would eliminate the IRS have a single rate and just do like a flat tax.*

JAMES: That's, that's a big deal.

NOEL: Yeah!

JAMES: We should we should discuss that. That flat doesn't mean a flat income tax, right? It was. It's an old idea. But we did know. And then the vague Ramaswamy it's like, well yeah I'm for a flat tax also

<CLIP> *VIVEK RAMASWAMY: I favor a 12% flat tax across the board. Eliminate the crony deductions and no, we don't need an IRS.*

JAMES: oh well okay. Here there was one issue really immigration,

NOEL: Hm

JAMES: which might seem a little odd given that New Hampshire is quite far away from the southern border with Mexico.

<CLIP> *FMR UN AMBASSADOR NIKKI HALEY: Then when it comes to the border, it doesn't even look like the United States of America anymore. It is a complete dereliction of duty.*

<CLIP> *FMR PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: They're poisoning the blood of our country. That's what they've done. They poisoned mental institutions and prisons all over the world.*

JAMES: But you're right. In previous primaries, this is where in the mix of town hall meetings and being on the ground that these candidates get to understand the future. Of American politics in the future issues of American politics. This is where Bill Clinton said he learned it was the economy, stupid. When he was walking along Elm Street in Manchester, it's where other folks, including Donald Trump, figured out that America had an opioid crisis in 2016.

<CLIP> *FMR PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, at Nov. 2015 rally in NH: The problem of heroin in New Hampshire is unbelievable. It's like an unbelievable problem that you have and you know, where that stuff comes from and we're going to work on with all of our friends here with so many the clinics that they want to get involved with and the rehab centers. But it's really, it's not unique to New Hampshire, but I think you have it bigger and, and tougher than anybody else. It just seems.*

JAMES: And we had an open conversation about what to do about that. That is one thing that was definitely lost this cycle. Look, there's a lot of disagreement that Iowa and New Hampshire have started this process since 1976. There are two whites, there are two rural – though, New Hampshire is basically a one big suburb of Boston these days – you can go through the criticism and in New Hampshire, case is very well educated and it's rich. It's one of the always one of the top 3 or 4 states in terms of per capita income. But if you believe in the concept that a person running for president who typically is a vice president or a U.S. senator or a governor or really successful in business, look, they do not live like you and me. They live in a rarefied air. Who they talk to at night, who they vacation with, who they hang out with. It's not the regular everyday folks. So if the I if the idea is before they become president, before they make decisions on who wins and who loses in the tax code, before they make decisions on sending kids off into war, that they should have to interact with everyday people just for like 20 or 30 days, actually on the campaign trail and understand everyday Americans. That is the romance of the New Hampshire primary. And we did not have much of that romance at all this particular cycle.

SCORING IN – Neutral Irene

NOEL: What are the consequences? You've been doing this for a long time. What are the consequences of a primary without a focus on issues where the focus is on personalities? Does this say something about the general election or about whomever wins the general election that you think might be kind of worth thinking about?

JAMES: It really, really does. You know, the 2020 election was really only about a few things, even though there were a number of issues we could talk about, we could have talked about the Supreme Court. No doubt about it. And we did. We talked about climate change. We talked about tax cuts. We talked about Covid a lot in 2020. But what we really talked about was Donald Trump. It was a referendum on did you want this man out of office, or is this man speaking for you and all your grievances, and you want to keep him in office? And I think that what's ironic is the 2024 election, which is always kind of about the incumbent - in this case, Joe Biden, and his record - is still going to be about Donald Trump and his record in office and how he handled the country. And so as a force of nature and a force of personality, I do think that we are not going to be talking about issues as much as we have in the past. And remember, last time Republicans didn't even put out a policy platform at their national convention. They may this time. But nonetheless, I think issues is something that is going to suffer. And it's something, to be honest with you, I'm focusing on for the rest of the general election, largely because it's a contrarian take about where we're at in American politics.

NOEL: James Pindall of the Boston Globe. Coming up, a self-described former Republican voter - and member of Donald Trump’s administration - on those 91 felony counts.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: Sarah. Go ahead. Give me your full name, please, and tell me what you do.

SARAH ISGUR: Sarah Isgur, and I'm a senior editor at The Dispatch and ABC News contributor.

NOEL: All right, so you work in news media now, but you did used to work on political campaigns. Tell me a little bit about your experience.

SARAH: Absolutely. So, was in Republican politics and campaigns for almost 20 years, many, many Senate campaigns, three presidential campaigns, Mitt Romney in 2008, 2012, and I ran Carly Fiorina's campaign in 2016.

NOEL: You also spent some time in the Trump administration. What are your thoughts on Donald Trump at this moment?

SARAH: I was the head of public affairs at the Department of Justice and senior counsel to the deputy attorney general during the Russia investigation. So, you know, the Mueller special counsel stuff. And, look, I think, it would be a big mistake for the country to reelect Donald Trump.

NOEL: Okay. All right. That said, I think the big question after New Hampshire is this: should Nikki Haley drop out? What do you think?

SARAH: You know, you talked to the Haley campaign, and what they'll tell you is they feel like the New Hampshire primary was day one of their campaign. That, yes, they understand they need to make inroads with, you know, sort of more harder core Republican primary voters, but that they see this as a jumping off point. Of course, there's something to that. They came in third in Iowa, second in New Hampshire. You know, you there's some momentum is building argument there. But the problem is the path forward. She's expected to, in fact, have a wider margin losing to Donald Trump in her home state of South Carolina. Then you head into Super Tuesday, which is really seen as more of a national primary. Lots of states all at once. It's not really a retail politics thing anymore. So in that sense, New Hampshire was kind of her last stand. She needed to win it, or at least come within, you know, a couple points of Donald Trump. Instead, it was an 11 point race. And so it's hard to see that path forward at this point for Nikki Haley, aside from just biding her time, in case, you know, the Supreme Court says Donald Trump's disqualified or there's a criminal trial that could change something or, you know, very small asteroid that hits Earth in a very specific place.

NOEL: You're a Republican voter who does not want to reelect Donald Trump. How do you feel today?

SARAH: So I don't know that I would describe myself as a Republican voter at this point.

NOEL: Ah.

SARAH: But, I would say that, you know, it's fascinating to live in a time where the parties are realigning so quickly. And I am one of those people who does not think that Donald Trump is the cause of that so much is the symptom, right? Because we've seen the same thing happen in so many countries across the world. I mean, my own view is that probably the 2008 financial collapse, among other causes, had that worldwide effect of really ushering in an era of populism and that Donald Trump is just the manifestation of that in the United States. You know, as you tear down institutions, though, which is what sort of populism does, in, in its manifestations, usually, that's a real problem for the future of the United States. You know, we've been around for 250 years, and at this point, the Supreme Court is dropping in people's esteem. Congress couldn't really go lower. But there it is, still somehow going lower and becoming even more, ineffectual. I mean, what is Congress even doing? And you also have Americans, I think losing a lot of trust in this negative polarization where people aren't voting for candidates, they're voting against the other people because they think that they're a threat to their way of life. That's a real problem in a pluralistic society, you know, based on everyone being different.

NOEL: Let's talk about Donald Trump's legal troubles, because one of the things that I think the smart money was telling us even a couple of months ago, is that a candidate running for president who is in as much potential legal peril as Donald Trump simply isn't going to be a good candidate. And again, that was either the smart or the relatively smart money. Why hasn't that turned out to be the case?

SARAH: Well, I mean, there's a real argument that this primary ended the second that, Alvin Bragg in New York indicted Donald Trump up there. Republican primary voters felt like Donald Trump was being targeted, not because of any potential crime that he had committed, but because of who he was and that he was a threat to the Democratic establishment.

NOEL: After Iowa we talked a bit on the show about Ron DeSantis, his apparent inability to go after Trump on his legal record, the sense that if DeSantis attacked, it was only going to alienate the people who might have chosen him. DeSantis over Trump DeSantis is now out of the race. Nikki Haley still in it. At what point do you think Nikki Haley brings up the legal jeopardy, the 91 felony charges?

SARAH: Look, I'm a big fan of reminding people that a losing campaign didn't do everything wrong,

NOEL hmm

SARAH: and a winning campaign didn't do everything right, of course. But the idea that, for instance, if only Ron DeSantis had done X, Y, or Z, he could have won the race. Sometimes you can do everything right and still lose. Now, I don't happen to think that the DeSantis campaign did everything right, but the idea that he should have run a campaign like Chris Christie's, is sort of undermined by Chris Christie's race,

NOEL: hmm

SARAH: you know, and I think Chris Christie said a lot of really important things in the Republican primary. But obviously it did not resonate with Republican primary voters.

*<CLIP> CHRIS CHRISTIE: “I am going to make sure that in no way I enable Donald Trump from ever being president of the US again, and that is more important than my own personal ambition. [cheers]”*

SARAH And those are the polls in the focus groups and everything else that the DeSantis team was looking at. So I'm not surprised where Haley and DeSantis landed on Trump. What is funny, maybe, and we saw it in 2016 also, is that as they get closer to losing or maybe you could say after the whole game has already been lost, they start telling the truth about what they think about Donald Trump. We've seen Ron DeSantis be more honest about what he thinks Donald Trump's chances in the general election are than he was during the entire primary season. Nikki Haley is starting to go after Donald Trump very forcefully at this point.

*<CLIP NIKKI HALEY: “With Donald Trump you have one bout of chaos after another. This court case, that controversy, this tweet, that senior moment…you can’t fix Joe Bidens’ chaos with Republican chaos! [cheers]”*

SARAH: But now, is it too late? And is that why they're going after Donald Trump? Because they no longer see actually winning the primary and winning over those voters as possible.

NOEL: In the first half of the show, Sarah, we spoke to James Pindell, a New Hampshire politics reporter, and he told us that he noticed that this primary season has been devoid of substantive issues. The candidates are not really talking about anything other than the candidates personalities and various troubles, etc.. Did you notice the same thing? Did you notice anything similar?

SARAH: Absolutely. But I think the interesting question is not is this campaign devoid of policies? Because it just is. There's no argument. I mean, James, as a brilliant political reporter, knows every inch of New Hampshire. He's incredible. But the question really is, was it ever about policies? Voters would tell you it was about policy, but, you know, was Ronald Reagan actually about policy or was it about vibes?

*<CLIP> RONALD REAGAN: “It’s morning again in America…”*

SARAH: Bill Clinton that seemed pretty vibe-y at the time as well.

<CLIP> BILL CLINTON: [playing saxophone,]

SARAH: And so I think, you know, as the two parties became much, much weaker in the last 20 years as a result of campaign finance reform and other sort of trends within American politics, we've seen, parties no longer be able to choose their standard bearers, which means that the parties no longer have those carrots and sticks to say, like, this is our platform, these are our issues. And at the same time, individuals have basically started running our politics. It's why Donald Trump arguably didn't just defeat the Democratic Party when he won in 2016. He first defeated the Republican Party in the primary.

NOEL: So we're tempted to fret about losing the focus on substance in favor of personalities. You're saying maybe we never had it, which seems very dark to me. Sarah.

SARAH: Yeah, I think it's a little dark to me, too, honestly. I need to think about how to, like, say, this is saintly. But basically, the presidency has become so important as Congress has faded into the background. You know, why would Congressman take hard votes if at any given point, 50% of them, you know, can call up their friends in the white House and try to do it through executive action

SCORING IN—FALLING IN PLACE

SARAH: So my hopeful future is that our problems will fester and stagnate and get much, much worse. And voters will realize that they don't want cable news pundits in Congress, that they actually want legislators. You know, I don't think there's a lot of people in Congress who are going to change who they are, but you can replace them with people who actually want to go and compromise and do the hard work and the, I mean, grueling. It takes a long time to get legislation done. You got to you can't get everything you want. You got to give up on some stuff. You need people there who want to do that, and you don't right now.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was Sarah Isgur of The Dispatch Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan and Isabel Angell. It was edited by Matthew Collette and engineered by Patrick Boyd and David Herman. Laura Bullard and Amanda Lewellyn fact-checked.

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[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]