2/05/24; Build Back Biden

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Remember November 7, 2020?

SCORING IN—ELECTRIC HARP GLISSANDO (APM)

JONATHAN CHAIT (*New York Magazine* writer: You had people discovering that Joe Biden was going to win the election and just bursting out of their houses and going out into the streets.

<CLIP>: [celebrations on November 7, 2020]

JONATHAN: And dancing and, and making noise and high fiving each other.

*<CLIP> MAN: It’s over! Best day of my life. Best day of the year….*

JONATHAN: This was happening in cities across the country. People were celebrating in a way you just don't see anymore. And I thought that was an important moment to recall because it captured the joy that people felt about Biden winning, which was not really about Biden's program. People were just thrilled that Donald Trump was going to go.

*<CLIP> PHILADELPHIA WOMAN: January 20 is going to be trash day at the White House, because we are going to get rid of that orange piece of trash, Donald Trump!*

SEAN: How people went from jubilant to totally jaded, and how Biden could maybe win ‘em back, coming up on *Today, Explained.*

[PREROLL]

[THEME]

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. Presidente Joe Biden easily won the South Carolina primary this weekend, but maybe you’ve heard he’s got a polling problem?

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS ANCHOR: When you ask folks hey, it's the general election, it's Trump vs. Biden. In our poll Donald Trump now leads Joe Biden by five points…  
  
<CLIP>CBS NEWS ANCHOR: A recent CBS news poll shows 77 percent of Black voters would back the president in a potential general election rematch with Donald Trump—down 10 points since 2020…*

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS ANCHOR: One of our pollsters tells us we are looking at a quote presidency in peril…*

SEAN: Jonathan Chait’s been writing about Biden’s reelection prospects for *New York Magazine*.

JONATHAN: You know, what I'm trying to argue is just a general collapse of the political willpower necessary to keep Trump out. It basically in 2020, people were so concerned about the threat of Trump that they were willing to make compromises, support a candidate who didn't give them everything they wanted, and put aside the normal priorities that they were concerned about in order to get behind the one cause of getting Trump out of the white House. And to an extent, they've forgotten about him to an extent. The political discipline that that required has, has exhausted them, and they're not willing to keep it up anymore. So so their priorities have risen back to the surface. And the priority of of stopping Trump has sunk relatively. So people are just more concerned about other things now both on the left and in the center.

SEAN: Let's start with the left before we move to the center. What happened to the coalition on the left? You write in the piece that it was a hard won coalition for Joe Biden. Even back in 2020.

SCORING IN—ON THE TRAIL (APM)

JONATHAN: You had a sense toward the end of the Obama administration and through the Trump era, that the left was ascendant within the Democratic Party. That assumption dominated all the political coverage of the Democratic Party.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: Decision 2020, where Senator Bernie Sanders leads the pack in a new NBC national poll.*

JONATHAN: Everybody, including me, wrote off Joe Biden for that reason.

*<CLIP> NBC NEWS: Former Vice President Joe Biden is in second but dropped 11 points since last month.*

JONATHAN: So Biden wins the nomination in 2020 suddenly, and to most people, surprisingly. And there's the shock on the left.

*<CLIP> MICHIGAN VOTER, SPRING 2020: I would rather have Biden than Trump, but I would rather have Bernie 100 times more than Biden.*

*<CLIP> MICHIGAN VOTER, SPRING 2020: I feel that it's important to vote blue just because it's a step in the right direction. But I really, really don't want to vote for Biden.*

JONATHAN: But then Biden starts bringing the left aboard. He creates a unity commission to build a new platform, and he brings the left aboard.

*<CLIP> BERNIE SANDERS: So today I am asking all Americans to come together in this campaign to support your candidacy, which I endorse …*

JONATHAN: And for a time period, the left is pretty enthusiastic about Biden. But for various reasons, this situation doesn't last forever.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Yeah. How does this coalition between Biden, Bernie Sanders, all of their followers start to unravel?

JONATHAN: Well, one reason is there's just a natural tendency on the left to have difficulty in power. The right doesn't have this problem. When conservatives are in power, conservatives will say everything's wonderful. We've saved the country. We're in prosperity. When conservatives are out of power, they'll say, everything's terrible. The country's a disaster. We need to save it. The left can't quite flip that easily. They will say how everything's terrible when they're out of power. But when they're in power, they don't want to say everything's great, because that diminishes in their minds the impetus to solve more problems in their minds that fosters complacency and reduces the the impetus to to have more aggressive social reforms. So you've never been able to get the left just fully on board under Democratic administrations saying …

*<CLIP> REAGAN AD, 1984: It's morning again in America.*

SEAN: <chortles>  
  
JONATHAN: … the way Republicans can. Biden has some deeper problems than some of the other Democratic presidents, though mainly the inflation surge of 2021 to 22just tanks his approval rating and sent him much lower than anybody thought he would go. And when your approval rating starts to drop, it creates different incentives for your political allies, especially when those allies are involved in factional struggles. So that dynamic, which I think is endemic within the left, but really has been worse for Biden, has been dragging him down over the past year. So you've one of the ways in which this has manifesting itself is that progressives have really gone all in on doomer economic messaging.

SEAN: Hm.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: We're currently in a silent depression deeper than the 1930s, and it's only going to get much worse in 2024 and 2025.*

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: We’re white liberals. We will gaslight others and ourselves into believing that life is significantly better under Biden, despite the fact that we're all struggling to feed our families and pay our bills.*

JONATHAN: Reinforcing how terrible the economy is, in part because they see that as advancing progressive goals of pushing reform, but also in part because this helps them in their factional fight against the centrist. See the the centrist President Joe Biden did the wrong things. That's why you need to put a real progressive Democrat in charge of the party.

SEAN: And he's seen a lot more painful response from the left wing of the Democratic Party since October 7th, 2023.

JONATHAN: The Hamas attacks in Israel were a real inflection point for his coalition, and ironically, it's hit him in two completely contrary ways. On the one hand, you have a significant number of moderates who supported Biden but have been horrified by the rise of left wing protests and have associated those with the Democratic Party and have been pulled toward the Republican Party in reaction against those protests. Meanwhile, those protesters actually hate Joe Biden and in some cases are pushing explicitly to defeat him as a response to the Biden administration's support for Israel.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: Refusing to vote for someone funding a genocide is the morally correct stance. Point blank period.*

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: Democrats should be scared because we're not voting for you.*

*<CLIP> TIK TOK: I will not be voting for Joe Biden this year. And neither will you*

SCORING OUT

SEAN: We've been focused on the left of the party. Let's talk about moderates, be they Democratic moderates, Republican moderates, moderates who maybe voted for Trump in 2016 but voted for Biden in 2020. How is he doing there?

JONATHAN: I think an important aspect of this phenomenon in the center is that. Some of the mainstream Republicans who used to treat Trump as dangerous and toxic have stopped describing him in those terms and have instead reduced their complaints about Trump to simply he's unelectable. He's not the best candidate we can nominate. So you have people like Bill Barr saying that the Trump is likely to lose and pushing people to nominate somebody else.

*<CLIP> BILL BARR, 2023: I think he will be self-indulgent in a new administration. And, you know, it won't be as effective as he could otherwise be.*

JONATHAN: But not saying he's unfit and dangerous to be president. So that whole idea in the political culture has diminished, which is very strange because. The actual substantive evidence that Trump is dangerous has gotten much stronger since the 2020 election. Since the 2020 election, Trump, of course, tried to overturn the results. Ginned up a violent attack on Congress, and then has gone around promising to take revenge on his enemies in office and saying that presidents should be allowed to commit crimes to any degree they want.

*<CLIP> TRUMP: He says you're not going to be a dictator, are you? I said, no, no, no. Other than day one.*

JONATHAN: So however dangerous you thought Trump was in the fall of 2020, he's significantly more dangerous now. But that's the opposite of how mainstream Republicans have reacted.

SEAN: I got the sense in 2020 from talking to the people that a lot of people who were disappointed that Biden was the candidate after all the primaries, after all the options, thought, ‘Well, you know, you got to beat Trump. We got to save the Republic. We'll hold our nose, vote for Joe Biden. But it's going to be a one term thing. He picked Kamala. She's going to be the candidate. Buttigieg is waiting in the wings!’ Whatever it might be. There was a sense that Biden, of course, will usher in the next generation of leadership because he's too dang old. Do you think that's part of the issue here – that people didn't realize this would be a two term thing?

JONATHAN: Yeah, that's absolutely a reason. Biden says that he never promised he would step down after one term. And it's true he didn't promise that. But that idea was floated and people heard it:

*<CLIP> LATE SHOW, 2019: This week, four unnamed Biden advisers told Politico that the candidate has been quietly telling people that if he's elected, he would serve only a single term. The strategy is designed to appeal to younger voters who are unexcited by Biden's candidacy.*

JONATHAN: I think a lot of people still haven't even absorbed the fact that he's going to be the nominee, and Trump is going to be the Republican nominee. Uh, low information voters haven't completely figured that out, and they don't really understand why that's going to be the case, because they got this idea of Biden is a one term solution.I think the Biden people can make a clever argument that, look, you can't point to a piece of paper where we promised in signed that we're not going to run again. But but that's not what people heard.

SEAN: Mm. and four years ago, Biden, despite his age, proved that normal could beat crazy. do you think He's lost the power to do that?

JONATHAN: Normal is boring.

SCORING IN—SKITCH THE HYPERLOOP

JONATHAN: Normal sounds great when you're living in crazy times, but when you're living in normal times, normal normalcy is just humdrum everyday life with all the problems you have, right? Biden didn't say he was going to solve every problem in American life, and he didn't solve every problem in American life. There are always difficulties, and there's always challenges, and those challenges loom a lot larger, larger when you're living through them. So the challenges we have now would have seemed pretty tolerable during the Trump era, when you had the president running around, you know, saying bleach is going to kill the virus. And and you had fights in the streets, and the country was coming apart. But when the country isn't coming apart and everything's open for business, your normal problems just loom a lot larger. So, so, so normalcy isn't really a selling point anymore when you're living it.  
  
 SCORING BUMP  
  
SEAN: Jonathan Chait. *New York Magazine*.   
  
Our conversation today was inspired by a piece he wrote there titled “Do You Remember the Ecstasy of Electing Joe Biden? How the coalition that defeated Donald Trump crumbled.” You can find it at n y mag dot com.  
  
When we’re back, we ask a former Biden White House staffer how the president can Build Back Biden.

[MIDROLL]

[BUMPER]

JAMAL: Hey, I'm Jamal Simmons, former communications director for vice president Kamala Harris.

SEAN: About a year ago Jamal left the vice-president’s office, but while he was there he was all about messaging, so we asked him to join us because it felt like the message from this Biden White House has been off lately. We asked him what Biden’s got to do to get it done this November.

JAMAL: The president of the United States, Joe Biden, has a very compelling case to make to the American public.  
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
JAMAL: And I think, over the course of the rest of this year, he'll have a chance to make that case. So he'll be talking about, you know, 130 plus billion dollars in student loans that have been forgiven. He'll be talking about the first African American woman to be on the Supreme Court. There's obviously an economy that has gotten at historic lows in unemployment. Wages are going up. Inflation is starting to go down. So we're starting to see the economy turn the corner and people will begin to have real benefit from the money and the investment of the first couple of years …

SEAN: There's a lot of accomplishments. We've covered a lot of them on the show. And yet it seems that people aren't that impressed, especially when it comes to the economy, which we know affects how people vote. Why do you think Biden is struggling so much to capitalize on his wins?

JAMAL: Well, here's the problem with the economy: Inflation <laughs>, right? So, even though wages have been going up for a long time and, and obviously unemployment is going down, this unprecedented amount of job growth, prices were also going up. So people were paying more money, for things that they were, you know, not used to. But there's another problem that's happening, which is like a general sense of, I think, unease, because looming over our shoulder is the specter of Donald Trump coming back and the MAGA forces that are still talking about what it is they want to do, and abortion has been taken away over the course of this time period. There are all these things that make us feel, I think, a little uncertain about the future. And I think that's a chunk of why people have some, some bad feeling about what's going on.

SEAN: And you think once the MAGA nation sort of rears its head in a more tangible way, people might awaken to that and feel a little better about voting for Joe Biden?

JAMAL: Well, it's not just that the MAGA Nation is going to rear its head like it hasn't been. <chortles> I think the campaign is going to spend a lot of time talking about what's happening, coming from the former president. You know, him saying that he wants to be a dictator for at least a day. Whoever's been a dictator for just a day, right?   
  
SEAN: [chuckles]  
  
JAMAL: There's a lot of unease that's out there, but that when these cases are made directly in front of people, the choice will become clear that we can either continue to turn the corner to more prosperity and to some stability, or we can go back to more chaos and an instability that Donald Trump and his forces will offer.

SEAN: We don't love talking about polls on this show, especially this far out from an election. But, you know, it's not *that* far out anymore.

JAMA:: Mm-hm.

SEAN: And a reason a lot of people are nervous is that it appears that Biden is struggling with people who are traditionally dependable for the Democratic Party: Black, Latino voters, young voters. How worried are you about that?

JAMAL: Well, everybody should be worried about it because that's the ballgame, right? But, there's a lot of time between now and then. People will tell you, I think I agree with this, It's a lot easier to get a lapsed Catholic to come back to church than it is to convert somebody who doesn't believe in their religion at all.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
JAMAL: So, so this isn't about swaying Trump voters to come vote for Biden. This is really about getting Biden voters to show up, and getting a few of those independents who are uneasy about, the choice that but that Trump offers to show up for the president.

SEAN: Mm. But what does he do to get there? I mean, I hear him doing this same old shtick, which is that, you know, democracy is at risk. And, you know, noted election loser Mitt Romney says that, that, that strategy is busted. But, I mean, like, I believe him because he tried it a couple times, right? He … this was, this was all Mitt was saying for a few years.

JAMAL: That's why you run campaigns. That's why you have advertising. That's why you, they're going to this is just an announcement from one of the superPACs that supports president that they're going to spend over $100 million in social media advertising, because what we know now is so many voters aren't even getting, you know, they don't show up in the algorithm, right? Because they're not following CNN or *New York Times* or the *Detroit News,* where I'm from. Instead, what you have to do is get them information that a friend of theirs believes in and that's willing to share that information with them. With the vice president, right, we've seen some pretty interesting things. Like when I was there. She. And she's done it since she started doing these on stage online conversations with creators, TikTok creators, Instagram creators. We did an on stage conversation with Priyanka Chopra

*<CLIP> PRIYANKA CHOPRA: I am very excited about the conversation I am about to have with a woman that not only inspires me, makes me feel seen, but also makes so many women and girls around the world feel the same way.*

JAMAL: When Priyanka put it up, it turned into like, the number one news post on Instagram for that day, right? The vice president hosted the 50th anniversary of hip hop at her house. Like the videos from that, like, showed up all over the place.

*<CLIP TIK TOK narrator voice: Shoutout to the VP, she sure knows how to throw a party! [music]...*

SEAN: I got to say though, the videos that I saw were like videos of her getting roasted for hosting a hip hop event when she used to be putting people away for, for drug use when she was a D.A. in the Bay Area.

*<CLIP TIK TOK user: I don’t know how much I even believe Kamala Harris likes rap music, if I am being real. She definitely doesn’t like Black men.*

SEAN: It feels like every positive post I see about the Biden administration comes with like three negative ones. How are they going to fight that?

JAMAL: Well, let's just remember that that's not all organic. Some of it is organic. It's not all organic, though. Some of that is like there's a narrative about our that conservatives are pushing. Maybe other people are pushing and they and they keep that going. But here's the thing. You can't walk away from it. Right? So what you can't do is say, because my opponent is going to say something bad about me, that I can't engage the community. And where you start today isn't necessarily where you're going to end up six months from now. And so what happens with people is they hear messages over and over again. And by the time you get to the point in the fall, those messages have sunk in in a way that maybe they didn't the first time that you've heard them. And that's why you run campaigns. You run campaigns because it's a persuasion, right? And sometimes you just persuading people to show up, you know, persuading them to change their mind. You're persuading them just to show up versus stay home.

SEAN: But this gets to something I want to ask you about, Jamal, because I think you're implying that some of the the negative stuff we're seeing about the president, the vice president is coming from the right. But I can promise you that I am seeing stuff coming from the left. And this connects to to what we spoke to Jonathan about, which is that Biden seems to have lost his hold on this coalition. He seems to be losing the far left, maybe even the not so far left. How do they win them back?

JAMAL: It takes a horse to beat a horse, right? So you gotta, you can't just walk like you just said, you can't just walk away from the fight. You put your content in, they put their content in, and then you battle it out over time. And that's the nature, you know, of the game. And, and you hope that you have something more compelling to say than your opponents do. And that that compelling argument penetrates where people really care about.

SCORING IN—A CLEAR VISION OF THE FUTURE

SEAN: You know, I want to ask you a question, Jamal, because you were in the vice president's office, you were on her team. I think a lot of people in 2020 who voted for Joe Biden thought that he was a bridge to a future Democratic Party. Why do you think it was that he decided to run again and not step aside and make room for someone else? Because obviously that's an issue on the mind of a lot of voters.

JAMAL: Well, it's kind of gets back to how you started the question. He said it was a bridge to get us through the Trump era, and we're not through. Right? <chortles> Like the Trump era is not over. Donald Trump still here. He still poses the most serious threat to American democracy. And I think, Joe Biden sees himself, and I would argue maybe he's right, as the most likely most credible person to take on Donald Trump and beat him. How do we know that? Because he's the only person who's ever beaten Donald Trump in an election. And he can hold together, a part of the electorate that many other Democrats may be challenged to hold together.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Jamal Simmons. He used to work at the White House.

Miles Bryan used to work at Nokomis Shoes in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Now he’s at *Today, Explained* where he made our show today. Matthew Collette edited, Laura Bullard fact checked, Patrick Boyd mixed.   
  
Why you should be paying close attention to the election in El Salvador, on the program tomorrow. Until then.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]