25 March 2024 / Spoiler alert: RFK’s VP

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): It’s a big week for Joe Biden.

SCORING IN – SOHO\_BOSA\_0125\_01801\_Fugue\_For\_Mugue\_APM-02

SEAN: The U.N. Security Council just passed a resolution for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza that will test the United States relationship with Israel.

*<CLIP> JAPANESE REP AT UN: Fourteen votes in favor. Zero votes against. One abstention. The draft resolution has been adopted… [CLAPPING]*

SEAN: It’s a big week for Donald Trump. A New York City judge just saved him from having to pull a half a billion dollars out of his MAGA hat.

*<CLIP> MSNBC: This appeals court allowing the former president to post a smaller bond of 175 million dollars within ten days.*

SEAN: And it’s a big week for … Robert F. Kennedy Jr.?

SCORING OUT

SEAN: Alright, I guess!

SCORING BACK IN  
  
SEAN: He’s announcing his running mate. Maybe it’ll be someone famous. Maybe it’ll be someone infamous. Maybe it’ll be a random billionaire?

The question is whether it can have a big enough impact on the races the other two guys are running. We’re gonna ask on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

DAVID: I'm David Weigel, I'm a political reporter in Semafor.

SEAN: The last time we checked in on Robert Francis Kennedy Junior on *Today, Explained* he had just declared he was running as an independent, no longer a Democrat. How has his campaign been doing since the start of the year?

DAVID: His campaign has been steadily polling between the high single digits and the low double digits in swing states, sometimes better in national polling.

*<CLIP> REUTERS: A recent Reuters Ipsos poll put his support among registered voters at 15%, versus 39% for Biden and 38% for Trump.*

DAVID: This is a function of many things people disagree on, including Kennedy. How much of it is that the Kennedy name is famous? How much of it is that he personally is seen as an independent set apart from the parties? It's debatable, but it has not been moving.

SEAN: And of course, who might serve on his ticket is going to make big news this week. It's the reason we're talking to you right now. Tell us who RFK junior is considering, will ya?

DAVID: So there is not an official Kennedy shortlist. There's not ever really an official shortlist when somebody is choosing a vice president. The names we've heard the most about are Aaron Rodgers, the Jets quarterback who was benched the last season.

<CLIP> AARON RODGERS: *“Getting vaccinated was not at the top of my list”*

DAVID: Jesse Ventura, the former governor of Minnesota.

<CLIP> JESSE VENTURA: *“I don’t think so!”*

DAVID: But the more recent name that he has has focused on is Nicole Shanahan.  
  
SEAN: Okay not sure who that is, but I’ve heard of the other two. Let’s go through them starting with … the guy from Jeopardy!? Aaron Rodgers.

SCORING IN—CROISETTE LOVERS

*<CLIP> AARON RODGERS: Final Jeopardy! today we deal with American names.*

DAVID: Yes. Is he from Jeopardy! Is that how we know him now?

*<CLIP> AARON RODGERS: And the clue [ding]*

DAVID: Rodgers is a young, fairly healthy football player who has never run for office before. His politics are not clearly delineated in every single way, but he got to bond with Kennedy, and this has been a case with Kennedy for years. Kennedy is a famous person who is good at connecting with other people who agree with him. He's done a ton of charity work where he connects with celebrities. If somebody is simpatico with him, he talks them. Kennedy and Rodgers met up, went on a hike. They've been talking. They got along.

SEAN: They went on a hike?! That’s so romantic!

DAVID: Everyone goes on a hike with RFK junior, every reporter who profiles him goes on a hike with him.   
  
SEAN: <laughs>  
  
DAVID: But what we determine as reporters is that, you get one level of skepticism as an athlete. You get a different level as a potential political candidate, really, in no time at all. There was a lot of scrutiny on on Aaron Rodgers, his record of statements, what he said in the past, there was a damaging CNN story.*CLIP> CNN ANCHOR: Rodgers has shared conspiracy theories, falsely claiming the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting was not real.*

SCORING SPUTTERS OUT

*CNN ANCHOR: CNN has also spoken to another source who would like to remain anonymous in order to avoid harassment, this person said. Rodgers claimed that, quote, Sandy Hook never happened. All those children never existed. They were all actors.*

SEAN: Oh no.

DAVID: The sense we get is that Rodgers was pretty high up in the pecking order for who might be his running mate, and that hurt.

*<CLIP> ENTERTAINMENT TONIGHT ANCHOR: Kennedy was singing Rodgers praises on Fox News Wednesday before the story broke.   
RFK JR.: He's a critical thinker and I think we need that at the time. As you know, the rise of AI, we need people who understand that you cannot always trust authority.  
ANCHOR: Rodgers is denying the allegations today.*

DAVID: They… and this is something we've seen repeatedly with Kennedy. He is had a I wouldn't say a charmed life obviously, but he has had a certain level of celebrity, that has inoculated him from, you know, the career damage of other people who become vaccine skeptics. He does not like criticism of his, his quotes, his beliefs. He considers them smears. I guess a lot of people would. And that hurt. It hurt that, Aaron Rodgers got that coverage out of the gate. So we have not heard him in the conversation very much in the last week.

SEAN: Okay. Well, maybe he has a long future ahead of him in football.

<CLIP> JESSE VENTURA: *“I don’t think so”*

SEAN: Let's talk about Jesse “The Body” Ventura.

*<CLIP> JESSE VENTURA, 1980s: Oh, you bet I got something to say! You check it out! Woo! The most beautiful body in professional wrestling!*

SEAN: People once liked him, and he's an actually experienced politician. Rare!

DAVID: He is – a mayor and a governor.

*<CLIP> CBS, 1998: Jesse Ventura, the former wrestler who slammed Minnesota's body politic. Ventura's underdog campaign promised taxpayers he'd give back surplus budget money, that he'd loosen gun laws, even consider legalizing prostitution.*

DAVID: Again, not qualities that Kennedy said he wanted in a running mate, but somebody who appeals to some of the same Kennedy voters out there. The Kennedy voter might have voted for Ron Paul or Republican primaries, might vote for Ralph Nader in the year 2000. Is very flexible, is very anti-establishment. For a long time, I would say really until maybe 2008 or 2012, Jesse Ventura was seen as one of those candidates who could appeal to people who hated politics. He only ruled out running a few times, and then he dabbled a lot more in conspiracy theories and things that made him just more politically toxic:

*<CLIP> JESSE VENTURA: We knew before, with Condoleezza Rice's memo on August 6, where it’s started right in the memo “Bin Laden to steal planes to run them into buildings.” And more stuff is coming out now also, how much the Bush administration ignored the intelligence. It’s almost like they ignored it because they wanted it to happen.*

*PIERS: “Oh come off it Jesse.”*

*CROWD CHEERS. VENTURA: No wait a minute! Every war fought starts with a false flag operation!”*

DAVID: He hosted a show on RT on the Russia sponsored cable network, which had for a long time, a kind of stable of, anti-establishment American political commentators he left that because of the military moves that Russian made. Basically, he's pretty, pretty committed. I wouldn’t say pacifist, but a pretty committed anti-imperialist. Whether it's America, whether it's Russia.That was one we in hearing about him in the conversation, it sounded a bit more like this is someone who appeals to voters that Kennedy wants, whether or not he agrees with Kennedy on the the motivating issues of his campaign.

SEAN: And lastly, let's talk about perhaps the person who's least known in the mix here, Nicole Shanahan.

DAVID: Yes, Nicole Shanahan is a wealthy attorney who has contributed a lot to help Kennedy thus far.

*<CLIP> RFK Jr.: Nicole, like Aaron Rodgers, has been interested in in regenerative agriculture and press freedom and ending the chronic disease epidemic.*

DAVID: She is wealthy, both from her legal career. Young too, I should say 38 years old, had enough money to put $5 million into the Kennedy Super PAC, which ran the Super Bowl ad that got attention.

*<CLIP> RFK JR SUPER BOWL AD: Kennedy. Kennedy Kennedy. Kennedy.*

DAVID: And her politics are pretty, pretty progressive. Sure, her pre Kennedy donations were to Democratic candidates she donated to Los Angeles County's progressive D.A., George Gascon. But a pattern with these Kennedy nominees is that they're ideologically all over the place. Or potential Kennedy nominees, I should say. They have either celebrity or resources, and they get along with him personally. Those are the criteria. This is not, like a Democratic or Republican process where somebody needs to check a bunch of boxes on different issues and different factions of the party. That's not like that. It really is. Get do you get along with RFK Jr, and can you help boost his campaign in some way?

SEAN: Is there a chance that whomever this is, whether it's Jeopardy or the Body or Nicole, that it moves the needle on RFK?

DAVID: It could or could hurt.

DAVID: The Rodgers campaign I think it surprised a lot of people that the attention Rodgers got immediately that for the really the first time in several months. And I had written a couple stories about Kennedy and I could tell that wasn't burning up the internet with traffic. Just speculating that he might pick a football player, a famous football player, was a big story. And so Kennedy will get some news out of this announcement. Now, it's possible he chooses Shanahan. And there's negative coverage of that. So the larger context for this is that the Democratic National Committee, which sees third party candidates as a threat to Biden, is working right now to undermine Kennedy. It's done oppo research on who he might pick as a running mate. It wasn't fueling the entire Aaron Rodgers thing, but it is acting and is responding to questions and trying to undermine these people. So whoever Kennedy picks, if they're famous or they're not famous, is going to get more scrutiny than the average running running mate for a candidate polling around 10%.

SEAN: And the big question here is if one of these three or even someone else he could select this week does indeed boost his campaign, at whose expense? Biden’s? The other guy’s?

DAVID: It well, it's a good question because his name is very famous with Democrats, very beloved by Democrats and by some Republicans especially, there's a there's a sort of Trump voter who used to be a Democrat who's moved to into the party and really likes the Kennedys. There is a appreciation for the Kennedy brand, the Kennedy family in MAGA circles that's been written about from time to time. So at the moment when Kennedy is included in polls, the margin between Trump and Biden doesn't change that much.

SCORING IN—SURF ROCKTrump.

DAVID: And what Kennedy has pointed out, including the libertarian convention where where I covered him, he's aware that his name is very famous. And the older Americans, older Democrats like the Kennedy name. But those voters tend to listen to the mainstream media, which doesn't cover him the way he wants to be covered. He does better with anti-establishment voters. Kind of the Joe Rogan listener, the, the TikTok viewer, etc.

*<CLIP> JOE ROGAN: “Could you imagine a primary, like a debate, between Joe Biden and RFK? Let RFK go…let RFK go on TV. Imagine…”*

DAVE: Those people like Kennedy better than voters who pay attention to the *New York Times* and CBS news. And hear that this, this candidate is a conspiracy theorist anti-vaxxer. They don't like him.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: More with David on the other spoilers when we’re back on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> JESSE VENTURA: “Oooh you bet I got something to say. You check it out!”*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back. I'm still Sean Rameswaram, he's still Dave Weigel. Dave, the last time Joseph Robinette Biden Jr and Donald John Trump ran for president in 2020, there wasn't seemingly a big third party threat. What about this time around?

DAVID: So in 2020, a majority of voters went to the polls, according to exit pollsters, and said they had a favorable opinion of Joe Biden. A little bit lower. A little bit was more negative for Donald Trump, but less negative than had been in 2016. Was there a little bit of a conversation among people about how surely the country should be able to be better than these candidates? There was, but it wasn't like it is now. And it's a combination of, the fact that Trump tried to overturn the 2020 election, the and the fact that Joe Biden is in his 80s and we've never elected somebody to a new term in their 80s. Those have fueled this idea that the country is, is being cheated by having a choice of two major party candidates who most Americans don't like. It is younger voters, voters under 30 who are most unhappy with these choices. And that's again, combination of age, Trump's record and just a sense, a sense that there has to be something better than that. Things have not been good enough for them for the last four years, and that there's something inherently wrong with being forced to choose between two parties. We're seeing a return of that attitude, which is much more intense than we saw in 2020.

SEAN: And remind us who the other choices are for these young people and for for older people, for everything in between. Because it's not just RFK.

DAVID: So there are two candidates and there are two question marks there. There is Cornel West, the left wing academic who supported Bernie Sanders for president and now is running his own campaign. There is Jill Stein, who is the Green Party nominee for president in 2012, 2016, who's back. Then there are the Libertarian Party and the No Labels ticket, two organizations that do not have a nominee yet but are trying to get as much ballot access as possible for nominee TBD.

SEAN: Okay, let's let's go one by one through these, starting with Doctor West.

SCORING IN—FUNYUN

*<CLIP> CORNELL WEST: I want to reintroduce America to the best of itself. And it's fairly clear that brother Trump, neofascist gangster, not the best. Brother Biden, neoliberal hypocrite, not the best. I want the legacy…*

SCORING BUMP

DAVID: Doctor West’s story is complicated. Almost as complicated as Kennedy. He was running for the Green Party nomination. That's the first time I talked to him in this campaign, was his first week as a Green Party nominee, and he had a reasons why he was going to seek the green nomination, reasons why he was going to build a party out. He was working with Jill Stein to do so. He changed his mind shortly after running and went independent, went to found his own, his own party scene again, same thing as Kennedy. In some states, it's easier to get on the ballot if you found a new party to do it. The Green Party did not pack up. The Green Party just kept running with its own nominee, and Jill Stein jumped back into the race. Has rebooted, I'd say, her 2016 campaign – same sort of arguments.

*<CLIP> JILL STEIN: It's very clear that people who would vote for Biden are mostly against Trump. They're not for Biden, and people who would vote for Trump aren't so much for Trump. They're just really against Biden. So where can you go with a political system in which we cannot say what we want, what we need, what are our priorities?*

DAVID: But I've talked to her, this is something West says to the country would not be significantly better off if Biden wins or if Trump wins.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
DAVID: They both are seen by Democrats as potential threats again, to the younger voters who might agree with them. Not to get too on a tangent, but one reason some Democrats don't mind the current uncommitted effort – the effort to get as many protest votes as possible for Biden in the primary is because that's taking some attention away from this effort to get them to vote for a third party.

SCORING OUT  
  
SEAN: You said there were two question marks – the Libertarians and No Labels. What’s going on with the latter one? No Labels, no candidate?

DAVID: Yeah. No Labels. It is followed down a very unrewarding path of creating a third party organization, getting on the ballot with the promise of nominating a candidate who would have broad bipartisan appeal and win the election. They cannot convince a well-known candidate to make the leap. And they also because they have some principles, but they don't have clear priorities in you. Let's, let's, let's stipulate that one of the big jobs of a president is appointing judges, for example, because they haven't really, clarified who they want the top ticket or Republican or a Democrat. They just kind of go after everyone who's got a big name and needs a job. So this happened with Nikki Haley repeatedly. No Labels floated that they would be happy if she lost to Donald Trump and decided to run No Labels they'd welcome her. And she said she wouldn't wouldn't want to do it.

*<CLIP> ANCHOR: Here's what she said. Quote, “if I were to do No Labels, that would require a Democratic vice president. I can't do what I want to do as president with a Democratic vice president.”*

DAVID: Larry Hogan, the former governor of Maryland, said he wouldn't do it. Chris Christie said he's he's gone back and forth a bit, on that. But everyone and Joe Manchin is another prominent person, Democrat who said he does not want to do this.

*<CLIP> SEN. JOE MANCHIN (WV-I): This is a no.*

DAVID: This is the problem with floating the access to the ticket, but not having a candidate each time you get rejected. I mean, it's like a script being passed around Hollywood and you learn that, well, Brad Pitt's attached and now, Joaquin Phoenix is attached. And now this guy you've never heard of is attached. It's kind of the same thing. It's the … the crown has gotten a lot, a lot dingier that they're offering. So they have this ballot access. They don't have a candidate. And they also returning to a theme. I've been opposed this whole time by the Democratic Party. Republicans just focused on other issues. But the Democratic Party has, worked overtime, including legally filing complaints to attack No Labels for even trying this. So, yeah, they, they have a lot of tumult and no candidate.

SEAN: You've named off a bunch of names. Some are familiar, some are TBD. But it does seem like there's a bunch of them, and they're certainly all going to get some number of votes unless No Labels never gets its act together and actually has a candidate. Who's it going to hit more, all told, Trump or Biden?

DAVID: Yeah. Well, I should say to start off, third party candidates and advocates hate this question. They get it all the time.   
  
SEAN: <laughs a hideous laugh>   
  
DAVID> Their usual answer is that, no one is entitled to a vote.

*<CLIP> RALPH NADER: “As long as we admit that all have an equal right to run for election, we should not engage in this political bigotry that focuses on a third party, the green party, taking away votes from Gore….”*

I was covering Ralph Nader in 2000. I was covering, Jill Stein 2016. They were making a lot of money. They were having rallies with substantial size. You've not seen the same thing this time. You have seen third party energy around Kennedy, and it changes from place to place. I have been to events where, most people who support Kennedy, there are Republicans who don't like Trump. And I've met Democrats who don't like Biden, who are supporting Kennedy. It is mixed. But you'll notice the Republican Party just doesn't talk that much about Kennedy. It was hyping him quite a bit. I should say Fox News was hyping a bit more when Kennedy was Joe Biden's primary challenger.

*<CLIP> TUCKER CARLSON: The question is, who is telling the truth? They're not many of those. One of them is Robert F Kennedy Jr.*

SEAN: You know, there's so much energy behind these third party candidates and there's, several of them that are, somewhat serious, and yet none of them are pulling any significant numbers. How is that when your two main candidates, the two 80 year old-ish guys, are so unpopular across the country.

DAVID: People are willing to put up with candidates that they don't love.

SCORING IN—MISMATCHED PIECES

DAVID: This has been happening with Donald Trump. That's been happening with Joe Biden. I should say the disquiet that the Democrats have about Joe Biden, apart from Gaza and younger voters who disagree with him on Gaza. It's largely about his age. We saw this in the primaries. We saw a very real test to this. There were polls in New Hampshire and Iowa, which didn't matter in the end. Anyway. That showed last summer a majority of Democratic voters wanted an alternative. And there were stories written, saying in the passive voice, because luckily I didn't write one of these stories …  
  
SEAN: <chortles>  
  
DAVID: … stories written about how RFK Jr could be a threat to Biden, because look at this gigantic Democratic vote that says it wants a younger alternative to him. Well, when one did not emerge that voters took seriously. And I‘m saying Dean Phillips, and Marianne Williamson, when neither of them got traction, Biden, as a write-in candidate, won the New Hampshire primary. He's been winning with lower turnout every Democratic presidential primary. And so it turns out that when pushed, most Democrats are worried about Biden, but they're not against him. What that leaves you with is a chunk of the electorate, perhaps 30% of the electorate that really doesn't want to have to choose between these candidates and doesn't agree with the parties on everything, but they're sorting. The stakes are just very high. And it's been very tough to convince people to try something else when the risk is very high that something that you agree with or something you believe in could be undermined or destroyed in four years.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: David Weigel. Politics. Semafor dot com.

Our program today was produced by Miles Bryan, edited by Amina Al-Sadi, mixed by Patrick Boyd, and fact checked by Laura Bullard and Anouck Dussad.

It’s *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]