

**Lex Fridman Podcast #423 - Tulsi Gabbard: War, Politics, and the Military Industrial
Complex**

Published - April 2, 2024

Transcribed by - thepodtranscripts.com

Lex Fridman

The following is a conversation with Tulsi Gabbard, who was a longtime Democrat - including being the vice chair of the Democratic National Committee. She endorsed Bernie in 2016 and Biden in 2020. She has been both loved and heavily criticized for her independent thinking and bold political stances, especially on topics of war and the military-industrial complex. She served in the US military for many years - achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. And now, she's the author of a new book called "For Love of Country". This is the Lex Fridman Podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Tulsi Gabbard. You've served in the US military for many years - achieving rank of Lieutenant Colonel. You were deployed in Iraq in 2004 and '05 - Kuwait in '08 and '09. What lessons about life and about country have you learned from that experience of war?

Tulsi Gabbard

So many. Central to those lessons learned was having my eyes open to the very real cost of war. Of course, I served in a medical unit during that first deployment to Iraq. It was 2005 during the height of that war, and unfortunately we took a lot of casualties. We, across the entire US military, my brigade that I deployed with was from the Hawaii National Guard. We had approximately 3,000 soldiers who were operating in four different areas of Iraq. And my first task every day was to go through a list of every combat related injury that had occurred the day before in the country. I went through that list name by name, looking to see if any one of our nearly 3,000 soldiers from Hawaii had been hurt in the line of duty. And then, if seeing them on the list, tracking them down. Where were they? Were they getting the care they needed? Would they be able to get sufficient care to stay in the country and return to duty? Did I need to get them evacuated? Usually it would be to military hospitals that at that time were in Landstuhl and Ramstein in Germany. And then from there, getting them to either Brooke Army Medical Center, which is here in Texas, that specialized in burn related injuries, or to Walter Reed, and tracking them and their care until they were finally home with their families. It never became a routine task. It never became like, okay, cool, check the list, kind of dot the Is, cross the Ts. It was that daily confrontation with the reality of the cost of war. Friends of mine were killed in combat. Experiencing firsthand that high human cost of war caused me - a 20-something-year-old from Hawaii - I had left my seat in the state legislature to volunteer to deploy with my brothers and sisters in my unit to Iraq, and so recognize the cost of war, I think, in two fundamental ways. Number one is the high human cost of war on our troops and on the people in the country where this war was being waged. And also the cost on American taxpayers. Seeing then, back again in 2005, and recognizing KBR Halliburton, one of the biggest defense contracting companies then, and I know that they're still very much in that business now, Dick Cheney being connected with that company at one point or another, but in our camp specifically, which was one of the larger ones in Iraq at that time, there wasn't anything that happened in our camp that didn't have the KBR Halliburton logo imprinted on it. We had a big shack, a place where we ate our meals. They call it a dining facility, a DFAC in the military. They served four meals a day. They

brought in, and they being KBR Halliburton, they imported workers in from places like Nepal and Sri Lanka and the Philippines to come in and cook food and work at this dining facility. I got curious about how much it costs us as taxpayers. And so I started asking around some of the people, and I think at that time it was like, well, every time a soldier or a service member walks through the door, if I were to go in for breakfast and grab a banana and walk out, that's an automatic \$35 per head per meal four times a day, thousands and thousands of people. And then we made friends. There's a pretty large Filipino community in Hawaii. A lot of Filipino soldiers from Hawaii. We made friends with the Filipino workers who were there. They would often go in the back of the tents and set up their own rice cookers and cook their own meals, which is where the real good food was. But just started talking to them and getting to know them and asked like, "Hey, how much do you get paid?" And on average it was like, "Oh, I get paid like 500 bucks a month." 500 bucks a month to go and do this work of either cleaning out porta-potties, picking up trash, the dining facility, doing laundry, all of these different tasks, because the military wanted soldiers to be out doing things that only soldiers could do. Understandable. But when I started putting two and two together and knowing that this company, one company alone, was making trillions of dollars, trillions of dollars, and yet this Filipino mom is making 500 bucks a month, maybe getting one day off a week, maybe, working 12 hours a day otherwise. And I said, "How often are you able to go home to your family?" "Well, they'll let us go home a couple of weeks every other year." It was an eye-opening experience that growing up in Hawaii, I frankly hadn't given much thought to before, but it's what led me ultimately coming back from that first deployment there was no way that I could go back to the life that I had left behind. And I knew somehow, somehow I needed to find a way to use those experiences to try to make a positive impact, to try to influence those - I mean - frankly, the politicians who are making decisions to go and launch these regime-change wars and send our men and women in uniform into war, and to what end, ultimately.

Lex Fridman

If we can just go back to that list. So the list is just name and injury, name and injury.

Tulsi Gabbard

Name, unit, potentially location if someone had documented that, and their injury.

Lex Fridman

And it's just pages and pages of that.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah. Yeah. I didn't get to call home every day, but when I called home and talked to my parents, I felt the tension in their voice. They didn't want me to worry about anything at home. And so they were always like, "Hey, how are you? What can we send you?" And this and that. But it wasn't like I was calling them from down the street and saying, "Hey, how's it going? Let's go have lunch," or whatever. I knew that the reason for that tension was they

were terrified of getting a phone call delivering the worst possible news. And that was what I thought of as I went through that list of how it is the reality of war. Behind every one of those names on that list was a husband or a wife, parents, sons and daughters, family members, who had no idea what we were dealing with, really. All they knew was what they saw on the news. What my dad told me later when I got home after that deployment was that every time they saw the news, and they saw a helicopter shot down or crashed or some IED, they held their breath until they saw or heard the news of who it was or what it was.

Lex Fridman

What can you say about what the soldiers had to go through physically and psychologically when they get injured?

Tulsi Gabbard

The physical; some injuries appeared to be minor upfront. At that time, traumatic brain injury was not something that was talked about much, if at all. Many had visible wounds. Others are now what we know appeared like, "All right, cool, you checked out," but had invisible wounds. Those who were injured in a way that did not allow them to get back to work, found it emotionally very difficult to be put on a plane and evacuated out of there. Feeling guilty that they were leaving their friends behind, and not thinking about themselves or not feeling bad for themselves, but instead feeling bad for being forced to be in a position to leave. For soldiers, of course, we all have our own political opinions on things, but when it comes right down to it in a war zone, it's about your friends. It's about your brothers and sisters that you're serving alongside. It's not about the politicians or whatever insanity is going on in Washington. It's about getting up and going out, getting the job done and coming back home together. I had friends of mine who were from Hawaii, who were from American Samoa, a very culturally tight-knit community, who confided in me throughout that year that we were there, infantry soldiers who were going out on security patrols and doing raids every day, just some of the very traumatic experiences that they went through. No physical injury, but creating a kind of emotional stress and trauma that, as human beings, they were struggling in dealing with. On a positive note, Polynesian culture especially, but also Asian culture and other cultures around the world, our guys found that shortly after we got there, the unit that we were replacing were taking the guys out on patrol and saying, "Hey, here's this village. Here's where we found friendlies." Or, "Here's where we know that there are insurgents operating, and they've got allies and lookouts." And showing them the lay of the land basically. And what our guys found was that as they were doing these ride-alongs, they call it a left seat, right seat when you're coming in and taking over, that there was a bit of a tense, even adversarial type of relationship, where on the military side there was an assumption of suspicion or lack of trust just with the locally Iraqi people who lived around the base that we were at. And without anybody telling them to culturally, our guys began trying to build relationships. For Hawaii and Samoa, and we had soldiers from Guam and Saipan, little things like you're riding down in a Humvee, you've got a gunner in the turret with a 50 cal or a machine gun of some sort, little things like pointing

the muzzle to the sky as you're riding through a town rather than pointing it directly at where people are walking down the street was a huge gesture of an assumption of, "Hey, let's actually talk and become friends." We had our guys riding down the street and throwing shakas out to the local people there, breaking bread, sharing tea, and building those relationships. Again, I served in a medical unit and what we saw was a downward shift in casualties from the unit that had been there before us, simply because of that basic human connection that our guys sought to make. And then, gradually, finding local people who lived in the town right next to us were saying, "Hey, you guys, somebody was digging a big hole a mile down the road. You might want to bypass that or check that out." And finding weapons, caches and IEDs, improvised explosive devices, and other things that helped save people's lives.

Lex Fridman

On the cost side of things, how is it possible for a company like Halliburton or others to get away with \$40 bananas? However much it was, but the overhead costs.

Tulsi Gabbard

Look, what they will claim is that it's expensive to move logistics through a country at war, but they get away with it, ultimately, this insane war profiteering, and they're not alone. Obviously, there are other companies that this is their business model. They get away with it because of their political connections, and the lobbyists that they have, the relationships they have with politicians. And ultimately, what President Eisenhower warned against with regard to that cozy relationship between Congress and even what he called then the military-industrial complex, it's been alive and well. He warned us against it, and I would say it's thriving more now than ever before.

Lex Fridman

How powerful is the military-industrial complex as a thing? Is it a machine that can be slowed down, can be stopped, can be reversed?

Tulsi Gabbard

It can be. It's powerful. I don't think you can overstate the powerful nature of it because it extends so deeply within our government. It's not just those in these specific big defense contracting companies that benefit from it. You look at the revolving door within the Pentagon, for example, where you have both high-ranking people who wear military uniforms as well as those who serve as high-ranking, Department of Defense civilians who are literally working their way into a big payout when they leave that job. We see it with our own Secretary of Defense now. He retired as a general officer, went and served on one of the boards for one of the big defense contractors, and then now back as the Secretary of Defense. We see the same thing in Congress with members of Congress and senior professional staffers in Congress. Same exact revolving door where you have people, whether they're writing contracts for the Department of Defense, for the company that then

wins the bid for that contract, and then going and working for that company. Or those in Congress who are writing policies and doing exactly the same thing.

Lex Fridman

You have been both a war hawk and a war dove at times. So what is your philosophy on when war is justified and when it is not?

Tulsi Gabbard

War is justified when it is in the best interest of our national security, and when it is the last resort, when all diplomatic efforts have been completed and exhausted and war is the last possible route that must be taken to ensure the safety, security, and freedom of the American people.

Lex Fridman

So that's a high-level beautiful idea, but there's messy details. So terrorism, for example.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

The United States involvement in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan was in part the big umbrella of the war on terrorism. So, when you decide whether something's justified or not and whether something can be defeated or not, how hard is it? Is it even possible? To what degree is it possible to defeat terrorism?

Tulsi Gabbard

Well, first of all, part of the problem of our foreign policy has been how many conflicts, wars, military actions have been waged in the name of this "war on terrorism" in the name of national security, legislation like the Patriot Act that violates our civil liberties and freedoms in the name of the war on terrorism and national security when it's not justified. I'll use Afghanistan as an example. I support the initial mission that lifted off shortly after the attack on 9/11, the Islamist terrorist attack on 9/11. It was a relatively small group of US military launched to go after those al-Qaeda cells and Osama bin Laden in the wake of that attack. That is the mission that should have been supported and focused on in its execution. Instead, as you know, attention was diverted very quickly to the regime-change war in Iraq that was waged on false pretenses, and the resources and focus was taken away from that initial mission that went to Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan blew up into something that became about regime change and governance and the Taliban, and less focus on al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. And it became this thing that even general officers had a hard time articulating what is the objective here? What are we trying to accomplish? What does winning look like? At what point do we know it's time to exit and get out? And as you look at things like the Afghanistan files and others, the answers to these simple and

essential questions shifted and changed over time, over a very long time. Similarly, in Iraq. I bought into a lot of what was being sold by the administration and by Democrats and Republicans and Congress at the time. And very quickly, even as I was on the ground there, started to have my eyes opened up into how we had been lied to tremendously, and how that protracted war went on for a very, very long time with decisions being made that ultimately served to strengthen terrorist groups like al-Qaeda, the creation of ISIS and others, really undermining our national security interests in the meantime. Understanding the enemy that you are trying to defeat is essential to being able to build a strategy. The declaration of President Biden, for example, saying, "Well, the war on terror is over. The war on terror is over." What does that mean? Or, "The forever wars are over." Well, what does that actually mean?" I served on my last most recent deployment in 2021 to East Africa and Somalia, where al-Shabaab is one of those Islamist terrorist groups that follows the same ideology as al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hamas and others. This group has been allowed to grow and be strengthened, even though they are one of the main groups that provides funding to al-Qaeda in that entire region. So any president or politician can declare a war to be over, but when you have an enemy like these Islamist terrorist groups who are still intent on their goal and their objective, which is to ultimately establish their Islamic caliphate and destroy Israel and exterminate the Jewish people, and basically kill or convert anyone who doesn't adhere to their ideology, that continues on. And they will only become stronger the longer our leaders put their heads in the sand and pretend like, "Oh no, this doesn't exist." This kind of war, this war specifically, is one that has to be waged militarily and ideologically. And the ideological component to this, which is defeating their ideology with a superior one, is one that I pointed out in Congress during the Obama administration, we, the collective we, were failing at. The Obama administration was failing at because they were so afraid of being labeled Islamophobes, that they refused to accurately identify that ideology driving these terrorist groups. And instead said, "We are countering violent extremism," was the term that the Obama administration started to use and was coined and kind of mandated across the US government. Well, again, you have to know the enemy that threatens you and why they're doing what they're doing if you have any hope of actually preventing their attack, both militarily, and as we're seeing now with Hamas's actions, not only directly in the assault on Israel, but how Hamas achieved their objectives in spreading their ideology around the world.

Lex Fridman

If you look at the lessons learned from the US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, how do you fight terrorism?

Tulsi Gabbard

Clearly understanding who they are and where they are and why they're doing what they're doing is essential, first of all. Obviously, there are different groups, different names. They have morphed and changed based on their locale and how they operate. Building relationships with people in other countries, both state leaders as well as religious leaders

and others who share that same objective of defeating these Islamist terrorists on both fronts, and acting as a united front in taking that action. What exactly that action looks like, details on the ground dictate that. Details about these different groups will dictate that. But we've seen examples of this before. I saw this in Somalia. We saw it in some cases in Iraq where, for example, you have Imams who recognize the threat that these terrorist groups pose to their own people and their own communities, and exerting their influence in defeating the terrorist Islamist ideology with their own teachings of Islam and preaching peace amongst their people. War is ugly and it is messy. It is also an unfortunate reality of the world we live in. So, while I firmly believe that we must always pursue peace, I'm not a pacifist, I'm a realist, and recognize that where there are these threats, we must do what we can to work towards that safety, that security, that freedom and peace that we all want.

Lex Fridman

If we look at the perspective of Israel and the Israel-Gaza war going on now, what do you do with the fact that the death of a civilian serves as a catalyst, gives birth to hate, potentially generational hate? So in Israel's stated goal of destroying Hamas, they are creating immeasurable hate. What do you do with that? From a perspective of Israel, what is the correct action to take in response to October 7th?

Tulsi Gabbard

It's a complex question with a complex answer. I think Israel's approach has to be in recognizing that delineation as far as possible. And I know it's tough when you have a terrorist group like Hamas that is so interwoven within the community of people in Gaza. But to recognize that there should be, and there is a shared purpose there for the Palestinian people to be able to live free and in peace and not under the oppression of this terrorist group, just as the people of Israel would like to live in peace and free from the threat of attack from a terrorist group that wants to exterminate them. The complexities of what's going on in Israeli politics is, I think, a different conversation, but also one that is directly intertwined with the answer to this question. When you have some people in the Israeli government who don't want the Palestinian people in Gaza at all and want them to go and repatriate in other countries, I think that's a big problem, and that further exacerbates this hatred and resentment that continues to grow there. This is a generation's long challenge, unfortunately, of the resentment and tension that exists between many Israelis and many Palestinians that can only be resolved when there's strong leadership representing both peoples who are able and willing to come together and recognize that the only way forward is to let the past be in the past and find a way towards peace in the future.

Lex Fridman

How do you think, how do you hope the war in Ukraine will end?

Tulsi Gabbard

The only way that this war ends is to do exactly what we're talking about. There has to be a brokered dialogue and conversation about peace that has to occur with representatives from Russia and Ukraine. It is really truly heartbreaking to see both how efforts that began just weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine to do exactly this, were thwarted by the Biden-Harris administration, and other Western powers has cost so many innocent people's lives. And this is where I get - innocent people's lives, and this is where I get - I have friends in Ukraine. I've been there more than a few times. I've enjoyed and appreciated the time that I've spent there. When I hear from my friends about how afraid they are of their husbands being conscripted and feeling like they have to hide for fear of being yanked off the streets, their friends and family members who've been killed in this war. The only way this ends is when both sides come to the table and find an agreement that neither side is going to be completely happy with, both sides being forced to make some concessions, but one where they will both walk away and this war can end.

Lex Fridman

What's the role of the US president perhaps to bring everybody to the table? Do you think that the US president should sit down with Zelenskyy and Putin together?

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes. Yes. In an ideal world, yes. This should have happened long ago. The question of whether or not President Biden is the right person to do that at this time when all of the statements and comments that they have made, the Biden-Harris administration has made from the beginning of this war essentially point to their objective being to basically destroy Russia, and that's one of the reasons why they have supported both the continuation of this war for as long as it's lasted, as well as why they have thwarted efforts towards peace. Whoever that most effective neutral broker is, that's the best person to do this. The Biden-Harris administration, I think the role that they have to take is actually encouraging Zelenskyy to sit down and begin this process. Those kinds of engagements are the most, to me, the most powerful exercises of diplomacy that can't be matched, especially when our president's foremost role and responsibility is to serve as commander in chief, and I wish that we had leaders who were more willing to engage because I think we'd make a lot more progress more quickly to find areas both of mutual interest as well as to help de-conflict and de-escalate areas where there is tension or disagreement or adversarial interests.

Lex Fridman

Well, some of it is basic human camaraderie. People call me naive for this, but sometimes, just knowing that there's a human on the other side. Even when it's in private, if you look at Zelenskyy and Putin for example, just humor. Both are very intelligent, witty at times, even funny people. Yes, this is wartime. Yes, a lot of civilians and soldiers are dying. There's hate, but if you can look above it all and think about the future of the countries, the flourishing of

the people and the stopping of the death of civilians and soldiers, then in that place, you can have that basic human connection.

Tulsi Gabbard

I agree. I don't think that's naive at all and I think there are so many examples through history that point to the power of that, the real power in that. In the Cuban Missile crisis, how JFK had to literally find a secret way to communicate with Khrushchev to try to go around the backs of the military commanders who were urging him to take military action, and instead find, hey, we both ultimately want the same thing. Neither of us wants to launch a catastrophic nuclear war so let's figure this out.

Lex Fridman

Of course, there's examples throughout history. Leaders are complicated people. They're manipulative people, so you have Hitler and Chamberlain meeting and Chamberlain kind of getting hoodwinked by Hitler's charisma and being convinced that Hitler doesn't have any interest in invading and destroying the rest of the world, so you have to -

Tulsi Gabbard

Be smart. Don't be hoodwinked.

Lex Fridman

You've met, and you've been criticized for this, you've met with Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, and as part of the campaign when running for president, got criticized for not calling him a war criminal. What's the right way to meet and communicate with these kinds of leaders?

Tulsi Gabbard

As I just stated, we need leaders who have the courage to meet not just with allies, but with adversaries in the pursuit of peace, in the pursuit of increased understanding. If policies are being made through the lenses and the barriers of bureaucrats and the media and others who have or may have their own interests. Our president, a leader, even members of Congress can't make decisions with the kind of clarity that we the American people need them to make. I think that these kinds of engagements are weaponized and politicized as they were against me by those who have their own interests, whether it be the military-industrial complex or in Washington. If you're not part of the official narrative of the US government, which was intent on a regime change war in Syria, then you're an outcast. And it was unfortunate because people levied all kinds of accusations and smears against me for going and having the audacity to go and learn more, try to seek the truth, in the hopes of preventing more needless war and in the hopes of preventing yet another quagmire and disastrous war in the Middle East. And simply for going, and yes, meeting with Assad, also meeting with religious leaders in Syria, also meeting and talking with people on the streets of Damascus, talking with college students, talking with people from the

opposition party who would like to see Assad replaced, talking with local law, just a whole host of people over the course of a few days, the accusation was like, "Oh, she loves dictators." It's a sad state of affairs when some of the most influential voices in our country will label someone a lover or supporter of dictators simply because you're saying, "Hey, we shouldn't be going to war. There is another way." And I'm not alone in this. People who were against the war in Iraq were given similar labels, until it became popular in our politics to have been against the Iraq war. We see the same thing now with people like Tucker, myself and others who are saying, "We should not be waging this proxy war against Russia via Ukraine and using the Ukrainian people's lives in this war." Well, now all of a sudden, you're a Putin lover or a Putin puppet or whatever, the traitor, treason, all of these accusations that are used ultimately by people who are not interested in having a substantive conversation about the truth, about looking at these wars and conflicts with a comprehensive view on exactly all the dynamics that are at play. And that's what I found when I came back. I went to Syria looking forward to coming back and shedding light on different perspectives, experiences and stories that I found that would give people a more broad understanding of what was happening in that country. And what I found was there was zero interest in the mainstream media or in Congress in hearing any other perspective other than their own, which was, "We need to launch this regime change war through the use of arming and equipping known terrorists within Syria to overthrow the regime," without them stating any realistic idea of who would take control once Assad was overthrown. But the reality actually being that no matter which opposition group they might try to prop up, they would not have the power to withstand the terrorist groups whose stated goal it was to go and take over power from Assad. They had no interest in trying to gain true understanding, and it was very disheartening. It was very disheartening and a big lesson learned about where their interests really were focused.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's a simplistic narrative template that's fit into every single situation. A lot of stuff is not talked about in the Russia-Ukraine war. One of the things that's not talked about is, okay, so Putin is overthrown, then who do you think will come into power?

Tulsi Gabbard

Exactly.

Lex Fridman

One of the things I talk about with Arestovych is that Putin, and he gets criticized for this, that Putin, out of all the people that might take power is the most liberal, is the most dovish. In fact, every indication shows that he really hates this war, and so everybody that will step in if he steps down or if he is overthrown is just going to accelerate this war and the expansionism and the thirst for empire and all that kind of stuff that the U. S military-industrial complex will feed into. So you have to think about what the future holds

and what the different power players are and what the level of corruption there is, and the realistic view of the situation versus the idealistic view of the situation.

Tulsi Gabbard

Just on that note real quick, I think that was exposed in broad daylight when it appeared that the former head of the Wagner Group was about to try to launch a coup, and how that was so celebrated, even on MSNBC and Rachel Maddow and others touting that this was somehow going to be a great thing, without looking at who is this guy really? What has he been doing in different countries around the world and what would be his ruling philosophy and how that would differ or benefit American interests or the interest of security and peace.

Lex Fridman

But also the interest of Ukraine or Russia, or humanity overall, just the flourishing of nations, which is great for everybody, and collaborations with nations.

Tulsi Gabbard

I agree.

Lex Fridman

Friendly competition. One of the things I love about the 20th century is the friendly, sometimes not so friendly, competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in space, in the space race. That's created some incredible engineering and scientific breakthroughs and all of this, and also made people dream about reaching out to the stars, and war destroys all of that, or damages it. Hopefully just damages it. Hopefully the Phoenix will rise again. Well, let me ask you about the criticism you've mentioned. It's probably the most common criticism of you, that you love Putin. So just to linger on it, what do you think is the foundation of this criticism?

Tulsi Gabbard

Well, I'll tell you when it began. My first day in Congress was January 3rd, 2013. I believe it was the third, fourth, fifth, somewhere around there, and my last day was January 3rd, 2021. I had been given my experience of serving as a soldier in the Middle East, and the motivation that really drove me to run for Congress in the first place. I served on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Armed Services Committee for almost eight years, the eight years that I was there, with my drive and motivation to actually be in a position to challenge the influence of the military-industrial complex, to try to prevent us from needlessly going to war. And so the likes of Hillary Clinton and the cabal of Warmongers in Washington, they weren't fans of mine to say the least. I can't say it was a total surprise, but it was disheartening nonetheless that the very day that I announced my candidacy, that I was running for president, which was in February, 2019. The hour that I walked up onto that stage to announce my candidacy, it was in Hawaii and I gave my announcement speech,

NBC News published a hit piece that planted the seeds of suspicion in voters' minds that somehow, I was a darling of Putin and Russia and whatever. It was baseless, all of it baseless. And that continued like a steady drumbeat throughout my candidacy, but that really was escalated when in a podcast with David Axelrod, Hillary Clinton said, "Oh, well, the Russians are grooming her." And this came from a very influential person. She was the former Secretary of State, the former US Senator, former First Lady, someone who wielded and continues to wield a lot of power in the Democratic Party and amongst voters, and that took it to a whole new level. What is the basis for this? Nothing. It is a tired yet dependable playbook that is used not only by people like Hillary Clinton, but also people like Mitt Romney and others to try to smear, discredit and destroy the reputations of people who have the audacity to question their objectives as they call for one war or another, or have the audacity to say that this is not in the best interest of peace, or in our country, our national security. They keep going back to this playbook as they do today, because again, they're not willing to debate the substance of one position versus another, which is what we should have. If people feel so strongly that we should be going and waging this war, that war, okay, great. Go make your case to the American people. Go stand on the floor of the United States House and actually have this debate. Allow those who are saying, "No, this is not a good idea," to also stand freely and make that argument. Instead, they resort to the kind of name-calling that tells voters, "Hey, you can't trust this person or anything that they say." Myself and some of my other colleagues got the same treatment when we tried to pass legislation in Congress that would have taken out provisions from the Patriot Act that are most egregiously violating our Fourth Amendment rights and civil liberties, authorities that have allowed our government to illegally surveil Americans without a warrant. And as we did so, we were called traitors. We had other members of Congress on the house floor saying that if you pass this legislation, you will be responsible for another 9/11-style attack on our soil. These are all distraction tactics to try to divert our attention away from what's actually happening, and instead, just tell voters, "Hey, you can't trust these people." Obviously, this has happened to Trump. It's happened to Bobby Kennedy. It's happened to people like Rand Paul and others. There's a small group, but a growing number, at least I'm on the Republican side at this point, people who are actually willing to stand up and challenge the military-industrial complex, challenge the warmongers in both parties.

Lex Fridman

Well, people on the left have challenged the warmongers as well throughout the last few decades.

Tulsi Gabbard

Less so recently. I agree with you, but less so recently, and this is one of the reasons why I left the Democratic Party, one of the foremost reasons. I devote an entire chapter to this issue in my book, *For Love of Country: Leave the Democrat Party Behind*. Going into the detail of some of the things we've talked about, about my own experiences, about what I have learned along the way, but also how even in the last year or two years, certainly under

this administration, people who I worked with in Congress who were Democrats, dependable voices for civil liberties, dependable voices, speaking out against the insanity of people who wanted to wage war for the sake of war. They're largely silent now. And unfortunately within the Democratic Party in Washington, there is no room for debate, that if you challenge the Biden administration's position on foreign policy, you're going to hear about it. And what we have seen is that's exactly what's happened, and people have retracted statements or just fallen silent or whatever the case may be. This debate that should be existent within both parties, on the Democrat side unfortunately, it just doesn't exist anymore.

Lex Fridman

There seems to be some kind of mass hysteria over the war in Ukraine. It was strange to watch that the nuance aspect of the discussion was lost very quickly. It was, "Putin bad." It was a war between good and evil. And in that, if you bring up any kind of nuanced discussion of how do we actually achieve peace in the situation, you're immediately put on the side of evil.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah, which is pretty sick when you think about it.

Lex Fridman

The cynical view is, of course, it's the military-industrial complex machine, the war profiteers just driving this kind of conversation. I hope they don't have that much power. I hope they just have incentives and they push people and they use people's natural desire to divide the world into good and evil and fight for the side of good. People just have a natural proclivity for that, and that's a good thing, that we want to fight for the side of good, but then that gets captured.

Tulsi Gabbard

And manipulated.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes. I admire your hopefulness. I am hopeful also because of the goodness in people and the naturally compassionate nature of people. However, I will tell you from firsthand experience that what we talk about is the national security state, and the military-industrial complex, this cabal of warmongers that extends not only within government but outside of government, extends to many powerful media outlets. They are incredibly powerful and don't have any qualms at destroying those who try to get in the way of their power, and they've got a lot of tools. They've got a lot of tools to do that, which I think is why President

Eisenhower chose to include this in his farewell address as a warning, because the only recourse, the only real power that has the ability to destroy them and stand up against them is a free people living in a free society, exercising the rights that we have enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

Lex Fridman

I just talked to Annie Jacobsen. She wrote a book on nuclear war, a scenario of how a nuclear war will happen, second by second, minute by minute. I apologize. If it happens, how it would happen. It is terrifying.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

It's terrifying how easy it is to start, that one person can start it first of all, and then there's no way to stop it. Even potentially with tactical nuclear weapons, that the machinery of it, how clueless everybody is combined with the machinery of it, it's just impossible to stop, and it's just between Russia and the United States especially. And then all of a sudden, you have nuclear winter and 5 billion people are dead, and they die through just essentially torture, slowly. How do we avoid that? How do we avoid a nuclear war? That's something that you talk about and think about. How do we avoid this kind of escalation of a hot war?

Tulsi Gabbard

I think the most essential thing, first of all, is understanding exactly what you have just detailed. We are in this very strange and absurd time where we have talking heads and so-called pundits on TV. We have politicians, we have people who are talking about a nuclear war as though it is a war that can be won, period, and a war that can be waged somehow without that risk of escalation to the point of destruction of human civilization. And so they talk about this as though it's just another war, and especially as they talk about the use of tactical nuclear weapons. "Oh, well, this is small and we think it'll send a message without actually escalating to the point where we are dealing with the kind of destruction that we witnessed in World War II." That's a dangerous thing when it becomes normalized as, "Well, we've got this new missile that'll go and it's targeted and it's strategic, and it'll only harm this, quote unquote, military target." Ronald Reagan was 100% correct when he said a nuclear war cannot be won and should never be waged. It was true then and it's true now, no matter how much these guys who are producing these weapons or those who are benefiting from that industry try to tell us, "Oh no, it'll never happen." So to me, that's an important first step, to continue to inform and educate and sound the alarms to people. Don't buy this crap because it's not true, and I look forward to listening to your podcast, but the PSA that was put out by New York City's Emergency Management Office about what to do in the event of a nuclear attack, you would find it funny if it wasn't so deeply disturbing. How they created this public service announcement, they distributed it everywhere across the city, on the

internet. I think it was on the radio where you had a woman who appeared to be an actor coming in and saying, "Hey, in the event of when the big one hits, here's what you should do. Focus on doing these three things," and I'm paraphrasing but I encourage you to watch it. I'm paraphrasing but she said, "Get inside. Stay inside and stay tuned." That was it. And, "Get inside, go away from the windows. Stay inside. Don't go outside until you get the all clear, and stay tuned. Follow our account on Instagram and Twitter." And at the very end of this short PSA, her closing words were, "We've got this." And it was so disturbing in that it was so completely out of touch with reality. It creates this kind of false sense of security that, okay, well, it's like here's what you do when a tornado hits or when a big storm hits, and categorizing the big one, a nuclear attack within that same kind of preparedness that you would want people to have in the event of a natural disaster of some sort. And it is reflective of the carelessness with which people in our government, that careless attitude that people in our government have towards nuclear war and a nuclear attack, even as they set us up for failure in pushing us closer and closer to the brink of a nuclear war occurring, whether it be an intentional attack, or as we saw during the last Cold War, one that could be launched unintentionally. How many near misses were there during the last Cold War? I saw this documentary called The Man Who Saved the World, and it was some mid-level officer who happened to be on duty and who didn't do what he was told in launching the nuclear missiles because of what they thought was an incoming attack, and it turned out to be a complete mistake or misread on the radar, but that's what we're facing.

Lex Fridman

But by the way, there's so many things to say there, but one of the things that Annie Jacobsen details is just how organized the machinery of all of this is, where the humans involved don't have to think. They just follow orders. There's a very clear set of steps you take, and there's very few places where you can inject your humanity and be like, "Wait a minute, what's the big picture of this?" The only person that can think is the - that can think is the president of the United States. The president of the United States gets six minutes after the warning. The early warning system says, whether it's false or not, says that, "We believe that there's been a nuclear weapon launched. You have six minutes before you can make the decision of launch back, initiate." And to me, that's what I'm voting based on, in the current situation.

Tulsi Gabbard

Right.

Lex Fridman

You really have to see that as one of the most important aspects of the United States President, is, "Who do you trust in those six minutes to sit there?"

Tulsi Gabbard

I agree.

Lex Fridman

And I'm not really sure, looking at Biden and Trump, boy, I don't know, but I do know that I would like somebody who's thinking independently, and not part of the machinery of warmongers, that that's really - I mean, I don't want to make it sound cynical or dramatic, but sometimes in such scary situations, in such dramatic situations, you kind of follow the momentum.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

When the right thing to do, the right thing for a leader to do is to step back and look of all human history, and ignore all the people in the room that are saying stuff, because most likely, what they're going to be saying is warmongering type of things.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

That's one of the things, why I also get criticized for, I still think Zelenskyy is a hero for staying in Kyiv. Everybody was telling him to flee. It was all the information was basically saying the world's second biggest military is like coming at Kyiv. It's just dumb on all fronts to stay in Kyiv, but that's what a great leader does, is ignores everybody and stays.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

"Screw it. I'm going to die for my country. I'm going to die as a leader," and that's the right thing for a leader to do.

Tulsi Gabbard

It's sad that - I mean - to me, that's what we should expect of our leaders, is exactly that, and it's sad that having a leader in that position fulfill their responsibility, and the oath that they take is seen as a heroic act, when we should - that's your job. That's what we elect our leaders to do, and yet, so many have failed. But to your point, it's not cynical at all to know that in those rooms, especially in these moments of crisis, unfortunately, there are the predominant and prevailing opinion of this warmongering establishment that's not specific to one party, is the knee-jerk reaction, which is to go to war, or to execute an act of war. This is one of the biggest costs of this establishment, destroying the reputations of, and smearing and trying to cancel and censor those who are voices of peace, or just those who take a contrarian position and say, "Well, hey, why don't we just pause for a moment and

actually think this through? Why don't we talk through, 'What happens if we take this course of action? What happens if we go down a different path?' Let's actually be thoughtful about what our options are for A, B, and C, and then make the decision in a thoughtful manner based on that." Even advocating for that is seen as a kind of heresy in the warmongering establishment in Washington, and the cost of their retaliation against those who are reasonable voices, who look at the world as it is, not some fantasy that they wish existed is, in those rooms, during those critical moments, people will, even if they know in their heart or their mind that this could end really badly, their instinct is to self-censor and not speak up because they don't want to experience the wrath and ire, whether it be coming from four-star generals, or the secretaries of state, or defense, or these high-ranking people in positions of power and influence. They don't want to be the one guy in the room who's just like, "Hey, guys, let's just take a breath and actually think this through. What will happen, not just in the immediate response of this action that you're advocating for, but what are all of the other people, other actors, stakeholders in the world, how will they respond, and then how will we respond to them? How will they respond to us?" Actually go through this exercise of, in the military, this is commonly referred to as, "What are the second, third, fourth order of effects that will occur as a result of pursuing a specific course of action?"

Lex Fridman

It's weird how difficult it is to be that person in the room.

Tulsi Gabbard

It requires courage -

Lex Fridman

Yeah, but like it -

Tulsi Gabbard

- which is sad, but it requires courage.

Lex Fridman

But why does it require, like even just to ask, "Okay, we've been in Afghanistan and Iraq for this number of years. What's the exit plan?"

Tulsi Gabbard

Right.

Lex Fridman

Just bring that up every day at a meeting.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

Like, "What's the exit plan?" It's strange that that gets criticized, the war in Iraq and so on, but I just remember there's this pressure you can't quite criticize, or ask dumb questions about, "Wait, what? Why are we going into Iraq again?" Like -

Tulsi Gabbard

But they're not dumb questions.

Lex Fridman

Right. In retrospect, you're like, "Oh, they're not dumb questions at all," but actually required a lot of courage to ask them while still working within the institution. It's easier if you're an activist from the outside saying, "No war," this kind of stuff.

Tulsi Gabbard

Sure. Sure.

Lex Fridman

But within the institution, in the position of power, to ask the questions like, "Maybe let's not."

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

It seems really difficult, and the same kind of thing in the war in Ukraine and just any kind of military involvement. Again, I guess the cynical interpretation is that it's the military-industrial complex that permeates just the halls of power.

Tulsi Gabbard

It does, and what is behind the military-industrial complex? And there are different examples of this. You can look at the pharmaceutical industry as well. There's a huge amount of money and a huge amount of power that wields tremendous influence over members of Congress. There are different examples of this across different sectors of our society, but I think the military-industrial complex over time has proven itself to be the most powerful and influential, and that's what is behind it, is this is why they try to destroy anyone who dares to ask the most obvious questions is because it is about power and wielding power.

Lex Fridman

Well, the good thing about the United States presidents is they have the power to say F you to everybody in the room, I think.

Tulsi Gabbard

They do.

Lex Fridman

It just seems like they don't quite take that power. People say like, "Yeah, the U. S. President doesn't have that much power." I don't know about that. It's just like if you look at the law, especially in the military, when you're talking about war and the military, they have a lot of power.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

So they can fire everybody.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

They have a lot of power. They can stop wars, they can start wars. They have a lot of power.

Tulsi Gabbard

The position of the presidency certainly does. Unfortunately, we have people, too often, who assume the presidency from a position of weakness because they're afraid of losing power, and so they make those calculated decisions not based on what is right for the right reasons, but instead, driven by fear of loss of power and loss of influence, and that's where, especially given all that we are facing, we need leaders in the presidency and in Congress who have courage to be that voice in the room to ask about, to remain mindful of and rooted in the Constitution to, even as we are seeing this legislation being billed as the anti-TikTok bill, that's really not about TikTok, it's about freedom of speech.

Lex Fridman

Can you actually explain that bill?

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes. I guess the bottom line upfront is this is another piece of legislation being expedited through Congress with strong bipartisan support in the name of national security interests that is essentially a power grab and an assault on freedom and liberty. And I'll just say this in, I think, probably the top three things that they're not actually telling us that's in the bill. Freedom of speech, it's our ability to be able to express ourselves, whether it be in person, on a podcast, on a social media platform, in a newspaper, whatever the platform may be. This legislation gives the executive the power to decide which platforms are acceptable for

us to be able to use TikTok itself. The words, TikTok, is not actually in the bill, but it gives the power to the president to decide, "Who is a foreign adversary?," single-handedly, no consultation with or agreement from members of Congress or anyone else. It actually gives the power to a cabinet secretary to designate, "Who is a foreign adversary?," and if a social media platform has at least 20% ownership in a social media platform, that platform may be banned from doing business in America essentially, but it's not just a foreign state actor that could be named as a foreign adversary. It also includes a line in the legislation that if, let's say a person has at least 25% financial interest or ownership in a social media platform, they're an American citizen who may be working or living in some other country, or working or living here, but doing business with other countries. If the executive branch of our government decides that this individual is under the influence of, or controlled by someone that they deem a foreign adversary, then that platform must not do business in America, and that person obviously, even an American citizen, is banned from conducting that business. They must divest, essentially. So when you look at, and this is where there's been a lot of chatter around this, when you look at Elon Musk, for example, well, you already have people in the Biden administration, even President Biden himself, implying that Elon Musk's activities need to be investigated. Well, he is someone with Tesla who does business in a lot of countries, including China, and therefore, he must be investigated. It is not at all a stretch of imagination to say that X could be the next platform that the executive branch decides. Nope. We've designated this person to be a foreign adversary, and therefore, his business interest cannot be allowed for this social media platform, cannot be allowed to exist. We've seen this already with people accusing him and X of interfering in our elections. Again, it's ironic that it's coming from the Democratic party, that they are claiming that a guy who has set himself, he's committed to free speech and is allowing free speech on his platform, and is not allowing the federal government to manipulate his platform by deeming which accounts are okay to post their content and which accounts are not because of disinformation, or whatever they claim it to be, it's not an accident that the social media platforms that have been proven to take action at the behest of the federal government and the White House to censor certain voices, they're not included with or being targeted at all in this legislation or outside of it, yet, other platforms that are not cooperating or collaborating somehow are. So the underlying issue here, this is being sold as TikTok and national security, but ultimately, even as Ron Paul said, this is a legislation that's the greatest assault on liberty since the Patriot Act was passed.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's quite dark that it's just a grab of power.

Tulsi Gabbard

It is.

Lex Fridman

I mean – it's not just with Elon, it's probably with Zuck, with Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. It puts pressure. It's not just about banning, but it puts pressure for them to kind of moderate behavior, which is a slippery slope.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

Of course, it's a beautiful dance of power, because you don't want tech companies to have too much power either, or individuals at the top of those tech companies to have too much power, but then, do you want that power in the hands of government?

Tulsi Gabbard

No.

Lex Fridman

The history of this nation is a fascinatingly effective journey towards the balance of power, and it does seem like this sneaky, little thing, as much as I hate TikTok on all fronts. My brain rots every time I use TikTok. I know it is also the national security dangers of China and so on, but it's just like, "TikTok, man."

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

I just – I don't know, it's so addicting. It's so addicting. So when I first saw this TikTok bill, I was like, "Yes," on all fronts, but then they got me. The Trojan Horse got me. No –

Tulsi Gabbard

I mean – they all – and this is like "The Social Dilemma" documentary, I think exposed a lot, that there's so much that these algorithms do in these various social media platforms that's problematic to say the least. Data security and privacy is a serious issue. These are serious things, and so let's have a conversation about these serious things, and cease these attempts to have our government try to tell us what we are and aren't allowed to see, where we are and aren't allowed to say what we want to say. That's really what it comes down to.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, more and more trust people to, whenever social media companies do bullshitty things for the people to make documentaries about it, to discover, for great journalists to do great journalism, and find the flaws in the hypocrisy and the call for transparency, all those kinds

of things. I don't trust, in most cases, government regulation of technology companies because they seem to be really out of touch.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

One, they want power.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

They're really intimidated by the power that the tech companies have, and two, they don't seem to get at the technology at all. So they're hindering innovation, and they're just greedy for power, and those are not -

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah. It's a bad combination.

Lex Fridman

It's a bad combination.

Tulsi Gabbard

The thing here too, though, is this extends far beyond social media companies. This is a very specific example, but it's one example of many how those who are greedy for power are continuing to try to find ways to tell us how to live our lives. They're increasingly trying to tell us, again, what we're allowed to see and hear, whether it be social media companies, or what shows up in a Google Search engine, for example, and if they're not finding a willing and compliant social media company or big tech company, then they're looking for ways to reach their hand into those tech companies and force compliance, but in the age of disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, all of the excuses that are given for government, either directly or indirectly through big tech, to try to censor certain voices, it really undermines the truth, which is the way to defeat bad speech is with better speech and more speech. Whether it's hate speech or things that you might be offended by, or things that you might disagree with, the answer is not to have some entity with the power of censorship and being the "Authority" to decide what is good speech and acceptable, and what is bad speech and unacceptable. It's what you said, let's encourage this debate, and encourage people who are inspired by like, "No, man." "I saw this thing or this thing is happening, and it's pissing me off, so I'm going to bring a superior argument. I'm going to show what the right way is." And gosh, this is what our founders envisioned for us as a

society in this country, and we would be so much stronger with a more engaged people and a more informed people if we had this and had it supported.

Lex Fridman

Do you think - what are the chances that the TikTok ban bill passes?

Tulsi Gabbard

The way that it passed through the House of Representatives with such an overwhelming bipartisan support and so quickly, and President Biden saying that if it comes across his desk, he'll sign it, I thought it would pass through very quickly. I'm only slightly encouraged by the fact that the Senate, at least, appears to be saying, "Hey, there are serious free speech concerns around this bill, serious civil liberties concerns around this bill. We need to do our due diligence." I won't say I'm cautiously optimistic because I understand how that place works, but their pause at least gives people the opportunity to continue to kind of sound the alarm and for people to call their senators and express their concerns with this, that are very real, valid concerns.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, this is really messed up. Just, in case we didn't make it clear, I think this is really, really big danger if this thing passes. Even if you hate Elon Musk or your whatever, this is really, really, really dangerous. If the government gets a say over the platforms on which we communicate with each other, it's a huge problem.

Tulsi Gabbard

And there's a section in there as well, just kind of the last piece on this, is if you use a VPN, and you try to use a VPN to access this, you could have problems with the law, and you take that a step further and say, "Well, how would they know?" There's a surveillance aspect to that. So once you start peeling back the layers of this really toxic onion, it really leads seriously to a pretty dark, and dangerous, and oppressive place.

Lex Fridman

You were a long-time Democrat. You were the vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, until you resigned in 2016 to endorse Bernie. I should say I love Bernie. I loved him before he was cool, all right? Anyway, can you go through what happened in that situation, and with the Democratic National Committee and with Bernie, and why you resigned?

Tulsi Gabbard

As a vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, one of the things that the rules of the DNC required was that officers of the DNC, of which we were, as I think there were five or six of us who were vice chairs at the time, you have to remain neutral in a Democratic primary. So you're not as a party supposed to be tipping the scales in any direction for any

candidate during a primary election. And so I had no plans to get involved for any candidate or against any candidate during that primary, and just the hopes of like, "All right, we got to make sure that this is a fair and balanced primary so that voters have the best opportunity to vote for the candidate of their choosing." I saw a couple of things pretty quickly. Number one is that the chair of the DNC at the time was a woman named Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a congresswoman out of Florida, and she made very serious decisions unilaterally that many times, we found out about via tweet or press release that showed she was tilting the scales in the favor of Hillary Clinton in that 2016 primary. The other thing that I saw was how the mainstream media and those who are supposed to be in a position to be neutral arbiters to facilitate debates and forums and conversations so that voters can be best informed in who they want to vote for, were calling Hillary Clinton the most qualified person ever to run for president in the history of our country because of the positions that she had held as secretary of state, as a U. S. senator, as first lady, and yet, they glossed over those titles without ever holding her, asking questions even, or holding her to account for her record, especially in the area of foreign policy. The job she was running for was to be commander in chief, to be the president of the United States. That responsibility to serve as commander in chief is the foremost responsibility a president has. It's essentially the one area where the president can unilaterally make decisions without education, healthcare, immigration. Congress has to actually pass legislation. President can come through and say, "Hey, here's the policies that I want." "Here's legislation that I'll propose," but those changes can't be made without Congress, working with Congress to pass them. So she was essentially being let off the hook for her record, as an American, as a soldier, as a veteran. That was a big problem for me, and so I made the decision to resign as vice chair of the DNC so that I could endorse Bernie Sanders, who largely at heart, I believe is a non-interventionist. He hasn't focused a lot on foreign policy. It's not at the heart of what his focus has been for decades, but he was certainly far more of a non-interventionist than Hillary Clinton, who has shown through her record to be the queen of warmongers in Washington. I wanted to be in a position where I would have a platform to inform voters about her record so that they could make that decision for themselves, so that they could see, "Hey, in this area, on this issue, which is incredibly important, there is a clear contrast between these two candidates running in the Democratic primary," and that's what drove my decision to resign and to endorse Bernie Sanders, and that's what I went on to do throughout the rest of that primary election.

Lex Fridman

What do you like most about Bernie, the positive?

Tulsi Gabbard

You know, what I like most about him is he is who he is, unapologetically so, both in personality, but also in what he advocates for, and what he's advocated for for a long time. So you can agree or disagree with his positions, but he is who he is.

Lex Fridman

Like I said, you were a long-time Democrat. You ran for president in 2020 as a Democrat. Now, you're an independent, and you wrote an excellent book, describing your journey ideologically, philosophically through that. Why did you choose to leave the Democratic party?

Tulsi Gabbard

In the book, I go into a number of the central reasons why I made that choice, but fundamental to them is that the Democratic party has become a party that is opposed to freedom, that is opposed to the central and foundational principles that exist within our founding documents, and that serve as the identity of who we are as Americans and what this country is supposed to be about. It has become a party that is controlled by this elitist cabal of warmongers, who are driving forward this "Woke agenda," and we see it through their racializing of everything. We see this through their defund the police mission. We see this through their open border policies. We see this through how, in their education policy, they're failing our kids, and how they are pushing this narrative, that ultimately is a rejection of objective truth. The fact that it's a question up for debate about whether or not - well, actually, it's not a question up for debate for them. They are actively pushing - question up for debate for them. They are actively pushing for boys who identify as girls to compete against girls in sports, changing our language so that the word woman, the identity of being a woman is essentially being erased from our society and it is the height of hypocrisy and, frankly, an act of hatred towards women that they are so intent on doing this, and ironic that it's coming from the party that for so long proclaimed themselves to be the greatest feminists and the most pro-woman party in the country. I go into detail around each of these issues and more in the book. But you will see as we go through each of these issues, fundamental and foundational to every one of them is that, sadly, the Democratic Party has become a party that is so consumed by their desire for power, this insatiable hunger for power, that they are willing to destroy our republic, our democracy, our freedom, just so that they can try to hold on to power and gain more power.

Lex Fridman

So, these are just different mechanisms for power. The identity of -

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

- politics and the warmongering are related to each other in that they're mechanisms to attain more power.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

You're making it sound like only the Democratic Party are full of power-hungry people. So to you, the Republican Party, I don't know if you've met those folks, but some of them -

Tulsi Gabbard

A couple of them.

Lex Fridman

- are also in love with power and are -

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

At times - to some degree - politicians in general are corrupt, sometimes within the legal bonds, sometimes slightly outside of the legal bonds. And so, to you, to what degree is sort of the Democratic Party worse than the Republican Party? So I don't want to paint a picture of this beautiful vision of the Republican Party that -

Tulsi Gabbard

No.

Lex Fridman

- they're somehow not -

Tulsi Gabbard

That doesn't exist.

Lex Fridman

- power-hungry.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yeah. I'm glad you - I'm glad you brought this up. The book details why, after 20 or so years as a member of the Democratic Party, I decided to leave. But also - and it goes through my experiences and things that I have seen and learned along the way, but I also point out exactly that fact in the book. But from the very beginning what the prologue is we should not be naive to think that this only exists within the Democratic Party. There are very serious problems within both of our political parties, specifically coming from politicians who are driven by this desire for power and who are so afraid of losing that power that they're willing to do whatever they feel they need to do, which centers around taking away our freedom because the more free we are to make our own decisions, even if they may end up being the wrong decisions, but to learn from those things and know that we've got to live

with the consequences, the beauty and messiness of what a free society looks like. They're so afraid of us because they see us as the people and our freedom as the central threat to their ability to remain in power. I think the difference that we're seeing today is that, unfortunately, we talked about this a little bit how the Democratic Party has become a party where you must walk in lockstep with the leadership of that party or risk being faced with your reputation being destroyed and smeared and all of these different attacks. And the reason why they do that is to put people like me and Bobby Kennedy and others up as an example of saying, "Hey, if you step out of line, if you challenge us, this is what we're going to do to you." The Republican Party has also done that, and they also have politicians and leaders who are more interested in feeding the thriving system in the Washington establishment. But we are also seeing that the Republican Party also has some voices and, I would say, increasing voices of people. And I would put Donald Trump in this category who are challenging the, quote, unquote, norms of the Republican Party that are represented by people like Nikki Haley or Mike Pence, for example. The Republican Party is not a monolithic entity, and it means different things to different people. And that's where I think the real challenge in this next election is less - it's really less about one political party over another, and it's more about our opportunity as voters to select leaders - first of all, to fire those who are against freedom and who are warmongers, who, by their essence, are willing to take away our freedom in the name of national security and vote for people - nobody's perfect. We shouldn't hold anybody up on a pedestal, but vote for those who are committed to the Constitution and who hold those values that represent the interests of the people.

Lex Fridman

I am not a fan of this choice, but here we are, Biden versus Trump. So let me ask you sort of a challenging question of pros and cons. Can you give me pros and cons of each? What's the biggest strength and biggest limitation of, let's say, Biden?

Tulsi Gabbard

This is a tough question. I've known President Biden for a lot of years. I knew his son Beau, who served in the National Guard the same time that I did. I considered Joe Biden a friend. He's someone over the years that I've talked to and shared laughs with and spent time with in different situations. The positive characteristics that drew me to Joe Biden of the past, they are not represented in how he has led as president, and I'll let the pundits theorize as to how that is or why that is. But the truth that I know exists, which points to his weakness, is that instead of listening to his better angels, he has instead at every turn - if you go back and I look back to his inauguration speech where he promised to be a president for all Americans, and during his campaign, promised to be the uniter in chief, to bring a country together that was deeply divided. That's the Joe Biden that I've known for many years. A guy who has worked with different people with different backgrounds and different political views but tried to find at different points in time a way to work together. At every turn, he has done the exact opposite of what he spoke about during his inauguration speech and has left us as the American people today more divided, less secure, both from an economic

standpoint as well as a national security or safety and security standpoint, and less free as a society and as a people.

Lex Fridman

So the biggest criticism would be he divided us or continued the division that's been there. Who do you be the greatest uniter? To me, over the past few decades, to me, Obama. You've been very critical of Obama on the foreign policy side -

Tulsi Gabbard

Mmhmm.

Lex Fridman

- on many fronts. But to me, that guy did really good. Maybe some people say just rhetoric, but I think rhetoric matters in your president. I think he was out of all the presidents we had as probably the most effective uniter of the people. Would that be fair to say?

Tulsi Gabbard

During his 2008 campaign, yes. I think that his message resonated with so many people across generations and across different views, different backgrounds to where people cried on the night that he was elected because they felt so hopeful. I talked to people, and I know people who set aside their entire lives to work on his campaign to be a part of this hope and change mission that he laid out that would bring us together. Some of the people that I know personally, they gave up their lives during the campaign, and after he won, they went to Washington, DC, because they wanted to be able to do the work that they had that he had laid out and continue to be a part of this mission that they expected would extend beyond the campaign. And they've expressed to me personally how heartbroken they were because so quickly after he was elected, instead of bringing in a new generation of fresh leadership that was not a part of the Washington establishment, he instead immediately chose to surround himself with people who were more of the same old, same old. Who were essentially part of the problem. And many of his actions after that proved that fear and that brokenheartedness that they felt to be true. I'll mention one example related to civil liberties that we talked about. He was someone as a US senator who gave some pretty powerful speeches on the Senate floor about his concerns with the Patriot Act, his concerns with surveillance from the NSA, his concerns with a violation of our Fourth Amendment Rights and civil liberties. But when, as president, he was confronted with leaked information about this surveillance occurring under those authorities in his presidency, he sided - he took the side of the national security state and did not take action to right the wrongs that he correctly pointed out as senator and during his campaign for the presidency, which is unfortunate because he really did build this unifying momentum throughout his campaign.

Lex Fridman

What do you think that is? Why is it so hard as a president to kind of act on the promises of the campaign? But also just, I mean, his speech is basically anti-war speech that really resonated to me. The fact that he was against the war in Iraq early on.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes. And that was a huge point of distinction between him and Hillary Clinton.

Lex Fridman

Mmhmm.

Tulsi Gabbard

Probably one of the biggest.

Lex Fridman

Why is it so hard when you step into the office of President to sort of act on your ideals?

Tulsi Gabbard

I think it goes back to what we talked about a little bit, which is what are you driven by and what are you afraid of? And if you are concerned for whether or not you can get re-elected, who's going to fund that re-election effort? Who's going to fund the presidential library and your legacy that will follow? There have been some documented examples around how he promised to crack down on Big Pharma, but when push came to shove, his Department of Justice campaign funding was threatened, and they chose not to take action even when they had a very, very strong case to make. This was with regard to the opioid crisis in the country. And this just goes back to the heart of why it's so essential that we have leaders who have courage and who are focused on doing what we elect them to do.

Lex Fridman

And who are resistant to the love of money and power.

Tulsi Gabbard

Yes.

Lex Fridman

It's hard.

Tulsi Gabbard

And we are human. We are fallible. We are flawed by nature. And I'll go into kind of the next one you asked about Trump.

Lex Fridman

Mmhmm.

Tulsi Gabbard

The weakness side and the lessons that I hope have been learned from 2016 for him and his team is you have to be in a position where you are surrounding yourselves with other people of courage who aren't just thinking about their next political job or their next job getting a cable news contract or looking for fame themselves or looking at how they can monetize their position for their - whatever their next financial interest might be. But people of courage who know what they're up against to really seriously clean house across the federal government and the corruption and rot that is so deeply entrenched in order to truly be effective. And if he is re-elected, that is my hope that that he sees - he's learned from what went wrong in 2016. That he went in with a largely non-interventionist, more focused on peace agenda, and yet he surrounded himself with people who are at the heart of the warmongers in Washington and who directly went against the policies that he advocated for. On the strength side, I think it's easy to point out because it's also what has caused him to be so attacked in ways that we haven't seen before. Certainly not in my lifetime by the Democrats, by the Biden administration, not only now, but something that started back in 2016 when he was a candidate. He's a guy who, by all measures, has been successful in his own life, and because of that, he's not coming in with this desire to please Washington that many other politicians have. And because he is so willing to challenge the, quote, unquote, norms, and these are not norms that serve the interests of the American people. These are norms that serve the interests of the most powerful, he's a direct threat. And so that attitude and that mindset of not coming in with the kind of caution that too many politicians come in with of wanting to be the popular one at the parties or whatever it is that they want, that is the strength that he brings.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, I just had a conversation with Dana White, and he's good friends with Trump, and he talks to the fact that he seems to be resistant to the attacks. Some aspect of that is just the psychology of being able to withstand their attacks that are there in the political game, and that can break people. You just don't want the headaches. So to withstand the attacks is tough, and something about his psychology allows for that. I mean, I guess a question for you also in your own psychology, you've been attacked quite a bit. We've mentioned some of that sort of misrepresentations, and how do you deal with that by yourself? How do you not become cynical or overcompensate the other direction, that kind of stuff?

Tulsi Gabbard

It really stems from having a clear sense of purpose. I never saw - I've served in state government, I've served on our city council in Honolulu and served in Congress, but at no time have I seen this as a, quote, unquote, political career. I don't have that ladder-climbing ambition that a lot of politicians have. My sense of purpose is deeply rooted in my

dedication and my desire in my life to be pleasing to God and to live a life of service. And what better way to be pleasing to God than to try to do my best to work for the well-being of God's children? Being rooted in that has made it so that, as the attacks are coming from different directions, even as people who I was friends with, former colleagues of mine, others, even family members, even as they have turned away or become attackers against me themselves because of different reasons related to politics, of course, it's a sad thing, especially when it's someone that personally and have had a personal friendship or relationship with. But I don't live my life trying to please politicians or please the people who show up on TV or anyone else. As long as I am doing my best to be pleasing to God, that is where I draw my happiness from and my fulfillment and contentment and strength.

Lex Fridman

So you've spoken about the value of religious faith in your life, of your Hindu faith, and seeing the Bhagavad Gita as a spiritual guide. So what role does faith in God play in your life?

Tulsi Gabbard

It's everything. It is central to who I am, what inspires me, what motivates me, where I find strength, where I find peace, where I find shelter, and where I find happiness. And this has been a constant throughout times of challenge, times of darkness, times of heartbreak, times of happiness, in always feeling very secure in knowing that God's unconditional love is ever present, and no matter what else is happening in my life, that God is my best friend. And remaining centered and grounded in always remembering that and meditating upon that truth is it's everything to me.

Lex Fridman

The interesting thing about the Hindu God is how welcoming the religion is of other religions. Just -

Tulsi Gabbard

It's true.

Lex Fridman

- how accepting it is. So in that way, in many ways, it's one of the most beautiful religions on earth. So, who do you think God is to you - in specifically the texts - but also you personally? What does he represent? So for Hinduism, it's also God can be many - there's also a aspect where there's a - it's like a part of all of us. There's a uniting thing - not a singular figure outside of us.

Tulsi Gabbard

I think one of the things that's most commonly misunderstood about Hinduism that people don't know is that Hinduism is truly a monotheistic religion. That there is one God, and He

goes by many names that describe His different qualities and characteristics. And as you pointed out, Hinduism is uniquely of a non-sectarian spiritual practice, essentially. It's not a, quote, unquote, religion that you convert into, or you leave behind, or whatever the case may be. Bhagavad Gita, a central scripture and text that comes from India, literally means Song of God. And the principles that are conveyed throughout the Bhagavad Gita are applicable to all of us. They are timeless truths that - whether you consider yourself Christian, or Catholic, or Muslim, or Jewish, or Hindu. These truths are eternal and relevant through all time. So for us as kids growing up, we learned from and had bedtime stories that came from both the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament. My dad was raised Catholic, my mom was raised Episcopalian, and both of them were attracted to the Bhagavad Gita as they were in their own lives searching for a more personal relationship with God than they had been able to find elsewhere in their own spiritual journeys. And that's where the application of - There're teachings in the Bhagavad Gita, for example, that talk about Bhakti Yoga. Bhakti Yoga essentially translates into dedicating your life, striving to develop a loving relationship with God. Karma Yoga. There's a chapter in the Bhagavad Gita that speaks about Karma Yoga. Karma is a word that has become a part of the - both karma and yoga have become very common terms, but what it really means is trying to dedicate your actions in life that have - in a way that have a positive impact on others, being of service to others. And so for me, growing up, I never really understood as kid the idea of sectarianism of one religion battling against another because I knew and understood and experienced that the real meaning of religion was love for God. No matter what name you worship Him by or how you worship that is the real meaning of religion. And the application of that in your life is you ask, "How do I see God in a personal way?" I see - I know that God is my best friend. God is my confidant. When I am struggling with a problem in my life or during those quiet moments by myself where I am anxious or I'm sad, I turn to God for that solace, for that clarity, for that strength to both know what the right thing to do is and the strength to act accordingly and to constantly strive to further develop that very personal loving relationship with God.

Lex Fridman

Tulsi, this was an honor to finally meet you - to talk to you. This was amazing. Thank you.

Tulsi Gabbard

Thank you, Lex. It's so wonderful to be here. Thank you for the opportunity.

Lex Fridman

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Tulsi Gabbard. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, let me leave you with some words from Dwight D. Eisenhower in his 1961 final address: "A vital element in keeping the peace is our military establishment. Our arms must be might, ready for instant action, so that no potential aggressor may be tempted to risk his own destruction. American makers of plowshares could, with time and as required, make swords as well. But now we can no

longer risk emergency improvisation of national defense; we have been compelled to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions. This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.