

Lex Fridman Podcast #454 - Saagar Enjeti: Trump, MAGA, DOGE, Obama, FDR, JFK,

History & Politics

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Lex Fridman

The following is a conversation with Saagar Enjeti, his second time in the podcast. Saagar is a political commentator, journalist, co-host of Breaking Points with Krystal Ball and of The Realignment podcast with Marshall Kosloff. Saagar is one of the most well-read people I've ever met. His love of history and the wisdom gained from reading thousands of history books radiates through every analysis he makes of the world. In this podcast, we trace out the history of the various ideological movements that led up to the current political moment. In doing so, we mention a large number of amazing books. We'll put a link to them in the description for those interested to learn more about each topic. This is the Lex Friedman podcast. To support it, please check out our sponsors in the description. And now, dear friends, here's Saagar Enjeti. So let's start with the obvious big question, why do you think Trump won? Let's break it down. Before the election, you said that if Trump wins, it's going to be because of immigration. So aside from immigration, what are the maybe less than obvious reasons that Trump won?

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, we absolutely need to return to immigration, but without that multifaceted explanation, let's start with the easiest one. There has been a wave of anti-incumbent energy around the world. The Financial Times chart recently went viral showing, so the first time, I think since World War II, possibly since 1905, I need to look at the data set, that all anti-incumbent parties all across the world suffered major defeats. So that's a very, very high level analysis, and we can return to that if we talk about Donald Trump's victory in 2016 because there were similar global precursors. The individual level in the United States, there's a very simple explanation as well, which is that Joe Biden was very old, he was very unpopular, inflation was high. Inflation is one of the highest determiners of people switching their votes and of putting their primacy on that ahead of any other issue at the ballot box. So that's that. But I think it's actually much deeper, at a psychological level, for who America is and what it is. And fundamentally, I think what we're going to spend a lot of time talking about today is the evolution of the modern left and its collapse in the Kamala Harris candidacy, and eventually, the loss to Donald Trump in the popular vote where, really, is like an apotheosis of several social forces. So we're going to talk about The Great Awakening or so-called Awokening, which is very important to understanding all of this. There's also really Donald Trump himself who is really one of the most unique individual American politicians that we've seen in decades. At this point, Donald Trump's victory makes him the most important and transformative figure in American politics since FDR. And a thought process for the audience is in 2028, there will be an 18-year-old who's eligible to vote who cannot remember a time when Donald J. Trump was not the central American figure. And there's stories in World War II where troops were on the front line, some were 18, 19 years old, FDR died, and they literally said, "Well, who's the president?" And they said, "Harry Truman, you dumb ass." And they go, "Who?" They couldn't conceive of a universe where FDR was not the president of the United States. And Donald Trump, even during the Biden administration, he was the figure. Joe Biden defined his entire candidacy and his

legacy around defeating this man, and obviously, he's failed. We should talk a lot about Joe Biden as well for his own failed theories of the presidency. So I think at a macro level, it's easy to understand. At a basic level, inflation, it's easy to understand. But what I really hope that a lot of people can take away is how fundamentally unique Donald Trump is as a political figure and what he was able to do to realign American politics really forever. In the white working class realignment originally of 2016, the activation, really, of a multiracial kind of working class coalition and of really splitting American lines along a single individual question of did you attend a four-year college degree institution or not? And this is a crazy thing to say, Donald Trump is one of the most racially depolarizing electoral figures in American history. We lived in 2016 at a time when racial groups really voted in blocks, Latinos, Blacks, whites. There was some, of course, division between the white working class and the white college educated, white collar workers. But by and large, you could pretty fairly say that Asians, Indians, everyone, 80, 90% were going to vote for the Democratic Party, Latinos as well. I'm born here in the state of Texas. George W. Bush shocked people when he won some 40% of the Latino vote. Donald Trump just beat Kamala Harris with Latino men and he ran up the table for young men. So really, fundamentally, we have witnessed a full realignment in American politics, and that's a really fundamental problem for the modern left. It's erased a lot of the conversation around gerrymandering, around the Electoral College, the so-called Electoral College bias towards Republicans. Really, being able to win the popular vote for the first time since 2004 is shocking and landmark achievement by a Republican. In 2008, I have a book on my shelf and I always look at it to remind myself of how much things can change, James Carville, and it says 40 More Years, How Democrats Will Never Lose An Election Again. 2008, they wrote that book after the Obama coalition and the landslide. And something I love so much about this country, people change their minds all the time. I was born in 1992, I watched red states go blue. I've seen blue states go red. I've seen swing states go red or blue. I've seen millions of people pick up and move, the greatest internal migration in the United States since World War II. And it's really inspiring because it's a really dynamic, interesting place. And I love covering it and I love thinking about it, talking about it, talking to people. It's awesome.

Lex Fridman

One of the reasons I'm a big fan of yours is you're a student of history, and so, you've recommended a bunch of books to me. And they and others thread the different movements throughout American history. Some movements take off and do hold power for a long time, some don't. And some are started by a small number of people and are controlled by a small number of people, some are mass movements. And it's just fascinating to watch how those movements evolve, and then, fit themselves, maybe, into the constraints of a two-party system. And I'd love to talk about the various perspectives of that. So would it be fair to say that this election was turned into a kind of class struggle?

Saagar Enjeti

Well, I won't go that far because to say it's a class struggle really implies that things fundamentally align on economic lines, and I don't think that's necessarily accurate. Although, if that's your lens, you could get there. So there's a very big statistic going around right now where Kamala Harris increased her vote share and won households over \$100,000 or more, and Donald Trump won households under 100,000. You could view that in an economic lens. The problem again that I have is that that is much more a proxy for four-year college degree and for education. And so, one of my favorite books is called *Coming Apart* by Charles Murray. And that book, really, really underscores how the cultural milieu that people swim in when they attend a four-year college degree and the trajectory of their life, not only on where they move to, who they marry, what type of grocery store they go to, their cultural, what television shows that they watch. One of my favorite questions from Charles Murray's is called a Bubble Quiz. I encourage people to go take it by the way. It asks you a question. It's like what does the word Branson mean to you? And it has a couple of answers. One of them is Branson is Sir Richard Branson. Number two is Branson, Missouri, which is like a country music tourist style destination. Three is, it means nothing. So you are less in a bubble if you say country music. And you're very much in the bubble if you say Richard Branson. And I remember taking that test for the first time, I go, "Obviously, Sir Richard Branson, Virgin Atlantic. Like what?" And then, I was like, "Wait." I'm like, "I'm in the bubble." And there are other things in there like can you name various different military ranks? I can because I'm a history nerd, but the vast majority of college educated people don't know anybody who served in the United States military, they don't have family members who do... The most popular shows in America are like *The Big Bang Theory* and *NCIS*, whereas people in our, probably, cultural milieu, our favorite shows are *White Lotus*, *The Last of Us*, this is prestige television with a very small audience, but high income, high education. So the point is that culture really defines who we are as Americans, where we live. And rural, urban is one way to describe it, but honestly, with the work from home revolution and more rich people and highly educated people moving to more rural suburban or areas they traditionally weren't able to commute in, that's changing. And so, really, the internet is everything. The stuff that you consume on the internet, the stuff that you spend your time doing, type of books you read, whether you read a book at all, frankly, whether you travel to Europe, whether you have a passport, all the things that you value in your life, that is the real cultural divide in America. And I actually think that's what this revolution of Donald Trump was activating and bringing people to the polls, bringing a lot of those traditional working class voters of all races away from the Democratic Party along the lines of elitism, of sneering, and of a general cultural feeling that these people don't understand me and my struggles in this life.

Lex Fridman

And so, the trivial formulation is the woke-ism and the anti woke-ism a movement?

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

So it's not necessarily that Trump winning was a statement against woke-ism, it was the broader anti-elitism?

Saagar Enjeti

It's difficult to say because I wouldn't dismiss anti woke-ism or woke-ism as an explanation. But we need to understand the electoral impacts of woke. So there's varying degrees of how you're going to encounter, quote-unquote, "woke-ism," and this is a very difficult thing to define. So let me just try and break it down, which is there are the types of things that you're going to interact with on a cultural basis. And what I mean by that is going to watch a TV show, and just for some reason, there's like two trans characters. And it's never particularly explained why, they just are there. Or watching a commercial, and it's the same thing. Watching, I don't know, I remember I was watching, I think it was Dr. Strange in the Multiverse of Madness. It was a terrible movie, by the way. Don't recommend it. But one of the characters, I think her name was like America and she wore a gay pride flag. Look, many left-wingers would make fun of me for saying these things, but that is obviously a social agenda to the point as in they believe it is deeply acceptable that it's used by Hollywood and cultural elites who really value those progress in sexual orientation and others and really believe it's important to, quote-unquote, "showcase it for representation." So that's one way that we may encounter, quote-unquote, woke-ism. But the more important ways, frankly, are the ways that affirmative action, which really has its roots in American society all the way going back to the 1960s, and how those have manifested in our economy and in our understanding of, quote-unquote, "discrimination." So two books I can recommend, one is called The Origins of Woke, that's by Richard Hanania. There's another one, The Age of Entitlement, by Christopher Caldwell. And they make a very strong case, Caldwell in particular, he calls it like a new founding of America, was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because it created an entire new legal regime and understanding of race in the American character and how the government was going to enforce that. And that really ties in with another one of the books that I recommended to you about the origins of Trump by Jim Webb. And Senator Jim Webb, incredible, incredible man. He's so under-appreciated. Intellectual. He was anti-war. And people may remember him from the 2016 primary and they had asked him a question, I don't exactly remember, about one of his enemies, and he's like, "Well, one of them was a guy I shot in Vietnam." And he was running against Hillary. And that guy, he wrote the book, Born Fighting, I think it's the history of the Scots-Irish people, something like that. And that book really opened my eyes to the way that affirmative action and racial preferences that were playing out through the HR, managerial elite really turned a lot of people within the white working class away from the Democratic Party and felt fundamentally discriminated against by the professional, managerial class. So there's a lot of roots to this, The Managerial Revolution by James Burnham. And in terms of the origin of

how we got here, but the crystallization of DEI and/or affirmative action, I prefer to use the term affirmative action, in the highest echelons of business. And there became this idea that representation itself was the only thing that mattered. And I think that right around 2014, that really went on steroids, and that's why it's not an accident that Donald J. Trump was elected in 2016.

Lex Fridman

At this point, do you think this election is the kind of statement that woke-ism as a movement is dead?

Saagar Enjeti

I don't know. It's very difficult to say because woke-ism itself is not a movement with a party leader, it's an amorphous belief that has worked its way through institutions now for almost 40 or 50 years. It's effectively a religion. And part of the reason why it's difficult to define is it means different things to different people. So for example, there are varying degrees of how we would define, quote-unquote, "woke." Do I think that the Democrats will be speaking in so-called academic language? Yes, I do think they will. I think that the next Democratic nominee will not do that. However, Kamala Harris actually did move as much as she could away from, quote-unquote, "woke," but she basically was punished for a lot of the sins of both herself from 2019, but a general cultural feeling that her and the people around her do not understand me and not only do not understand me, but have racial preferences or a regime or an understanding that would lead to a, quote-unquote, "equity mindset," equal outcomes for everybody as opposed to equality of opportunity, which is more of a colorblind philosophy. So I can't say, I think it's way too early. And again, you can not use the word Latinx, but do you still believe in an effective affirmative action regime in terms of how you would run your Department of Justice, in terms of how you view the world, in terms of what you think the real dividing lines in America are? Because I would say that's still actually kind of a woke mindset, and that's part of the reason why the term itself doesn't really mean a whole lot. And we have to get, actually, really specific about what it looks like in operations. In operation, it means affirmative action, it means the NASDAQ passing some law that if you want to go public or something, that you have to have a woman and a person of color on your board. This is a blatant and extraordinary, look, racialism that they've enshrined in their bylaws. So you can get rid of ESG, that's great, you can get rid of DEI, I think that's great, but it's really about a mindset and a view of the world, and I don't think that's going anywhere.

Lex Fridman

And you think the reason it doesn't work well in practice is because there's a big degree to which it's anti-meritocracy.

Saagar Enjeti

It's anti-American, really. DEI and woke and affirmative action make perfect sense in a lot of different countries. And there are a lot of countries out there that are multi-ethnic and they're heterogeneous and they are run by, basically, quasi-dictators. And the way it works is that you pay off the Christians and they pay off the Muslims and they get this guy and they get that guy and everybody kind of shakes... It's very explicit where they're like, we have 10 spots and they go to the Christians, we have 10 spots, and they go to the Hindus. India's a country that I know pretty well, and this does kind of work like that on state politics level in some respect. But in America, fundamentally, we really believe that, no matter where you are from, that you come here, and basically, within a generation, especially if you migrate here legally and you integrate, that you leave a lot of that stuff behind. And the story, the American dream that is ingrained in so many of us is, one, that really does not mesh well with any sort of racial preference regime or anything that's not meritocratic. And I will give the left-wingers some credit in the idea that meritocracy itself could have preference for people who have privileged backgrounds, I think that's true. And so, the way I would like to see it is to increase everybody's equality of opportunity to make sure that they all have a chance at, quote-unquote, "willing out the American dream." But that doesn't erase meritocracy, hard work, and many of the other things that we associate with the American character, with the American frontier. So these are two ideologies which are really at odds. In a lot of ways, woke-ism, racialism and all this is a third world ideology. It's one that's very prevalent in Europe and all across Asia, but it doesn't mix well here, and it shouldn't. And I'm really glad that America feels the same way.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, I got to go back to Jim Webb in that book. What a badass, fascinating book.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh my God, it's amazing.

Lex Fridman

Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America. So I did not realize to the degree, first of all how badass the Scots-Irish are. And that to the degree, many of the things that kind of identify as American and part of the American spirit were defined by this relatively small group of people as he describes the motto could be summarized as fight, sing, drink and pray. So there's the principles of fierce individualism, the principles of a deep distrust of government, the elites, the authorities, bottom-up governance, over 2,000 years of a military tradition. They made up 40% of the Revolutionary War Army and produced numerous military leaders including Stonewall Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, George S. Patton, and a bunch of presidents, some of the more gangster presidents, Andrew Jackson, Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton. Just the whole cultural legacy of country music.

Saagar Enjeti

We owe them so much and they really don't get their due unfortunately – a lot for the reasons that I just described around racialism is because post-mass immigration from Europe, the term white kind of became a blanket applied to new Irish, to Italians, to Slovenians. And as you and I both know, if you travel to those countries, people are pretty different. And it's not that different here in the United States. Scots-Irish were some of the original settlers here in America, and particularly in Appalachia. And their contribution to the fighting spirit and their own culture and who we are as individualists and some of the first people to ever settle the frontier. And that frontier mindset really does come from them. We owe them just as much as we do the Puritans, but they don't ever really get their due. And the reason I recommend that book is if you read that book and you understand then how exactly could this group of white working class voters go from 2012 voting for a man named Barack Hussein Obama to Donald J. Trump? It makes perfect sense if you combine it with a lot of the stuff I'm talking about here, about affirmative action, about distrust of the elites, about feeling as if institutions are not seeing through to you and specifically also not valuing your contribution to American history, and in some cases actively looking down. I'm glad you pointed out not only their role in the Revolutionary War, but in the Civil War as well, and just how much of a contribution culturally really that we owe them for the groundwork that so many of us who came later could build upon and adopt some of their own ideas and their culture as our own. It's one of the things that makes America great.

Lex Fridman

Mark Twain.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

So much of the culture, so much of the American spirit, the whole idea, the whole shape and form and type of populism that represents our democracy. So would you trace that fierce individualism that we think of back to them?

Saagar Enjeti

Definitely. It's a huge part of them, about who they were, about the screw you attitude. That book actually kind of had a renaissance back in 2016 when Hillbilly Elegy came out. I'm sure you remember this, which it's kind of weird to think that it's now the Vice President-elect of the United States. It's kind of wild, honestly, to think about. But JD Vance's book, Hillbilly Elegy, I think was really important for a lot of American elites who were like, "How do these poor people support Trump? Where does this shit come from?" Really, if you really think back to that time, it was shocking to the elite character that any person in the world could ever vote for Donald Trump. And not just vote, he won the election. How does that happen?

And that's Hillbilly Elegy guided people in an understanding of what that's like on a lived day-to-day basis. And JD, to his credit, talks about Scots-Irish heritage, about Appalachia and the legacy of what that culture looks like today and how a lot of these people voted for Donald Trump. But we got to give credit to Jim Webb who wrote the history of these people and taught me and you about their original fight against the oppressors in Scotland and Ireland and their militant spirit and how they were able to bring that over here. And they got their due in Andrew Jackson and some of our other populist presidents who set us up on the road to Donald Trump to where we are today.

Lex Fridman

Dude, it got me pumped and excited to be an American.

Saagar Enjeti

Me too. I love that book.

Lex Fridman

It's crazy that JD, the same guy, because that's Hillbilly Elegy's, what I kind of thought of him as.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, I'll tell you, for me, it's actually pretty surreal. I met JD Vance in 2017 in a bar. I didn't ever think he would be the Vice President-elect of the United States. Just kind of wild. One of my friends went back and dug up the email that we originally sent him, just like, "Hey, do you want to meet up?" And he was like, "Sure." I was watching on television. The first time that it really hit me, I was like, whoa. It was like, name in a history book is whenever he became the vice presidential nominee. I was watching him on TV and the confetti was falling and he was waving with his wife, and I was like, "Wow, that's it." You're in the history books now forever, especially now as the literal Vice President-elect of the US. But his own evolution is actually a fascinating story for us too because I think a lot of the time I've spent right now is a lot of what I'm giving right now are 2016 kind of takes about why Trump won that time. But we just spent a lot of time on how Donald Trump won this election and what happened, some of the failures of the Biden administration, some of the payback for the Great Awakening. But also, if you look at the evolution of JD Vance, this is a person who wrote Hillbilly Elegy. And not a lot of people pay attention to this, but if you read Hillbilly Elegy, JD was much more of a traditional conservative at that time. He was citing a report, I think the famous passage is about payday loans and why they're good or something like that. I don't know his position today, but I would assume that he's probably changed that. But the point is that his ideological evolution from watching somebody who really was more of a traditional Republican with a deep empathy for the white working class than eventually become a champion and a disciple of Donald Trump, and to believe that he himself was the vehicle for accomplishing and bettering the United States, but specifically for working class Americans really of all stripes. And that story is really one of the rise of the modern left as it

exists as a political project, as an ideology. It's also one of the Republican Party which coalesced now with Donald Trump as a legitimate figure and as the single bulwark against cultural leftism and elitism that eventually was normalized to the point that majority of Americans decided to vote for him in 2024.

Lex Fridman

So let's talk about 2024. What happened with the left? What happened with Biden? What's your take on Biden?

Saagar Enjeti

Biden is, I try to remove myself from it, and I try not to give big history takes while you're in the moment. But it's really hard not to say that he's one of the worst presidents in modern history. And I think the reason why I'm going to go with it is because I want to judge him by the things that he set out to do. So Joe Biden has been the same person for his entire political career. He is a basically C student who thinks he's an A student. The chip on his shoulder against the elites has played to his benefit in his original election to the United States Senate through his entire career as a United States Senator, where he always wanted to be the star and the center of attention and to his 1988 presidential campaign. And one of the most fascinating things about Biden and watching him age is watching him become even more of what he already was. And so, a book recommendation, it's called *What It Takes*, and it was written in 1988, and there's actually a long chapter on Joe Biden and about the plagiarism scandal. One of the things that comes across is his sheer arrogance and belief in himself as to why he should be the center of attention. Now, the reason I'm laying all this out is the arrogance of Joe Biden, the individual and his character is fundamentally the reason that his presidency went awry. This is a person who was elected in 2020, really because of a feeling of chaos of Donald Trump, of we need normalcy, decides to come into the office, portrays himself as a, quote-unquote, "transitional president," slowly begins to lose a lot of his faculties and then surrounds himself with sycophants, the same ones who have been around him for so long that he had no single input into his life to tell him that he needed to stop and he needed to drop out of the race until it became truly undeniable to the vast majority of the American people. And that's why I'm trying to keep it as him as an individual, as a president, because we could separate him from some of his accomplishments and the things that happened on... Some of them I support, some I don't, but generally, a lot of people are not going to look back and think about Joe Biden and the CHIPS Act. A lot of people are not going to look back and think about Joe Biden and the Build Back Better bill or whatever his Lina Khan antitrust policy. They're going to look back on him and they're going to remember high inflation. They're going to remember somebody who fundamentally never was up to the job in the sense that, again, book recommendation *Freedom From Fear* by David Kennedy is about the Roosevelt years. And one of the most important things people don't understand is the New Deal didn't really work in the way that a lot of people wanted it to. There was still high unemployment, there was still a lot of suffering, but you know what changed? They felt that they had a

vigorous commander in chief who was doing everything in his power to attack the problems of the everyday American. So even though things didn't even materially change, the vigor, that's a term that was often associated with John F. Kennedy, he had vigor, in the Massachusetts accent. We had this young vibrant president in 1960, and he was running around and he wanted to convince us that he was working every single day tirelessly. And when you have an 80-year-old man who is simply just eating ice cream and going to the beach while people's grocery prices and all these things go up- ... cream and going to the beach while people's grocery prices and all this thing go up by 25%. And we don't see the same vigor, we don't see the same action, the biased action, which is so important in the modern presidency. That is fundamentally part of the reason why the Democrats lost the election and also why I think that he missed his moment in such a dramatic way. And he had the opportunity, he could have done it if he wanted to, but maybe 20 years ago. But the truth is that his own narcissism, his own misplaced belief in himself and his own accidental rise to the presidency ended up in his downfall. And it's amazing because again, if we look back to his original campaign speech 2019, why I'm running for president, it was Charlottesville, and he said, "I want to defeat Donald Trump forever and I want to make sure that he never gets back in the White House again." By his own metric he did fail. It was the only thing he wanted to do, and he failed from.

Lex Fridman

You said a lot of interesting stuff. One, FDR, that's really interesting. It's not about the specific policy, it's about fighting for the people and doing that with charisma and just uniting the entire country for a... This is the same with Bernie. Maybe there's a lot of people that disagree with Bernie that's still supporting him because we just want somebody-

Saagar Enjeti

Feels authentic.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

That's it.

Lex Fridman

We just want somebody to fight authentically for us.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, yes. FDR people really... FDR was like a king. He was like Jesus Christ in the US. And some of it was because of what he did, but it was just the fight. People need to go back and read the history of the first 100 days under FDR, the sheer amount of legislation that went through, his ability to bring Congress to heel and the Senate. He gets all this stuff through.

But as you and I know, legislation takes a long time to put into place. We've had people starving on the streets all throughout 1933 under Hoover. The difference was Hoover was seen as this do nothing joke who would dine nine course meals in the White House, and he was a filthy rich banker. FDR comes in there and every single day has fireside chats. He's passing legislation, but more importantly, so he tries various different programs. Then they get ruled unconstitutional. He tries even more. What does America take away from that? Every single time if he gets knocked down, he comes back fighting. And that was a really part of his character that he developed after he got polio. And it gave him the strength to persevere through personally what he could transfer in his calm demeanor and his feeling of fight that America really got that spirit from him and was able to climb itself out of the Great Depression. He's such an inspirational figure. He really is. And people think of him for World War II, of course, we can spend forever on that. But in my opinion, the early years are not studied enough. 33 to 37 is one of the most remarkable periods in American history. We were not ruled by a president. We were ruled by a king, by a monarch. And people liked it. He was a dictator and he was a good one.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. To push back against the implied thing that you said.

Saagar Enjeti

Sure.

Lex Fridman

When saying Biden is the worst president-

Saagar Enjeti

No second worst in modern history, that's what I said.

Lex Fridman

Second in modern history. Who's the worst?

Saagar Enjeti

W, no question.

Lex Fridman

I see. Because of the horrible wars probably.

Saagar Enjeti

I mean, Iraq is just so bad.

Lex Fridman

It's just a mess. Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

One of my favorite authors is a guy, Jean Edward Smith. He's written a bunch of presidential biographies. And in the opening of his W Biography, he's like, "There's just no question. This is a single worst foreign policy mistake in all of American history. And W is one of our worst presidents ever." He had terrible judgment and it got us into a war of his own choosing. It was a disaster, and it set us up for failure. By the way, we talked a lot about Donald Trump. Nobody is more responsible for the rise of Donald Trump than George W. Bush, but I could go off on Bush for a long time.

Lex Fridman

Oh, we will. We'll return there. As part of the pushback I'd like to say, because I agree with your criticism of arrogance and narcissism against Joe Biden. The same could be said about Donald Trump.

Saagar Enjeti

You're absolutely right.

Lex Fridman

Of arrogance. And I think you've also articulated that a lot of presidents throughout American history have suffered from a bad case of arrogance and narcissism.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely. But sometimes for a benefit. You have to be a pretty crazy person to want to be president. I had put out a tweet that got some controversy, and I think it was Joe Rogan, who I love, but he was like, "I want to find out who Kamala Harris is as a human being." And I was like, "I'm actually not interested in who politicians are as human beings at all." I was like, "I've read too much about them to know, I know who you are." If you spend your life and because I live in Washington and I spend a lot of time around would-be politicians, I know what it takes to actually become the president. It's crazy. You have to give up everything, everything. Every night, you're not spending it with your wife. You're spending it at dinner with potential donors, with friends, with people who can connect you. Even after you get elected, that's even more so now you got to raise money and now you're onto the next thing. Now you want to get your political thing through. You're going to spend all your time on your phone. You and your staff are going to be more like this. Your entire life revolves around your career. Honestly, you need an insane level of narcissism to do it because you have to believe that you are better than everybody else, which is already pretty crazy. And not only that, your own personal characteristics and foibles lead you to the pursuit of this office and to the pursuit of the idolatry of the self and everything around you. There's a famous story of Lady Bird Johnson after Johnson becomes the president and he's talking to the White House Butler. She was like, "Everything in this house revolves around my husband. Whatever's left goes to the girls," her two children, "And I'll take the scraps." Everything revolved around Johnson's political career and his daughters, when they're honest, because

they like to paper over some of the things that happened under him, but they didn't spend any time with him. Saturday morning was for breakfast with Richard Russell, I forget. These are all in the Robert A. Caro books. Sunday was for Rayburn. There was no time for his kids. That's what it was. And by the way, he's one of the greatest politicians to ever live. But he also died from a massive heart attack and he was a deeply sad and depressed individual.

Lex Fridman

I saw that tweet, to go back to that. And also I listened to your incredible debate about it with Marshall on the Realignment podcast. And I have to side with Marshall. I think you're just wrong on this.

Saagar Enjeti

All right.

Lex Fridman

Because I think revealing the character of a person is really important to understand how they will act in a room full of generals and full of-

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, this gets to the judgment question.

Lex Fridman

The judgment.

Saagar Enjeti

And that's, I think of Johnson and of Nixon, of Teddy Roosevelt, even of FDR. I can give you a laundry list of personal problems that all those people had. I think they had really, really good judgment. And I'm not sure how intrinsic their own personal character was to their exploration and thinking about the world. JFK is actually, JFK might be our best example because he had the best judgment out of anybody in a room as a brand new president in the Cuban Missile crisis. And he got us out and avoided nuclear war, which he deserves eternal credit for that. But how did he arrive at good judgment? Some of it certainly was his character, and we can go again though into his laundry list of that. But most of it was around being with his father, seeing some of the mistakes that he would make. And he was also had a deeply inquisitive mind and he experienced World War II at the personal level after PT 109. Look, I get it. I actually could steal, man. The response to what I'm saying is judgment is not divisible from personal character, but just because I know a lot of politicians and I've read enough with the really great ones, the people who I revere the most, there's really bad personal stuff basically every single time.

Lex Fridman

But you're saying the judgment was good?

Saagar Enjeti

His judgment was great. His judgment-

Lex Fridman

On the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes.

Lex Fridman

Some of the best judgment and decision-making in the history of America.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, and we should study a lot of it. And I encourage people out there, this is a brutal text. We were forced to read it in graduate school, the *Essence of Decision* by Graham Allison. I'm so thankful we did. It's one of the foundations of political science because it lays out theories of how government works. This is also a useful transition, by the way, if we want to talk about Trump and some of his cabinet and how that is shaping up because people really need to understand Washington. Washington is a creature with traditions, with institutions that don't care about you. They don't even really care about the president. They have self-perpetuating mechanisms which have been done a certain way. And it usually takes a great shocking event like World War II to change really anything beyond the marginal. Every once in a while you have a figure like Teddy Roosevelt who's actually able to take peacetime presidency and transform the country, but it needs an extraordinary individual to get something like that done. The question around the essence of decision was the theory behind the Cuban Missile Crisis of how Kennedy arrived at his decision. And there are various different schools of thought. But one of the things I love about the book is it presents a case for all three, the organizational theory, the bureaucratic politics theory, and then kind of The Great Man Theory as well. you and I could sit here and I could tell you a case about PT 109 and about how John F. Kennedy experienced World War II as this, I think it was a First Lieutenant or something like that. And how he literally swam miles with a wounded man's life jacket strap in his teeth with a broken back, and he saved him and he ended up on the cover of Life Magazine and he was a war hero. And he was a deeply smart individual who wrote a book in 1939 called *Why England Slept*, which to this day is considered a text, which at the moment was able to describe in detail why Neville Chamberlain and the British political system arrived at the policy of appeasement. I actually have a original copy is one of my most prized possessions. And from 1939, because this is a 23-year-old kid, who the fuck are you, John F. Kennedy? Turns out he's a brilliant man. And another just favorite aside is that at the Potsdam Conference where Harry Truman is there with Stalin and everybody. In the room at the same time, Harry S. Truman, President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, the general, who will succeed him. 26-year-old John F. Kennedy as a journalist, some shit head journalists on the side, and all three of those presidents were in the same

room with Joseph Stalin and others. And that's the story of America right there. It's kind of amazing. I loved people to say that because you never know about who will end up rising to power.

Lex Fridman

Are you announcing that you're running for president?

Saagar Enjeti

No, absolutely not.

Lex Fridman

Good.

Saagar Enjeti

I don't have what it takes. I don't think so. I'm self-aware.

Lex Fridman

Well, maybe humility is necessary for greatness. Okay. Actually, can we just linger on that book?

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

The book, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* by Graham Allison, it presents three different models of how government works, the Rational Act model, so seeing government as one entity. Trying to maximize the national interest. Also seeing government as through the lens of the momentum of standard operating procedures. So this giant organization that's just doing things how it's always been done. And the government politics model of there's just these individual internal power struggles within government. And all of that is a different way to view, and they're probably all true to a degree, of how decisions are made within this giant machinery of government.

Saagar Enjeti

That's why it's so important is because you cannot read that book and say one is true and one is not. You can say one is more true than the other, but all of them are deeply true. And this is one, or this is probably a good transition to Donald Trump because... And I guess for the people out there who think I've been up too obsequious, you'll be my criticism, Trump says something very fundamental and interesting on the Joe Rogan podcast, probably the most important thing that he ever said. Which is he said, "I like to have people like John Bolton in my administration, well, because scare people and it makes me seem like the most rational individual in the room." At a very intuitive level, a lot of people can understand

that, and then they can rationalize, while there are picks that Donald Trump has brought into his White House, people like Mike Waltz and others that have espoused views that are directly at odds with a "anti-neocon anti-Liz Cheney agenda". Now, Trump's theory of this is that he likes to have "psychopaths" like John Bolton in the room with him while he's sitting across from Kim Jong Un because it gets scared. What I think Trump never understood when he was president, and I honestly question if he still does now, is those two theories that you laid out, which are not about the rational interest as the government is one model, but the bureaucratic theory and the organizational theory of politics. And because what Trump I don't think quite gets is that there are 99% of the decisions that get made in government never reached the president's desk. One of the most important Obama quotes ever is, "By the time it gets to my desk, nobody else can solve it. All the problems here are hard. All the problems here don't have an answer. That's why I have to make the call." The theory that Trump has that you can have people in there who are, let's say warmongers, neocons or whatever, who don't necessarily agree with you, is that when push comes to shove at the most important decisions, that I'll still be able to rein those people in as an influence. Here's the issue. Let's say for Mike Waltz, who's going to be the National Security Advisor, a lot of people don't really understand there's this theory of national security advisor where you call me into your office and you're the president and you're like, "Hey, what do we think about Iran?" I'm like, "I think you should do X, Y, and Z." No, that's not how it works. The national security advisor's job is to coordinate the inter-agency process. His job is to actually convene meetings, him and his staff, where in the situation room, CIA, state Department, SECDEF, others before the POTUS even walks in, we have options. We're like, "Hey, Russia just invaded Ukraine. Weed a package of options. Those packages of options are concede of three things. We're going to have one group, we're going to call it the dovish option. Two, we're going to call it the middle ground. Three, the hardcore package." Trump walks in, this is how it's supposed to work. Trump walks in and he goes, "Okay, Russia invaded Ukraine. What do we do?" "Mr. President, we've prepared three options for you. We got one, two, and three." Now, who has the power? Is it Trump when he picks one, two, or three? Or is the man who decides what's even in option one, two, and three? That is the part where Trump needs to really understand how these things happen. And I watched this happen to him in his first administration. He hired a guy, Mike Flynn, who was his national security advisor. You could say a lot about Flynn, but him and Trump were at least like this on foreign policy. Flynn gets outed because what I would call an FBI coup, whatever. 33 days, he's out as a national security advisor, H.R McMaster, he's got a nice shiny uniform, four star, all of this. McMaster doesn't agree with Donald Trump at all. And so Trump says, "I ran on pulling out of Afghanistan, I want to get out of Afghanistan." They're like, "Yeah, we'll get out of Afghanistan, but before we get out, we got to go back in." As in we need more troops in there. And he's like, "Oh, okay." It's like all this and proves a plan and effectively gives a speech in 2017 where he ends up escalating and increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan. And it's only until February, 2020 that he gets to sign a deal, the Taliban peace deal, which in my opinion, he should have done in 2017. But the reason why that happened was because of that organizational theory, of that bureaucratic politics theory where H.R

McMaster is able to guide the inter-agency process, bring the uniform recommendations of the joint chiefs of staff and others to give Donald Trump no option but to say, "We must put troops." Another example of this is a book called *Obama's War* by Bob Woodward. I highly encourage people to read this book because this book talks about how Obama comes into the White House in 2009 and he says, "I want to get out of Iraq and I don't want to increase... I want to fight the Good War in Afghanistan." Obama's a thoughtful guy, too thoughtful actually. And so he sits there and he's working out his opinions. And what he starts to watch is that very slowly his options began to narrow because strategic leaks start to come out from the White House situation room about what we should do in Afghanistan. And pretty soon David Petraeus and Stan McChrystal and the entire national security apparatus has Obama pegged where he basically politically at the time decides to take the advantage position of increasing troops in Afghanistan, but then tries to have it both ways by saying, "But in two years, we're going to withdraw." That book really demonstrates how the deep state can completely remove any of your options to be able to move by presenting you with ones which you don't even want, and then making it politically completely infeasible to travel down the extreme directions. That's why when Trump says things like, "I want to get out of Syria," that doesn't compute up here for the Pentagon. Because first of all, if I even asked you how many troops we have in Syria, and you could go on the DOD website, it'll tell you a number. The number's bullshit because the way that they do it is if you're only there for 179 days, you don't count as active military contracts. The real numbers, let's say five times. And so Trump would be like, "Hey, I want to get out of Syria." They're like, "Yeah, we'll do it. Six months, we need six months." And after six months ago, he goes, "So, are we out of Syria yet?" And they're like, "No. Well, we got to wrap this up. We got this base, we got that, and we have this important mission." And next thing you know, you're out of office and it's over. That there's all these things which I don't think he quite understands. I know that some of the people around him who disagree with these picks do is the reason why these picks really matter, it's not only are the voices in the situation room for the really, really high profile stuff, it's where all little things to never get to that president's desk of which can shape extraordinary policy. And I'll give you the best example. There was never a decision by FDR as President of the United States to oil embargo Japan. One, which he thought about as deeply as you and I would want. It was a decision made within the State Department. It was a decision that was made by some of his advisors. I think he eventually signed off on it. It was a conscious choice, but it was not one which ever was understood the implications that by doing that, we invite a potential response like Pearl Harbor. So think about what the organizational bureaucratic model can tell us about the extraordinary blowback that we can get and why we want people with great judgment all the way up and down the entire national security chain in the White House. Also, I just realized I did not talk about immigration, which is so insane. One of the reasons Donald Trump won in 2024, of course, was because of the massive change to the immigration status quo. The truth is is that it may actually be second to inflation in terms of the reason that Trump did win the presidency was because Joe Biden fundamentally changed the immigration status quo in this country. That was another thing about the Scots-Irish people and others that we need

to understand is that when government machinery and elitism and liberalism appears to be more concerned about people who are coming here in a disorderly and illegal process and about their rights and their ability to "pursue the American dream," while the American dream is dying for the native-born population, that is a huge reason why people are turning against mass immigration. Historically as well, my friend, Reihan Salam, wrote a book called *Melting Pot or Civil War?* And one of the most important parts about that book is the history of mass migration to the United States. If we think about the transition from Scots-Irish America to the opening of America to the Irish and to mass European immigration, what a lot of people don't realize is it caused a ton of problems. There were mass movements at the time, the no nothings and others in the 1860s who rose up against mass European migration. They were particularly concerned about Catholicism as the religion of a lot of the new immigrants. But really what it was is about the changing of the American character by people who are not have the same traditions, values and skills as the native-born population. And their understanding of what they're owed and their role in American society is very different from the way that people previously had. One of the most tumultuous periods of US politics was actually during the resolution of the immigration question where we had massive waves of foreign-born population come to the United States. We had them integrated, luckily actually at the time with the Industrial Revolution. So we actually did have jobs for them. One of the problems is that today in the United States, we have one of the highest levels of foreign-born population than ever before, actually since that time in the early 1900s. But we have all of the same attendant problems. But even worse is we don't live in an industrial economy anymore. We live in a predominantly service-based economy that has long moved past manufacturing. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't bring some of that back, but the truth is that manufacturing today is not what it was to work in a steel mill in 1875. I think we can all be reasonable and we can agree on that. And part of the problems with extremely high levels of foreign-born population, particularly unskilled, and the vast majority of the people who are coming here and who are claiming asylum are doing so under fraudulent purposes. They're doing so because they are economic migrants and they're abusing asylum law to basically gain entrance to the United States without going through a process of application or of merit. And this has all of its traces back to 1965 where the Immigration Naturalization Act of 1965 really reversed and changed the status quo of immigration from the 1920s to 1960, which really shut down levels of immigration to the United States. In my opinion, it was one of the most important things that ever happened. And one of the reasons why is it forced and caused integration. It also forced by slowing down the increase in the number of foreign-born population, it redeveloped an American character and an understanding that was more homogenous and was the ability for you and me to understand despite the difference in our background. If you accelerate and you continue this trend of the very high foreign-born unskilled population, you unfortunately are basically creating a mass... It's basically it's a non-citizen population of illegal immigrants, people who are not as skilled. I think I read 27% of the people who've come under Joe Biden illegally don't even have a college degree. That means that we are lucky if they're even literate in Spanish, let alone English. So there are major problems about integrating that

type of person. Even in the past, whenever we had a mass industrial economy, now imagine today the amount of strain that would put on social services if mass citizenship happened to that population would be extraordinary. I don't think it's a good idea, but even if we were to do so, we would still need to pair it with a dramatic change. And part of the problem right now is I don't think a lot of people understand that immigration system. The immigration system in the United States, effectively they call it family-based migration. I call it chain migration. Chain migration is the term which implies that let's say you come over here and you get your green card. You can use sponsorship and others by gaming the quota system to get your cousin or whatever to be able to come. The problem with that is who is your cousin? Is he a plumber? Is he a coder? That doesn't actually matter because he's your cousin so he actually has preference. The way that it should work is it should be nobody cares if he's your cousin. What does he do? What does she do? What is she going to bring to this country? All immigration in the United States, in my opinion, should be net positive without doing fake statistics about, "Oh, they actually increased the GDP or whatever." It's like we need a merit-based immigration system. We are the largest country in the world and one of the only Western countries in the world that does not have a merit-based points-based immigration system like Australia and, or Canada. And I mean, I get it because a lot of people did come to this country under non-merit-based purposes, so they're really reluctant to let that go. But I do think that Biden, by changing the immigration status quo and by basically just allowing tens of millions, potentially tens of millions, at the very least 12 million new entrants to come to the US under these pretenses of complete disorder and of no conduct, really broke a lot of people's understanding and even mercy in that regard. And so that was obviously a massive part of Trump's victory.

Lex Fridman

Speaking of illegal immigration, what do you think about the border czar, Tom Homan?

Saagar Enjeti

Tom Homan is a very legit dude, got to know him a little bit in Trump 1.0. He is an original true believer on enforcing immigration law as it is. Now notice how I just said that. That's a politically correct way of saying mass deportation. And I will point out for my left wing critics in that, yeah, he really believes in the ability, in the necessity of mass deportation, and he has the background to be able to carry that out. I will give some warnings, and this will apply to Doge too. czar has no statutory or constitutional authority. czar has as much authority as the President of the United States gives him. Donald Trump, I think it's fair to say, even as critics or even the people who love him could say he can be capricious at times. And he can strip you or not strip you or give you the ability to compel. Czar in and of itself is frankly a very flawed position in the White House, and it's one that I really wish we would move away from. I understand why we do it. It's basically to do a national security advisor inter-agency convener to accomplish certain goals. That said, there is a person, Stephen Miller, who will be in the White House, the Deputy White House chief of staff who has well-founded beliefs, experience in government and rock solid ideology on this, which I

think would also give him the ability to work with Homan to pull that off. That said, a corollary to this, and frankly this is the one I'm the most mystified yet, is Kristi Noem as the Department of Homeland Security Secretary. Let me just lay this out for people because people don't know what this is. The Department of Homeland Security, 90% of the time the way you're going to interact with them is TSA. You don't think about it. But people don't know. The Department of Homeland Security is one of the largest law enforcement if maybe the largest law enforcement agency in the world. It's gigantic. You have extraordinary statutory power to be able to prove investigations. You have border patrol, ICE, TSA, CBP, all these other agencies that report up to you. But most importantly for this, you will be the public face of mass deportation. I was there in the White House briefing room last time around when Kirstjen Nielsen, who was the DHS secretary under Donald Trump, and specifically the one who enforced child separation for a limited period of time. She was a smart woman. She has long experience in government. And honestly, she melted under the criticism. Kirsti Noem is the governor of South Dakota. I mean, that's great. You have a little bit of executive experience, but to be honest, I mean you have no law enforcement background. You have no, frankly, with understanding of what it is going to be like to be the secretary of one of the most controversial programs in modern American history. You have to go on television and defend that every single day, a literal job requirement under Donald Trump. And you will have to have extraordinary command of the facts. You have to have a very high intellect. You have to have the ability to really break through. And I mean, we all watch how she handled that situation with her dog and her interviews. And that does not give me confidence that she will be able to do all that well in the position.

Lex Fridman

What do you think is behind that?

Saagar Enjeti

I have no idea.

Lex Fridman

Krystal Ball's theory on Breaking Points is that there's some kind of interpersonal...

Saagar Enjeti

I can explain it.

Lex Fridman

I should know this, but I didn't know any of... There was some cheating or whatever.

Saagar Enjeti

There's a rumor nobody knows if it's true that Corey Lewandowski and Kirsti Noem had a previous relationship ongoing. Corey Lewandowski is a Trump official and that he maybe put her in front. I don't know.

Lex Fridman

Is this like the Real Housewives of DC?

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, but kind of, although I mean it was the most open secret in the world, allegedly. I don't know if it's true. Okay. All right. I don't like to traffic too much in personal theories. But I mean in this respect, it might actually be correct in terms of how it all came down. I have no idea what he's thinking to be... I truly don't. I mean, maybe it's like he was, last time he said, "I want a woman who's softer and emotionally and the ability to be the face of my immigration program." I mean, again, like I said, I don't see it. In terms of her experience and her media, it's frankly not very good.

Lex Fridman

You think she needs to be, not just be the softer face of this radical policy, but also be able to articulate what's happening with the reasoning behind all that?

Saagar Enjeti

Yes. You need to give justification for everything. Here's the thing. Under mass deportation, the media will drag up every sob story known to planet Earth about this person and that person who came here illegally and why they deserve to stay. And really what the quasi thing is. That's why the program itself is bad and we should legalize everybody who's here illegally. Okay. The thing is that you need to be able to have extraordinary oversight. You need a great team with you. You need to make sure that everything is being done by the book. The way that the media is being handled is that you throw every question back in their face and you say, "Well, you either talk about crime or you talk about the enforceability of the law, the necessity." I mean, I just I think articulated a very coherent case for why we need much less high levels of immigration to the United States. And I am the son of people who immigrated to this country. But one of the favorite phrases I heard from this, from a guy named Mark Corcoran, who's a center for immigration studies, is, "We don't make immigration policy for the benefit of our grandparents. We make immigration policy for the benefit of our grandchildren." And that is an extraordinary and good way to put it. And in fact, I would say it's a triumph of the American system that somebody whose family benefited from the immigration regime and was able to come here. My parents had PhDs, came here legally, applied, spent thousands of dollars through the process. Can arrive at the conclusion that actually we need to care about all of our fellow American citizens. I'm not talking about other Indians or whatever. I'm talking about all of us. I care about everybody who is here in this country. But fundamentally, that will mean that we are going to have to exclude some people from the US. And another thing that the open borders people don't ever really grapple with is that even within their own framework, it makes no sense. for example, a common left-wing talking point is that it's America's fault that El Salvador and Honduras and Central America is fucked up. And so because of that, we have a responsibility to take all those people in because our fault. Or Haiti, right? But if you think about it, America is

responsible, and I'm just being honest, for destroying and ruining a lot of countries. They just don't benefit from the geographic ability to walk to the United States. I mean, if we're doing grievance politics, Iraqis have way more of a claim to be able to come here than anybody from El Salvador who's talking about something that happened in 1982. Within its own logic, it doesn't make any sense. Even under the- Within its own logic, it doesn't make any sense. Even under the asylum process, people don't even know this, you're literally able to claim asylum from domestic violence. Okay? I mean, imagine that. Frankly, that is a local law enforcement and problem of people who are experiencing that in their home country. I know how cold-hearted this sounds, but maybe, honestly, it could be because I'm Indian. One of the things that whenever you visit India and you see a country with over a billion people, you're like, "Holy shit. This is crazy," and you understand both the sheer numbers of the amount of people involved, and also, there is nothing in the world you could ever do to solve all problems for everybody. It's a very complex and dynamic problem, and it's really nice to be bleeding heart and to say, "Oh, well, we have responsibility to this and to all mankind and all that," but it doesn't work. It doesn't work with the nation state. It doesn't work with the sovereign nation. We're the luckiest people in the history of the world to live here in this country, and you need to protect it and protecting it requires really thinking about the fundamentals of immigration itself and not telling us stories. There's a famous moment from the Trump White House where Jim Acosta, CNN white House correspondent, got into it with Stephen Miller, who will be the current deputy chief, and he was like, "What do you say," something along the lines, "to people who say you're violating that quote on the Statue of Liberty, 'Give me you're tired, you're poor, you're hungry,'" all of that," the Emma Lazarus quote. And Stephen very logically was like, "What level of immigration comports with the Emma Lazarus quote? Is it 200,000 people a year? Is it 300? Is it 1 million? Is it 1.5 million?" And that's such a great way of putting it because there is no limiting principle on Emma Lazarus quote. There is, when you start talking, honestly, you're like, "Okay. We live in X, Y, and Z society with X, Y, and Z GDP. People who are coming here should be able to benefit for themselves and us not rely on welfare, not be people who we have to take care of after because we have our own problems here right now and who are the population and the types of people that we can study and look at who will be able to benefit, and based on that, yeah, immigration is great," but there are a lot of economic, legal and societal reasons for why you definitely don't want the current level. But another thing is even if we turn the switch and we still let in 1,000,005 people a year under the chain family-based migration, I think it would be a colossal mistake because it's not rooted in the idea that people who are coming to America are explicitly doing so at the benefit of America. It's doing so based on the familial connections of people who already gamed the immigration system to be able to come here. I have a lot of family in India and I love them, and some of them are actually very talented and qualified. If they wanted to come here, I think they should be able to apply on their own merit and that should have nothing to do with their familial status of the fact that I'm a US citizen.

Lex Fridman

You mentioned in the book *Melting Pot or Civil War* by Reihan Salam. He makes an argument against the open borders. The thesis there is a simulation should be a big part. I guess there's some kind of optimal rate of immigration which allows for a simulation.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, and there are ebbs and flows, and that's what I was talking about historically where, I mean, the truth is you could walk the streets of New York City in the early 1900s and the late 1890s and you're not going to hear any English, and I think that's bad. I mean, really what you had was ethnic enclaves of people who were basically practicing their way of life just like they did previously, bringing over a lot of their ethnic problems that they had and even some of their cultural unique capabilities or whatever, bringing it to America, and then New York City police and others are figuring out like, "What the hell do we do with all of this?" And it literally took shutting down immigration for an entire generation to do away with that and there's actually still some. The point about assimilation is twofold. One is that you should have the capacity to inherit the understanding of the American character that has nothing to do with race, and that's so unique that I can sit here as a child of people from India and has such a deep appreciation for the Scots Irish. I consider myself American first, and one of the things that I really love about that is that I have no historical relationship to anybody who fought in the Civil War, but I feel such kinship with a lot of the people who did and reading the memoirs and the ideas of those that did because that same mindset of the victors and the values that they were able to instill in the country for 150 years later gives me the ability to connect to them. And that's such an incredible victory on their part and that's such a unique thing. In almost every other country in the world, in China and India or wherever, you're kind of like what you are. You're a Hindu, you're a Jew, you're a Han Chinese, you're a Uyghur or you're Tibetan, something like that. You're born into it. But really here, it was one of the only places in the world where you can really connect to that story and that spirit and the compounding effect of all of these different people who have come to America, and that is a celebration of immigration as an idea. But immigration is also a discrete policy, and that policy was really screwed up by the Biden administration. And so we can celebrate the idea and also pursue a policy for all of the people in the US, our citizens to actually be able to benefit. And look, it's going to be messy, and honestly, I still don't know yet if Trump will be able to pursue actual mass deportation just because I think that I'm not sure the public is ready for it. I do support mass deportation. I don't know if the public is ready for it. I think, I don't know. I'll have to see because there's a lot of different ways that you can do it. There's mandatory E-Verify, which requires businesses to basically verify you're a US citizen or you're here legally whenever they employ you, which is not the law of the land currently, which is crazy, by the way. You can cut off or tax remittance payments, which are payments that are sent back to other countries like Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala. Again, illustrating my economic migrant point. There are a lot of various different ways where you can just make it more difficult to be illegally here in the US so

people will self-deport, but if he does pursue real mass deportation, that will be a flashpoint in America.

Lex Fridman

Aren't you talking about things like what Tom Homan said, the work site raids, sort of increasing the rate of that?

Saagar Enjeti

We used to do that.

Lex Fridman

But there's a rate at which you can do that where it would lead to, I mean, radical social upheaval.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, it will. I mean, and I think some people need to be honest here, and this actually flies in the face of ... I mean, one of the most common liberal critiques is this is going to raise prices, and yeah, I think it's true. I think it's worth it, but that's easy for me to say. I'm making a good living. If you care about inflation, you voted for Donald Trump and your price of groceries or whatever goes up because of this immigration policy, I think that needs to be extremely well-articulated by the president and of course, he needs to think about it. The truth is America right now is built on cheap labor. It's not fair to the consumer, it's not fair to the immigrants, the illegal immigrants themselves, and it's not fair to the natural born citizen. The natural born citizen has his wages suppressed for competition by tens of millions of people who are willing to work at lower wages. They have to compete for housing, for social services. I mean, just even basic stuff at a societal level, it's not fair to them. It's definitely not fair to the other person because, I mean, whenever people say who's going to build your houses or whatever, you're endorsing this quasi-legal system where uninsured laborers from Mexico, they have no guarantee of wages, they're getting paid cash under the table, they are living 10 to a room, they're sending Mexican remittance payments back just so that their children can eat. That's not really fair to that person either. So that's the point. The point is that it will lead to a lot of social upheaval, but this gets to my Kristi Noem point as well is you need to be able to articulate a lot of what I just said here because if you don't, it's going to go south real quick.

Lex Fridman

The way that Vivek articulates this is that our immigration system is deeply dishonest. We don't acknowledge some of the things he just said.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, exactly.

Lex Fridman

And he wants to make it honest. So if we don't do mass deportation, at least you have to be really honest about the living conditions of illegal immigrants, about basically mistreatment of them.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, it's true. I mean, if you support mass illegal migration, you're basically supporting tens of millions who are living lives as second class citizens. That's not fair to them. I also think it's deeply paternalistic. So there's this idea that America has so ruined these Central American countries that they have no agency whatsoever and they can never turn things around. What does that say about our confidence in them? One of the things they always say there, "Oh, they're law-abiding, they're great people," and all that. I agree. Okay? By and large, I'm not saying these are bad people, but I am saying if they're not bad and they're law-abiding and they're citizens and thoughtful and all that, they can fix their own countries and they did in El Salvador. That's the perfect example. Look at the dramatic drop in their crime rate. Bukele is one of the most popular leaders in all of South America. That is proof positive that you can change things around despite perhaps the legacy of US intervention. So to just say this idea that because it's America's fault that they're screwed up, it takes agency away from them. Another really key part of this dishonesty, this really gets to Springfield and the whole Haitian thing because everybody, beyond the eating cats and dogs, everybody does not even acknowledge because when they're like, "The Haitians are here legally," they need to actually think about the program. The program is called TPS. So let me explain that. TPS is called Temporary Protected Status. Note, what's the first word on that? Temporary. What does that mean? TPS was developed under a regime in which let's say that there was a catastrophic ... I think this is a real example. I think there was a volcano or an earthquake or something where people were granted TPS to come to the United States, and the idea was they were going to go back after it was safe. They just never went back. There are children born in the United States today who are adults, who are the descendants of people who are still living in the US under TPS. That's a perfect example of what Vivek says is dishonest. You can't mass de facto legalize people by saying that they're here temporarily because of a program or because of something that happened in their home country when the reality is that for all intents and purposes, we are acknowledging them as full legal migrants. So even the term migrant to these Haitians in Springfield makes no sense because they're supposed to be here under TPS. Migrant implies permanency. So the language is all dishonest and people don't want to tell you about the things I just said about chain migration. The vast majority of Americans don't even know how the immigration system works. They don't understand what I just said about TPS. They don't really understand the insanity of asylum law, where you can just literally throw up your hands and say, "I fear for my life," and you get to live here for four or five years before your court date even happens, and by that time, you get a work permit or whatever, you can get housing, like you just said, in substandard conditions, and you can kind of just play the game and wait before a deportation order comes, and even if it does, you never have to leave

because there's no ice agent or whatever who's going to enforce it. So the whole system is nuts right now, and we need complete systematic reform that burns it all to the ground.

Lex Fridman

That said, the image and the reality of a child being separated from their parents seems deeply un-American, right?

Saagar Enjeti

Well, I mean, look, it gets ... Okay. So I'm not going to defend it, but I'll just put it this way.

Lex Fridman

Do you hate children?

Saagar Enjeti

See, this is what I mean. Do you think twice whenever you see a drug addict who's put in prison and their child is put in protective services? Nobody in America thinks twice about that, right?

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

So I mean, well, that's kind of screwed up. Well, what we should think about, why did we come to that conclusion? The conclusion was is that these adults willingly broke the law and pursued a path of life, which put them on a trajectory where the state had to come in and determine that you are not allowed to be a parent basically to this child while you serve your debt to society. Now, child separation was very different. Child separation was also a product of extremely strange circumstances in US immigration law, where basically at the time, the reason why it was happening was because there was no way to prosecute people for illegal entry without child separation because of previous doctrine, I believe it's called the Flores Doctrine under some asylum law. People will have to go check my work on this. But basically, the whole reason this evolved as a legal regime was because people figured out that if you bring a kid with you because of the so-called Flores Doctrine or whatever, that you couldn't be prosecuted for illegal entry, so it was a de facto way of breaking the law. And in fact, a lot of people were bringing children here who weren't even theirs, who they weren't even related to or couldn't even prove it, were bringing them to get around the prosecution for illegal entry. So I'm not defending child separation. I think it was horrible or whatever, but if I gave you the context, it does seem like a very tricky problem in terms of do we enforce the law or not, how are we able to do that, and the solution, honestly, is what Donald Trump did was remain in Mexico and then pursue a complete rewrite of the way that we have US asylum law applied and of asylum adjudication and really just about enforcing our actual laws. So what I try to explain to people is the immigration system right now is a

patchwork of this deeply dishonest, such a great word, deeply dishonest system in which you use the system and set it up in such ways that illegal immigration is actually one of the easiest things to do to accomplish immigration to the United States. That is wrong. My parents had to apply. It wasn't easy. Do you know in India there's a temple called the Visa Temple where you walk 108 times around it, which is like a lucky number, and you do it when you're applying for a visa to the United States. It costs a lot of money and it's hard. People get rejected all the time. There's billions of people across the world who would love to be able to come here, and many of them want to do so legally and they should have to go through a process. The current way it works is it's easier to get here illegally than it is legally. I think that's fundamentally right. It's also unfair to people like us whose parents did come here legally.

Lex Fridman

Can you still make the case against mass deportation? What are the strongest arguments?

Saagar Enjeti

The strongest argument would be that these people contribute to society, that these people, many of whom millions of here, have been here for many years who have children, natural born citizens because of birthright citizenship, it would require something that's fundamentally inhumane and un-American as you said, the idea of separating families across different borders simply because of what is "small decision of coming here illegally", and the best case beyond any of this moral stuff for no mass deportation is it's good for business. Illegal immigration is great for big business. It is great for big agriculture. So if you want the lowest prices of all time, then yeah, mass deportation is a terrible idea.

Lex Fridman

First of all, very convincing, and second of all, I mean, you can't just do mass deportation without also fixing the immigration system, right?

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, exactly. And I mean, there are several pieces of legislation. H.R.2, that's something that the Republicans have really coalesced around. It's a border bill. I encourage people to go read it and see some of the different fixes to the US immigration system. I'm curious whether it'll actually pass or not. Remember, there's a very slim majority of the House of Representatives for Republicans this time around, and people vote for a lot of things when they're not in power, but when it's actually about to become the law, we'll see. There's a lot of swing state people out there who may think twice before casting that vote. So I'm definitely curious to see how that one plays out. The other thing is that, like I just said, the biggest beneficiary of illegal immigration is big business. So if you think they're going to take this one lying down, absolutely not. They will fight for everything that they have to keep their pool of cheap labor because it's great for them. I think JD said a story. I think he was on Rogan about how he talked to a hotelier chain guy and he was like, "Yeah, it's just terrible."

They would take away our whole workforce.” And he was like, “Do you hear yourself in terms of what you’re talking, you’re bragging about?” but that’s real. That’s a real thing. And that, Tyson Foods and all these other people, that’s another really sad part is ... What I mean by second class citizenship is this presumption, first of all, that Americans think it’s too disgusting to process meat or to work in a field. I think anybody will do anything for the right wage, first of all, but second is the conditions in a lot of those facilities are horrible and they’re covered up for a reason, not only in terms of the way that businesses, they actually conduct themselves, but also to cover up their illegal immigrant workforce. So honestly, I think it could make things better for everything.

Lex Fridman

You have studied how the government works. What are the chances mass deportation happens?

Saagar Enjeti

Well, it depends how you define it. So I mean, mass deportation could mean one million. I mean, nobody even knows how many people are here illegally. It could be 20 million, it could be 30 million. I’ve seen estimates of up to 30 million, which is crazy. That’s almost 1/11 of the entire US population.

Lex Fridman

What number do you think will feel like mass deportation? One million people?

Saagar Enjeti

A million people is a lot.

Lex Fridman

That’s a lot of people.

Saagar Enjeti

It’s a lot, but the crazy part is that’s only 1/12 of what Joe Biden led in the country. So it’s one of those. That just to give people the scale of what it will all look like. Do I think mass deportation will happen? It depends on the definition. Will one million over four years? Yeah, I feel relatively confident in that. Anything over that, it’s going to be tough to say. Like I said, probably the most efficient way to do it is to have mandatory E-Verify and to have processes in place where it becomes very difficult to live in the United States illegally, and then you’ll have mass self-deportation and they will take the victory lap on that, but actual rounding millions of people up and putting them in deportation facilities and then arranging flights to God knows all across the globe, that’s a logistical nightmare. It would also cost a lot of money. And don’t forget, Congress has to pay for all of this. So we can have DOGE or we can have mass deportation. So those two things are kind of irreconcilable, actually. There’s a lot of competing influences at play that people are not being real about at all.

Lex Fridman

That was one of the tensions I had talking to Vivek is he's big on mass deportation and big on making government more efficient, and it really feels like there's a tension between those two in the short-term.

Saagar Enjeti

Well, yes, absolutely. Also, I mean, this is a good segue. I've been wanting to talk about this. I'm sympathetic to DOGE, to the whole Department of Government Efficiency.

Lex Fridman

How unreal is it that it's called DOGE?

Saagar Enjeti

Actually, with Elon, it's quite real. I guess I've accepted Elon as a major political figure in the US, but the DOGE committee, the Department of Government Efficiency is a non-statutory agency that has zero funding that Donald Trump says will advise OMB, the Office of Management and Budget. Now, two things. Number one is, as I predicted, DOGE would become a "Blue Ribbon Commission". So this is a non-statutory Blue Ribbon Commission that has been given authority to Vivek Ramaswamy and to Elon Musk. Secondary, their recommendations to government should be complete by July of 2026 according to the press release released by Trump. First of all, what that will mean is they're probably going to need private funding to even set all this up. That's great, not a problem for Elon, but you're basically going to be able to have to commission GAO reports, Government Accountability Office and other reports and fact-finding missions across the government, which is fantastic. Trump can even empower you to go through to every agency and to collect figures. None of it matters one iota if Republican appropriators in the House of Representatives care what you have to say. Historically, they don't give a shit what the executive office has to say. So every year, the president releases his own budget. It used to mean something, but in the last decade or so, it's become completely meaningless. The House Ways and Means Committee and the People's House are the ones who originate all appropriations and set up spending. So that's one is that DOGE in and of itself has no power. It has no ability to compel or force people to do anything. Its entire case for being, really, if you think about it mechanically, is to try and convince and provide a report to Republican legislators to be able to cut spending. So that's that. Now, we all know how Congress takes to government reports and whether they get acted on or not. So that's number one. Number two is the figures that Elon is throwing out there. Again, I want to give them some advice because people do not understand federal government spending. The absolute vast majority of government spending is entitlement programs like Social Security and Medicare, which are untouchable under Donald Trump and their most politically popular programs in the world, and military spending, discretionary non-military spending. I don't have the exact figure in front of me. It's a very, very small part of the federal budget. Now, within that small slice, about 90% of that eight is bipartisan and is supported by everybody.

NOAA, you know the hurricane guys? Like people like that, people who are flying into the eye of the hurricane, people who are government inspectors of X, Y and Z. The parts that are controversial that you're actually able to touch, things like welfare programs like food stamps is an extraordinary small slice. So what's the number we put out there? Five trillion? Something like that? There is only one way to do that, and realistically under the current thing, you have to radically change the entire way that the Pentagon buys everything. And I support that, but I just want to be very, very clear, but I haven't seen enough energy around that. There's this real belief in the US that we spend billions on all of these programs that are doing complete bullshit, but the absolute vast majority of it is military spending and entitlements. Trump has made clear entitlements are off the table. It's not going to happen. So the way that you're going to be able to cut realistically military spending over a decade-long period is to really change the way that the United States procures military equipment, hands out government contracts. Elon actually does have the background to be able to accomplish this because he has had to wrangle with SpaceX and the bullshit that Boeing has been pulling for over a decade, but I really want everybody's expectations to be very set around this. Just remember, non-statutory, Blue Ribbon. So if he's serious about it, I just laid out all of these hurdles that he's going to have to overcome, and I'm not saying him and Vivek aren't serious dudes, but you got to really know the system to be able to accomplish this.

Lex Fridman

So you just laid out the reality of how Washington works. To give the counterpoint that I think you're probably also rooting for is that one is a statement like Peter Thiel said, "Don't bet against Elon."

Saagar Enjeti

Sure.

Lex Fridman

One of the things that you don't usually have with Blue Ribbon is the kind of megaphone that Elon has.

Saagar Enjeti

True.

Lex Fridman

And I would even set the financial aspects aside, just the influence he has with the megaphone but also just with other people who are also really influential. I think that can have real power when backed by a populist movement.

Saagar Enjeti

I don't disagree with you, but let me give you a case where this just failed. So Elon endorsed who for Senate Majority Leader? Rick Scott, right? Who got the least amount of votes in the US Senate for GOP leader? Rick Scott. John Thune is the person who got it. Now, the reason I'm bringing that up, one of my favorite books, Master of the Senate by Robert Caro, part of the LBJ series, the Senate has an institution, it reveres independence. It reveres. I mean, the entire theory of the Senate is to cool down the mob that is in the House of Representatives and to deliberate. That's its entire body. They are set up to be immune from public pressure. Now, I'm not saying they can't be pressured, but that example I just gave on Rick Scott is a very important one of he literally endorsed somebody for leader, so did Tucker Carlson, so did a lot of people online, and only 13 senators voted for Rick Scott. The truth is that they don't care. They're set up where they're marginally popular in their own home states, they'll be able to win their primaries, and that's all they really need to do to get elected, and they have six-year terms. They're not even up for four years. So will Elon still be interested in politics six years from now? That's a legitimate question for a Republican senator. So maybe he could get the House of Representatives to sign off maybe on some of his things, but there's no guarantee that the Senate is going to agree with any of that. There's a story that Caro tells in Master of the Senate book, which I love, where Thomas Jefferson was in Paris during the writing of the Constitution, and he asked Washington, he said, "Why did you put in a Senate, a bicameral legislature?" And Washington said, "Why did you pour your tea into a saucer?" and Jefferson goes, "To cool it," and Washington says, "Just so," to explain it. He was a man of very few words. He was a brilliant man.

Lex Fridman

Okay. So you actually outlined the most likely thing that's going to happen with DOGE as it hits the wall of Washington. What is the most successful thing that can be pulled off?

Saagar Enjeti

The most successful thing they could do is right now, I think they're really obsessed with designing cuts and identifying cuts. I would redesign systems, systems of procurement. I would redesign the way that we have processes in place to dispense taxpayer dollars because the truth is that appropriations itself, again, are set by the United States Congress, but the way that those appropriations are spent by the government, the executive has some discretionary authority. So your ability as the executive to be a good steward of the taxpayer money and to redesign a system which I actually think Elon could be good at this and Vivek too in terms of their entrepreneurial spirit is the entire Pentagon procurement thing, it needs to be burned to the ground. Number one, it's bad for the Pentagon. It gives them substandard equipment. It rewards very old weapons systems and programs and thinking that can be easily defeated by people who are studying that for vulnerabilities. The perfect example is all of this drone warfare in Ukraine and in Russia. I mean, drone warfare costs almost nothing, and yet drone swarms and hypersonic missiles pose huge dangers to US systems, which cost more than hundreds of billions of dollars. So

my point is that giving nimble procurement and systemic change in the way that we think about executing the mission that Congress does give you actually could save the most amount of money in the long run. That's where I would really focus in on. The other one is, counter to everything I just said, is maybe they would listen. Maybe the Republicans are like, "Yeah, okay. Let's do it." The problem again though is swing state people who need to get reelected, they need to do one thing. They need to deliver for their district. They need to run on stuff, and nobody has ever run on cutting money for your state. They have run on bringing money to your state. And that's why earmarks and a lot of these other things are extraordinarily popular in Congress is because it's such an easy way to show constituents how you're working for them whenever it does come reelection time. So it's a very difficult system. And I also want to tell people who are frustrated by this, I share your frustration, but the system is designed to work this way. And for two centuries, the Senate has stood as a bulwark against literally every popular change, and because of that, it's designed to make sure that it's so popular for long enough that it has to become inevitable before the status quo can change. That's really, really frustrating, but you should take comfort in that it's always been that way, so it's been okay.

Lex Fridman

Well, as I've learned from one of the recommendations of *The Age of Acrimony*, I feel embarrassed that I didn't know that senators used to not be elected.

Saagar Enjeti

What a crazy system, huh?

Lex Fridman

Yeah. I mean, many of the things we take for granted now as defining our democracy was kind of invented, developed after the Civil War in the 50 years after the Civil War.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely correct. *Age of Acrimony*, oh, my God, I love that book. I cannot recommend it enough. It is so important. And one of the biggest mistakes that Americans make is that we study periods where greatness happened, but we don't often study periods where nothing happened or where really bad shit happened. We don't spend nearly enough. Americans know about FDR. They don't really know anything about the depression or how we got there. What was it like to be alive in the United States in 1840? Right? Nobody thinks about that really because it's kind of an in-between time in history. There are people who lived their entire lives, who were born, who had to live through those times, who were just as conscientious and intelligent as you and I are and were just trying to figure shit out and things felt really big. So the *Age of Acrimony* is a time where it's almost completely ignored outside of the Gilded age aspect. But like you just said, it was a time where progressive reform of government and of the tension between civil rights, extraordinary wealth and democracy and really the reigning in of big business, so many of our foundations happened

exactly in that time. And I take a lot of comfort from that book because one of the things I learned from the book is that voter participation is highest when people are pissed off, not when they're happy, and that's such a counterintuitive thing, but voter participation goes down when the system is working. So 2020, right? I think we can all agree it was very tense election. That's also why it had the highest voter participation ever. 2024, very high rates of participation. Same thing. People are pissed off, and that's actually what drives them to the vote, but something that I take comfort in that is that people being pissed off and people going out to vote, it actually does have major impact on the system because otherwise, the status quo is basically allowed to continue and so- ... [inaudible 01:33:00] the status quo is basically allowed to continue. And so, yeah, like you just said, I mean, direct election of senators... I mean, there are probably people alive today who were born when there was no direct election of senators, which is an insane thing to think about. I mean, there'd be almost 100 or so. But the point is that that time, it was so deeply corrupt, and it was one where the quasi aristocracy from the early days leading into the Gilded Age, were able to enforce their will upon the people. But you can take comfort in that that was one of those areas where Americans were so fed up with it, they changed the constitution and actually force the aristocrats in power to give their own power. It's like our version of when they flipped power and took away the legislative power of the House of Lords in the UK. I just think that's amazing and it's such a cool thing about our country and the UK too.

Lex Fridman

It's the continued battle between the people and the elite. Right? And we should mention not just the direct election of senators, but the election of candidates for a party.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes.

Lex Fridman

That was also invented. It used to be that the, quote-unquote, party bosses, I say that with half a chuckle, chose the candidate.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. The whole system is nuts. The way that we currently experience politics is such a modern invention.

Lex Fridman

With a little asterisk with Kamala Harris, but-

Saagar Enjeti

Right. Yeah, good point. Well, that was actually more of a mean reversion, right? We're living in an extraordinarily new era where we actually have more input than ever on who our candidates are. It used to be... This is crazy. So the conventions have always taken place

two months before, right? Imagine a world where you did not know who the nominee was going to be before that convention, and the nominee literally was decided at that convention by those party bosses. Even crazier, there used to be a standard in American politics where presidents did not directly campaign. They, in fact, did not even comment about the news or mention their opponent's names. They would give speeches from their doorstep, but it was unseemly for them to engage in direct politics.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. You would not get a Bernie Sanders.

Saagar Enjeti

No.

Lex Fridman

You would not get a Donald Trump.

Saagar Enjeti

Obama, Bill Clinton... I mean, basically every president from John F. Kennedy onwards has been a product of the new system. Every president prior to that has been much more of the older system. There was an in-between period post-FDR where things were really changing, but the primary system itself had its first true big win under John F. Kennedy.

Lex Fridman

I think that the lesson from that is there's a collective wisdom to the people. Right?

Saagar Enjeti

I think so.

Lex Fridman

I think it works.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. I mean, well, okay, I'll steelman it. We had some great presidents in the party boss era. FDR was a great president. FDR was the master of coalitional politics of his ability. In fact, what really made him a genius was his ability to get this overthrow, the support of a lot of the corruption and the elite Democrats to take control in there at the convention, and then combine his personal popularity to fuse all systems of power where he had the elites basically under his boot because he was the king, and he used his popular power and his support from the people to be able to enforce things up and down. I mean, even in the party boss era, a lot of the people we revere really came out of that. People like Abraham Lincoln. I mean, I don't think Abraham Lincoln would have won a party primary in 1860. There's no chance. He won, luck, thank God, from an insane process in the 1860 Republican

Convention. People should go read about that because that was wild. I think we were this close to not having Lincoln as president. And, yeah, I mean, Teddy Roosevelt, there's so many that I could point to who made great impacts on history. So the system does find a way to still produce good stuff.

Lex Fridman

That was a beautiful diversion from the Doge discussion. If you're going to return briefly to Doge, so you talked about cost-cutting, but there's also increasing the efficiency of government, which you also talked about with procurement, and maybe we can throw into the pile, the 400-plus federal agencies. So let's take another perspective on what success might look like. So radically successful Doge, would it basically cut a lot of federal agencies?

Saagar Enjeti

Probably combine.

Lex Fridman

Combine?

Saagar Enjeti

Okay, so I can give great examples of this because I have great insight. For each agency will often use different payroll systems. They'll have different internal processes. Right? That makes no sense, and it's all because it's antiquated. Now, everybody always talks about changing it, but there are a lot of party interests about why certain people get certain things. The real problem with the government, the people like us who are private, and for example, when you want to do something, you can just do it. So I was listening to a really interesting analysis about law enforcement and the military. So I think the story was that National Guard guys were assigned to help with the border, and they were trying to provide... I think it was translation services to people at the border patrol. But somebody had to come down and be like, "Hey, this has got to stop. According to US Code X, Y, and Z, the United States military cannot help with law enforcement abilities here." And so even though that makes absolutely no sense, because they're all work, there are literal legal statutes in place that prevent you from doing the most efficient thing possible. So for some reason, we have to have a ton of Spanish speakers in SouthCom, in the US Command that is responsible for South America, who literally cannot help with a crisis at the border. Now, maybe you can find some legal chicanery to make that work, but, man, you got to have an attorney general who knows what he's doing. You need a White House counsel. You need to make sure that shit stands up in a court of law. I mean, it's not so simple. Whereas let's say you have a software right here and you want to get a new software, you can just do it. You can hire whoever you want. When you're the government, there's a whole process you got to go through about bidding, and it just takes forever and it is so inefficient. But unfortunately, the inefficiency is really derivative of a lot of legal statutes, and that is something that, again, actually radically successful Doge, quote-unquote, would be to study the law, and

then change it. Instead of cost-cutting, cut this program or whatever, like I just said about why do different systems use payroll, just say that you can change the statute under which new software can be updated, let's say, after 90 days. I've heard stories of people who work for the government who still have IBM mainframe in 2024 that they're still working, because those systems have never been updated. There's also a big problem with a lot of this clearance stuff. That's where a lot of inefficiency happens because a lot of contractors can only work based upon previous clearance that they already got. Achieving a clearance is very expensive. It's very lengthy process. I'm not saying it shouldn't be, talking about security clearance, but it does naturally create a very small pool that you can draw some contracts fund. And I even mean stuff like the janitor at the Pentagon needs a security service, right? So clearance. So there's only five people who can even apply for that contract. Well, naturally, in an interim monopoly like that, he's going to jack his price up because he literally has a moat around his product. Whereas if you were hiring a... Whatever, anybody for anything, that type of credentialism and legal regime, it doesn't matter at all. So there are a million problems like this that people in government run into, and that is what I would see is the most successful.

Lex Fridman

Paperwork slows everything down, and it feels impossible to break through that in an incremental way.

Saagar Enjeti

It's so hard.

Lex Fridman

It feels like the only way to do it is to literally shut down agencies in some radical way, and then build up from scratch. Of course, as you highlight, that's going to be opposed by a lot of people within government.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. Well, historically, there's only one way to do it, and it's a really bad answer. War.

Lex Fridman

War. Yes. I was going to say, basically you have the consensus where, "Okay, all this stupid bureaucratic bullshit we've been doing, we need to put that aside. Get the fuck out of here. We need to win a war. So all the paperwork, all the lawyers go leave, please,"

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. No, but I want people to really understand that. Up until 1865 or 1860, I forget the exact year, we didn't even have national currency. And then we were like, "Well, we need a greenback." And prior to that, people would freak out if we were talking about having national currency, greenbacks backed by the US government and all of that. Not even a

question, passed in two weeks in the US Congress. An income tax eventually went away, but not even in the realm of possibility, and they decided to pass it. Same thing after World War I. And you think about how World War II... I mean, World War II just fundamentally changed the entire way the United States government works. Even the DHS, which I mentioned earlier, the Department of Homeland Security. It didn't even exist prior to 9/11. It was done as a response to 9/11 to coalesce all of those agencies under one branch to make sure that nothing like that could ever happen again. And so historically, unfortunately, absolute shitshow disaster war is the only thing that moves and throws the paperwork off the table. And I wish I wasn't such a downer, but I've read too much and I've had enough experience now in Washington to just see how these dreams get crushed instantly. And I wish it wasn't that way. I mean, it's a cool idea and I want people who are inspired, who are getting into politics to think that they can do something, but I want them to be realistic too, and I want them to know what they're signing up for whenever they do something like that, and the Titanic amount of work it's going to take for you to be able to accomplish something.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. But I've also heard a lot of people in Silicon Valley laughing when Elon rolled in and fired 90% of Twitter. Here's this guy, Elon Musk -

Saagar Enjeti

You are absolutely correct.

Lex Fridman

- knows nothing about running a social media company. Of course, you need all these servers. Of course, you need all these employees. And nevertheless, the service keeps running.

Saagar Enjeti

He figured it out, and you have to give him eternal credit for that. I guess the difference is there was no law that he could fire them. At the end of the day, he owned the company. He had total discretion of his ability to move. So I'm not even saying his ideas are bad. I'm saying that what makes him such an incredible visionary entrepreneur, it's movement, it's deference at times to the right people, but also the knowledge of every individual piece of the machine and his ability to come in and execute his full vision at any time and override any of the managers. So I talked previously about the professional managerial class and the managerial revolution. Elon is one of the few people who's ever built a multi-billion-dollar company who has not actually fallen victim to the managerial revolution and against entrepreneurship and innovation that happens there. There are very few people who can do it. Elon, Steve Jobs. But what do we learn is that, unfortunately, after Steve died, Apple basically did succumb to the managerial revolution and has become the product... They make all their money by printing services and making it impossible to leave this ecosystem

as opposed to building the most cool product ever. As much as I love my Vision Pro, don't get me wrong.

Lex Fridman

I think you just admitted that you're part of a cult.

Saagar Enjeti

I know. I literally am. I am. I fully admit it.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. I miss Steve.

Lex Fridman

The grass is greener on the other side. Come join us. Okay. Whether it's Elon or somebody else, what gives you hope about something like a radical transformation of government towards efficiency, towards being more slim? What gives you hope that that will be possible?

Saagar Enjeti

Well, I wouldn't put it that way. I don't think slimness in and of itself is a good thing. What I care about is the relationship to people and its government. So the biggest problem that we have is that we have a complete loss of faith in all of our institutions. And I really encourage people... I don't think people can quite understand what the relationship between America and its government was like after World War II and after FDR. 90% of the people trusted the government. That's crazy. When the president said something, they were like, "Okay, he's not lying." Think about our cynical attitude towards politicians today. That is largely the fault of Lyndon Johnson and of Richard Nixon and that entire fallout period of Vietnam. Vietnam, in particular, really broke the American character and its ability and its relationship with government, and we've never recovered faith in institutions ever since that. And it's really unfortunate. So what makes me hopeful, at least this time, is anytime a president wins a popular vote and an election is they have the ability to reset and to actually try and build something that is new. And so what I would hope is that this is different from the first Trump administration in which the mandate for Donald Trump is actually carried out competently. Yes, he can do his antics, which got him elected. At this point, we can't deny it. The McDonald's thing is hilarious. It's funny. It is. People love it. People like the podcasting. People like -

Lex Fridman

Garbage truck.

Saagar Enjeti

The garbage truck. Yeah, exactly. They like the stunts, and he will always excel and he will continue to do that. There are policy and other things that he can and should do, like the pursuit of no war, like solving the immigration question, and also really figuring out our economy the way that it currently runs and changing it so that the actual American dream is more achievable. And housing is one of the chief problems that we have right now. The real thing is Donald Trump was elected on the backs of the working man. I mean, it's just true. Households under \$100,000 voted for Donald Trump. Maybe they didn't do so for economic reasons. I think a lot of them did for economic, a lot of them did for immigration, for cultural. But you still owe them something. And I would hope that they could carry something out in that respect that is not a similar continuation and chaotic vibe of the first time where everything felt like it'd explode at any time with staffing, with even his policy or what he cared about or his ability to pursue. And a lot of that does come back to personnel. So I'm concerned in some respects, I'm not thrilled in some respects, I'm happy in some respects, but it remains to be seen how he's going to do it.

Lex Fridman

To the degree it's possible to see Trumpism and MAGA as a coherent ideology, what do you think are the central pillars of it?

Saagar Enjeti

MAGA is a rejection of cultural elitism. That's what I would say. Cultural elitism though has many different categories. Immigration is one, right? Is that cultural elitism and cultural liberalism has a fundamental belief that immigration in and of itself is a natural good at any and all levels, that all immigrants are replacement level, that there is no difference between them. Cultural elitism in a foreign policy context comes back to a lot of that human rights democracy stuff that I was talking about earlier, which divorces American values from American interests and says that actually American values are American interests. Cultural elitism and liberalism leads to the worship of the post-civil rights era of bureaucracy that I talked about from those two books of DEI or, quote-unquote, woke, and of progressive social ideology. So I would put all those together as ultimately what MAGA is. It is a, "Screw you." I once drove past... It was in rural Nevada, and I was driving and I drove past the biggest sign I've ever seen, political sign, to this day. And it was in 2020. It just said, "Trump, fuck your feelings." And I still believe that is the most coherent MAGA thing I've ever seen. Because everyone's always like, "How can a neocon, and Tulsi Gabbard, and RFK and all these other people, how can they all exist under the same umbrella?" And I'm like, "It's very simple. All of them have rejected the cultural elite, in their own way, certainly, but they've arrived at the same place. It's an umbrella. And it's an umbrella fundamentally, which has nothing to do with the status quo and with the currently established cultural elite. That doesn't mean they're not elite and they're not rich in their own regards, that doesn't mean they don't disagree, but that's the one thing that unites the entire party." And so that's the way I would put it.

Lex Fridman

Anti-cultural elite, is that synonymous with anti-establishment? So basic distrust of all institutions? Is elitism connected to institutions?

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, absolutely, because elites are the ones who runs our institutions. That's said, anti-establishment is really not the right word because there are a lot of left-wingers who are anti-establishment, right? They are against that, but they're not anti-cultural leftism. And that's the key distinction between MAGA and left populism. Left populism basically does agree. They agree with basic conceits, like racism is one of the biggest problem facing America. They're like, "One of the ways that we would fix that is through class-oriented economic programs in order to address that. But we believe in... I don't know, reparations as a concept. It's just more about how we arrive there." Whereas in MAGA, we would say, "No, we actually don't think that at all. We think we've evolved past that and we think that the best way to fix it is actually similar policy prescription, but the mindset matters a lot." So the real distinction, MAGA and left populism really is on culture. Trans, in particular, orientation about... Actually, immigration may be the biggest one. Because if you look at the history of Bernie Sanders, Bernie Sanders was a person who railed against open borders and against mass migration for years. There are famous interviews of him on YouTube with Lou Dobbs, who's one of the hardcore immigration guys, and they agree with each other. And Lou is like, "Bernie's one of the only guys out there." Bernie, at the end of the day, he had to succumb to the cultural left, and it's changing attitudes on mass immigration. There's some famous clips from 2015 in a Vox interview that he gave where he started... I think he started talking about how open borders is a Koch brothers libertarian concept, right? Because Bernie is basically of a European welfare state tradition. European welfare states are very simply understood. We have high taxes, high services, low rates of immigration. Because we have high taxes and high services, we have a limited pool of people who can experience and take those services. He used to understand that. He changed a lot of his attitude. Bernie also... I will say, look, he's a courageous man and a courageous politician. As late as 2017, he actually endorsed a pro-life candidate because he said that that pro-life candidate was pro-worker. And he's like, "At the end of the day, I care about pro-worker policy." He took a ton of shit for it, and I don't think he's done it since. So the sad part that's really happened is that a lot of left populist agenda and other has become subsumed in the hysteria around cultural leftism, wokeism, whatever the hell you want to call it. And ultimately, that cultural leftism was the thing that really united the two wings of that party. And that's really why MAGA is very opposed to that. They're really not the same, but the left populist can still be anti-establishment. That's the key.

Lex Fridman

It's interesting to think of the left cultural elite subsuming, consuming Bernie Sanders, the left populist. So you think that's what happened?

Saagar Enjeti

That's what I would say.

Lex Fridman

What do you think happened in 2016 with Bernie? Is there a possible future where he would've won? You and Krystal wrote a book on populism in 2020. So from that perspective, just looking at 2016, if he rejected wokeism at that time... By the way, that would be pretty gangster during 2016. Would he have... Because I think Hillary went towards the left more, right? Am I remembering that correctly?

Saagar Enjeti

It was a very weird time. So yes and no. It wasn't full-on BLM-mania like it was in 2020, but the signs were all there. So the Great Awakening was in 2014. I know it's a ridiculous term. I'm-

Lex Fridman

I love it. Please keep saying it because it has a ring to it.

Saagar Enjeti

But just to give the origin, the Great Awakening is about the great religious revival in the United States. So because wokeism is a religion, that's a common refrain, they were like, "The Great Awakening is a really good term," so-

Lex Fridman

Thank you for explaining the joke. Yep.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. So the Great Awakening is basically when racial attitudes amongst college-educated whites basically flipped on its head. There are a variety of reasons why this happened. I really believe that Ta-Nehisi Coates's case for reparations in the Atlantic is one of those. It radicalized an entire generation of basically white college-educated women to think completely differently on race. It was during Ferguson, and then it also happened immediately after the Trayvon Martin case. Those two things really set the stage for the eventual BLM takeover of 2020. But fundamentally, what they did is they changed racial attitudes amongst college-educated elites to really think in a race-first construct. And worse is that they were rejected in 2016 at the ballot box by the election of Donald Trump. And in response, they ramped it up because they believed that that was the framework to view the world, that people voted for Trump because he was racist and not for a variety of other reasons that they eventually did. And so the point around this on question of whether Bernie could have won in 2016, I don't know. Krystal seems to think so. I'm skeptical. I'm skeptical for a variety of reasons. I think the culture is honestly one of them. One of Trump's core issues in 2016 was immigration. And Bernie and him did not agree on immigration. And

if immigration, even if people did support Bernie Sanders and his vision for working class people, the debates and the understanding about what it would look like, like a healthcare system, which literally would pay for illegal immigrants, I think he would've gotten killed on that. But I could be wrong. I will never know what that looked like.

Lex Fridman

Let me reference you from earlier in the conversation with FDR. It's not the policy. I think if he went more anti-establishment and more populist as opposed to trying to court, trying to be friendly with the DNC-

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. I mean, that's a good counterfactual. Nobody will really know. Look, I have a lot of love for the Bernie 2016 campaign. He has a great ad from 2016 called America. You should watch it. It's a great ad. That's another very interesting thing. It's unapologetically patriotic, and that is not something that you see in a lot of left-wing circles these days. So he understood politics at a base level that a lot of people did not. But Bernie himself, and then a lot of the Bernie movement was basically crushed by the elite Democratic Party for a variety of reasons. They hated them. They attacked Joe Rogan for even having him on and for giving him a platform. That was ridiculous. Obviously, it backfired in their face, which is really funny. But there were a million examples like that when they attacked Bernie for endorsing a pro-life politician. He never did it again. They attacked Bernie for having Bernie Bros. People online, the bros who were [inaudible 01:56:40] Bernie, and it was his fault. His supporters would say nasty things about Elizabeth Warren, and he would defend straight himself and be like, "Yes, I'm sorry. Please, my bros," he was like, "Stop that."

Lex Fridman

I think that his biggest problem is he never went full Trump. He kept saying sorry.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, I agree. I totally agree. Actually, in 2020, I did a ton of analysis on this at the time. He would always do stuff like, "Joe Biden, my friend," and it's like, "No, he's not your friend. He stands for everything that you disagree with. Everything." He'd be like, "Yeah, he's a nice guy, but he's not my friend," but he would always be like, "Joe and I are great friends, but we have a small disagreement on this." But like you just said, in terms of going full Trump, they wanted to see Trump up there humiliating all of the GOP politicians that they didn't trust anymore. That's what people really wanted. But the other side of this is that the Democratic base in 2020 was very different than 2016. Because by 2020, they full-on had TDS, and they were basically like, "We need to defeat Trump at all costs. We don't give a shit what your name is, Bernie, Biden, whatever. Whichever of you is going to be at best defeat Trump, you get the knob." 2016 is different because they didn't full-on have that love and necessity of winning. By the way, this is a strategic advantage that the Democrats have. Democrats just care about winning. The current base of the party, all they want to do is win. Republican

base? They don't give a shit about winning. They just love Trump. So it's nice to win. But one of those where they will express their id for what they really want. Now, it's worked out for them because it turns out, that's a very palpable political force. But one of the reasons why you won't see me up here doing James Carville 40 more years is there is a law of something called thermostatic public opinion, where the thermostat, it changes a lot whenever you actually... So when you have a left-wing president in power, the country goes right. When you have a right-wing president in power, the country goes left. Amazing. Right? You can actually look at a graph of economic attitudes from the two months where Joe Biden became president after Donald Trump. So Republicans, Trump was president in the last year in office, the economy's great. Two months later, the economy is horrible. That is a perfect example of thermostatic opinion. And I'm not counting these Democrats out. 2004, George W. Bush wins the popular vote. He has a historic mandate to continue in Iraq. By '06, he's toasted. We have a massive midterm election. And by '08, we're writing books about 40 more years, and how there's never going to be a Republican in the office ever again. So things can change a lot in a very short period of time.

Lex Fridman

I think also for me, personally, maybe I'm deluded, the great man view of history, I think some of it is in programming circles, the term skills issue. I think some of it just has to do how good you are, how charismatic you are, how good you are as a politician. I maybe disagree with this. I'd love to see what you think. If you were allowed to run for many terms, I think Obama would just keep winning. He would win 2016, he would win 2020, he would win this year, 2024.

Saagar Enjeti

It's possible. But I would flip it on you, and I would say Obama would never be elected if there were no term limits, because Bill Clinton would have still been president.

Lex Fridman

Right.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. So-

Lex Fridman

Well, those two, right? That's two examples of... Exactly. Extremely skilled politicians and somehow can appear like populists.

Saagar Enjeti

Man, Bill Clinton was a force in his time, and it's honestly sad what's happened to him. I was actually just talking with a friend the other day. I'm like, "I don't think that presidents should become president when they're young because they live to see themselves become

irrelevant," and that must be really painful because I know what it takes to get there. Imagine being Clinton, I mean, your entire legacy was destroyed with Hillary Clinton in 2016. And then imagine being Obama, who, in 2016, you could argue it's a one-off and say that Trump is just... Oh, Hillary was a bad candidate, but Michelle and Barack Obama went so hard for Kamala Harris, and they just got blown out in the popular vote. I mean, the Obama era officially ended with Donald Trump's reelection to the presidency in 2024, and that was a 20-year period where Obama was one of the most popular central figures in American politics. But I want to return to what you're saying because it is important, and by the way, I do not support term limits on American presidents.

Lex Fridman

Are you a fascist or -

Saagar Enjeti

Well, that would imply that I don't believe in democracy. I actually do believe in democracy because I think the people, if they love their president, should be able to reelect him. I think FDR was amazing. I think that the term limit change was basically what happened is that Republicans and a lot of elite Democrats always wanted to speak against FDR, but he was a god, so they couldn't. So they waited until he died. And then after he died, they were like, "Yeah, this whole third, fourth term, that can never happen again." And America didn't really think that hard about it. They were like, "Yeah, okay, whatever." But, I mean, it had immense consequences for American history. Clinton is the perfect example. I mean, Bill Clinton left office, even despite the Lewinsky bullshit, he had a 60% approval rating. Okay? No way George W. Bush gets elected. Impossible. Clinton would've blown his ass out. And imagine the consequences of that. We would have no Iraq... I mean, I'm not saying he was a great man. We probably still would've had the financial crisis, and there's still a lot of bad stuff that would've happened. But he was a popular dude, and I wouldn't say he had the best judgment at times presidentially... Definitely not personally, but presidentially. But I'm pretty confident we would've not gone into the Iraq war. And so that's where it really cost us. If you're left wing and you're talking about Obama, yeah, I think Obama probably would've won in 2016. Although it's a counterfactual, because Obama was never challenged in the same way that MAGA was able to, to the liberal consensus. Romney really ran this awful campaign, honestly, about cutting spending. It was very traditional Republican. It was deeply unpopular. The autopsy of that election was we actually need to be more pro-immigration. That literally was the autopsy. But Trump understood the assignment. There are two people who I so deeply respect for their political bets. Peter Thiel and Donald Trump. So one of the books that I recommended called *The Unwinding* by George Packer, he actually talks about Peter Thiel there. This is in 2013. And Thiel talks about, he was like, "Whoever runs for office next, they don't need to run on an optimistic message. They need to run on a message that everything is fucked up and that we need to... And if you think about, that's why Thiel's endorsement of Trump with the American carnage message is... I mean, it was shocking at the time, but he had that fundamental insight that that's what the American people wanted.

Trump too comes out of an election in 2012 where the literal GOP autopsy, the report produced by the party, says, "We need to be pro-mass immigration." What happens? Immediately after 2012, they start to go for mass immigrant... Basically, they go for these amnesty plans, the so-called Gang of Eight plan, Marco Rubio, and all of this in 2013, it falls apart, but Republicans get punished by their base in [inaudible 02:04:04]—Republicans get punished by their base in 2014. So Eric Cantor, who was the House Majority Leader, the number two Republican, spent more on stake in his campaign than his primary opponent who successfully defeated him, a guy named Dave Brat. Dave Brat kicked his ass on the issue of immigration and said that Eric Cantor is pro-amnesty. All of the forces were there. Then in 2015, Trump comes down the escalator, and he gives the message on immigration that the GOP base has been roaring and wanting to hear now but that nobody wanted to listen to them. That was his fundamental insight. That bet was a colossal and a Titanic political bet at a time when all political ideology and thought process would've said that you should come out on the other side, which is where Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz and all these other guys were effectively there in varying different ways, like they were hawkish or whatever. But Trump just had such a monopoly on that as an idea. That's why he wins the 2016 primary. Then paired with immigration, a hard line position on immigration, is this American carnage idea that actually everything is wrong. The American dream has gone. "We will stop this American carnage." I think American Carnage is one of the most important inaugural speeches ever given in American history. Put it up against every single other speech, there's nothing else like it. But that was what the country wanted at the time. That's what great politicians are able to do, is they're able to suss something out. That's also why Peter Thiel is who he is because he saw that in 2000. Imagine what it takes to come out of the 2012 election and to be honestly totally contrarian to the entire national mood and this entire theory of Obama-esque star politics and say, "No, you need somebody who runs on the opposite of that to win."

Lex Fridman

Well, we'll never know. I love this kind of Mike Tyson versus Muhammad Ali. I still think I would've loved to see Obama versus Trump.

Saagar Enjeti

Me too. I agree.

Lex Fridman

First of all, Obama versus Trump in 2008, Obama wins hands down.

Saagar Enjeti

Well, yes, definitely.

Lex Fridman

I love how this is a boxing talk.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

Now, 2016, Obama has Iraq and Afghanistan.

Saagar Enjeti

He's vulnerable though. I'll tell you why: DACA. That's what nobody ever talks about in the Obama-Trump thing. Don't forget, Obama takes his 2012 victory, basically says, "Oh, the GOP even now agrees with me on immigration," and then he does DACA and he legalizes X million number of illegal immigrants who are here who were brought here as children. That also fundamentally changed the immigration consensus on the Republican side because they're like, "Wait, holy shit. You can just do that? Because we don't agree with that at all." That really ignited the base as well. So I'm not sure. A moment I think about a lot with Trump and just being able to unleash the rage of the Republican base is in the 2012 debate, Candy Crowley was the moderator with Mitt Romney, and she fact-checked him famously. This was when fact checking was shocking in a presidential debate. She said something about Benghazi, and she was like, "No, he did say that." She corrected Romney on behalf of Obama. To this day, it's questionable whether she was even right. Romney was just like, "Oh, he did? Okay." Trump would've been like, "Excuse me. Excuse me. Look at this woman." He would've gone off. I think about that moment because that's what the Republican base wanted to hear. But also, it turns out, America had a lot of festering feelings about the mainstream media that it needed unleashed, and Trump was just this incredible vector to just blow up this system, which, if you asked me about optimism, that's the thing I'm most optimistic about.

Lex Fridman

But don't you think Obama had a good sense in how to turn it on, how to be anti-establishment correctly?

Saagar Enjeti

I will not deny that he's one of the most talented politicians literally to ever play the game. He is a just unbelievable rhetorical talent. Look, as a counterfactual, would he have been more talented than Hillary? Yeah, no question in terms of anybody would've been for that one. But at the same time, all the signs were there. All the signs for the Trump victory and for the backlash against Obama-ism kind of as a political project, it all existed. Like I just laid the tea leaves out there, from 2012 to 2015, in retrospect, it's the most predictable thing in the world that Donald Trump would get elected, but it was crazy in the moment. I got to live through that, which was really fun, like professionally.

Lex Fridman

I think it's unfortunate that he kind of let Kamala Harris borrow his reputation.

Saagar Enjeti

It's like, "You know better, dude. You know. You defeated these people, the Clinton machine. You destroyed them." And it was awesome in '08.

Lex Fridman

What is that? He's so much bigger and better than the machine.

Saagar Enjeti

I don't get it.

Lex Fridman

It's interesting, right?

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. It's so weird though. I just think-

Lex Fridman

I think this was a wake-up call. 2024 was a wake-up call. The DNC machine doesn't work.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely.

Lex Fridman

There needs to be new blood, new Obama-like candidates.

Saagar Enjeti

Well, I'm glad you brought that up because that's important, too, in terms of the process and the way that things currently stand. The DNC actually rigged its entire primary system under Biden not to the benefit of Obama. For example, you know how they moved away from the Iowa caucuses and they actually moved some other primaries and moved the calendar to reward traditional states that vote much more in line with the democratic establishment. The story of Barack Obama is one that not many... actually, probably a lot of young people today don't even remember how it happened. In 2008, Obama was the underdog. Actually, here's the critical thing. Obama was losing with Black people. Why? Black Democrats simply did not believe that white people were vote for a Black guy. So Barack Obama goes to this white state, Iowa, all in on the Iowa caucuses, and shocks the world by winning the Iowa caucuses. Overnight, there is a shift in public amongst the Black population in South Carolina that says, "Oh, shit, he actually could win," and he comes out, and he wins South Carolina. That's basically was the death knell for the Hillary Clinton campaign. The problem is by moving South Carolina up and by making it first along with other more pro-establishment friendly places, what do we do? We make it so that Barack Obama can never happen again. We make it so that an older base of Democratic Party voters who

listens to the elites can never have their assumptions challenged. That's one of the worst things Joe Biden did. I talked about his arrogance. He was so arrogant, he changed the freaking primary system. He was so arrogant, he refused to do a debate. I mean, imagine history. How lucky are we honestly that Joe Biden agreed to do that debate with Donald Trump early? Again, that was his arrogance. I think we're so lucky for it because if we hadn't gotten... We got to understand as a country how cooked he was and how fake everything was behind the scenes in front of all of our eyes. They tried for three straight years to make sure that that would never happen. It's still such a crime, honestly, against the American people.

Lex Fridman

I've been thinking about who I want to talk to for three hours. That's why I bring up Obama because he's probably the number one person on the left I would like to hear analyze what happened in this election and what's happened to the United States of America over the past 20 plus years. I can't imagine anybody else.

Saagar Enjeti

Look, if anybody could do it, it'd be you. But there are layers upon layers with that man. I would love to actually sit and talk with him, for real.

Lex Fridman

I think it's fair to say that we talked about the great man view of history. I think you have a psychopath view of history where all great leaders are for sure psychopaths.

Saagar Enjeti

Not for sure. There are many who are good people. Harry Truman was-

Lex Fridman

You're like, some of them [inaudible 02:11:52].

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, some-

Lex Fridman

Yeah, Harry Truman, Harry Truman.

Saagar Enjeti

Some, I assume, are good people. To be fair though, most of the good ones are accidents, like Harry Truman. He never would've gotten himself elected. He was a great dude.

Lex Fridman

How do you know he was a great dude?

Saagar Enjeti

David McCullough book, I highly recommended it. Everybody should read it. Truman loved his wife. I think that's really awesome. I love when politicians love their wife. It's so rare. He adored his wife, he adored his daughter, spent time with them. He made family life a priority. He had really good small-town judgment that he would apply to foreign affairs. He was just a very well-considered, very stand-up man. I so appreciate that about him. Another one is John Adams. I love and revere John Adams. He's my favorite Founding Father. Him and John Quincy, they don't get nearly enough of their due. They were some of the most intelligent, well-considered. They were family men. The love and the relationship between John and Abigail Adams is literally legendary. I think it's amazing, especially in the context of the 1700s, the way that he would take her counsel into conversations and her own ability. She would sit there and go toe-to-toe as much with Thomas Jefferson. There are some who are great, who are really, really good presidents, who have good judgment and who are really good people and really think deeply about the world and have really cool personal lives. But also the vast majority of them... I would say especially in the modern era and where the price of the presidency extracts everything that you have, you have to be willing to give everything. That's not a price that most people want to pay.

Lex Fridman

Is it possible that some of the people who you think are sociopaths in politics are in fact really good people, and some of the people you think are good, like Truman and Adams, are actually sociopaths?

Saagar Enjeti

Definitely. I could just be reading the wrong books, right?

Lex Fridman

Yeah, that's right. It sounds like you just read some really compelling biographies.

Saagar Enjeti

Well, to be fair, I don't base this on one book. I read a lot of them, and I'll get... For example, I've read books about LBJ, you wouldn't know any of his foibles. But then you find out that they're written by his friend or it was written by... I think you read [inaudible 02:14:08].

Lex Fridman

I think you read the truth. I really worry about this general, especially now, the anti-establishment sense that every politician must be a sociopath. The reason I worry about that is it feels true.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

So you can fall into this bubble of beliefs where every politician is a sociopath, and because of that-

Saagar Enjeti

It can be a self-reinforcing [inaudible 02:14:38].

Lex Fridman

... it can be a self-reinforcing mechanism.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, I understand what you're saying. I agree, by the way. We do need to dramatically change it. But the problem is that people vote with their eyeballs and with their interests, and people love to dissect people's personal lives. One of the reasons why you were probably more likely in the pre-modern era to get, quote/unquote, good people is they were not subject to the level of scrutiny and to the insanity of the process that you are currently. Like I just said about... Theoretically, you could run for president and you would just get your nomination at the convention. It's only two months to Election Day. That's not so bad. But you run for president today, you got your ass on the road for two years and then two years before that. Then you have to run the damn government. So the price is so extraordinarily high. I also think that, oh, God, just Washington as a system, it will burn you. It will extract absolutely everything that you can give it. At the end of the day, everyone always talks about this, it's hilarious, how Trump is the only president not to age in office. I actually think it's crazy when you look at the photos of how he actually looks better today than he did whenever he went into the office. That's amazing, and it actually says a lot about how his mind works. I think Trump is pure id. Having observed him a little bit, both at the White House and having interviewed him, it's calculating, but it's also pure id, which is very interesting. The ones who are the thinkers, guys like Obama and others who are really in their heads, it's a nightmare. It's a nightmare. Apparently, Obama would only sleep four hours a night.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, add some empathy on top of that, it's just going to destroy you.

Saagar Enjeti

It will kill you, man.

Lex Fridman

All right, speaking about the dirty game of politics, several people, different people told me that of everyone they have ever met in politics, Nancy Pelosi is the best at attaining and wielding political power. Is there any truth to that?

Saagar Enjeti

In the modern era, yeah, I think that's fair in the last 25 years, definitely. Let's think about it. Number one is longevity. She's had the ability to control the caucus for a long period of time, so that's impressive. Because as I just laid out with Clinton, Obama, these figures come and they go, but over a 25-almost-year period, you've been at the very top and the center of American politics. The other case would be is that in this modern era has been defined by access to money. She's one of the greatest fundraisers in Democratic Party history. Again, consistently, Obama, Kamala, all those people come and go. But she's always had a very central understanding of the ability to fundraise, to cultivate good relationships with Democratic Party elites all across the country, use that money and dole it out to her caucus. She also was really good at making sure that legislation that came to the floor actually had the votes to do so. She ran an extremely well-ordered process in the House of Representatives, one in which you were able to reconcile problems within her office. It didn't usually go public. Then it would make it to the floor, and it would pass so that there would be no general media frenzy and Democrats in disarray or any of that. Put that on display with the Republicans, and we've had multiple Speakers all resign or get fired in a 16-year period. That's pretty remarkable. Basically, ever since John Boehner decided to leave in, what was it, 2012? I forget the exact year. My point is that if you compare her record to the longevity on the Republican side, it is astounding. The other interesting thing is that she also has pulled off one of the real tests of political power is, can you rule even when you don't have the title anymore? She gave up the leader position to Hakeem Jeffries, but everybody knows she pulled Joe Biden out of the race. That's pretty interesting. She's technically just a back-bencher, a nobody member of Congress, but we all know that's bullshit. So that's actually a very important case of political power is, can you rule without the title? If you can, then you truly are powerful. So I would make a good case for her, yeah. She's done a lot of remarkable stuff for her party. I will say they played Trump like a fiddle, man. Last time around, they were able to. They really got him. One of the craziest elements that I covered was Trump basically threatened to shut down the government and actually did shut down the government for a period of time over a dispute over border wall funding. Pelosi and Schumer, despite genuine mass hysteria in the Democratic Party with even some people who were willing to try and to strike a deal, never wavered and actually basically won and forced Trump to back down. Not a lot of MAGA people want to admit it, but that was honestly really embarrassing for the Trump administration at that time. The amount of discipline that it took for her, and Chuck to a lesser extent, but for the two of them to pull that off, it was honestly impressive that they were able to do that, even when the president has so much political power. It literally shut down the government over it.

Lex Fridman

Speaking of fundraising, Kamala raised \$1 billion -

Saagar Enjeti

Insane.

Lex Fridman

- but I guess the conclusion is she spent it poorly. How would you spend it?

Saagar Enjeti

I don't think money matters that much. I think Donald Trump has proven to us twice that you can win an underdog campaign through earned media. And I don't think that paid advertisement moves the needle that much. Now, notice, I didn't say it doesn't matter. But am I buying \$425,000-a-day spots on the Vegas Sphere? No. We're not doing that. As people who do this for a living, how do you even spend \$100,000 to build a set for one interview?

Lex Fridman

Is this the Call Her Daddy?

Saagar Enjeti

The Call Her Daddy thing.

Lex Fridman

Okay.

Saagar Enjeti

How's that possible? Think about the dollar-per-hour cost. That's like running a jet airplane in terms of what they did, [inaudible 02:20:24] Kamala Harris thing.

Lex Fridman

You know what I want to note behind the scenes, and I'm not good with this, I get really frustrated and I shouldn't, but dealing with PR and comms people can sometimes break my soul.

Saagar Enjeti

It's maddening. "Can we not talk about this? We need to pull them at 2:12 p.m." You're like, "But that's only 30 minutes." It's like, yeah.

Lex Fridman

That, but there's stuff like where to put the camera. It's not that I don't-

Saagar Enjeti

Oh, yeah.

Lex Fridman

Hypothetically, I don't even disagree with any of the suggestions, but it's like -

Saagar Enjeti

The micromanagement.

Lex Fridman

- just the micromanagement and the politeness, but the fake politeness. It just makes me feel like, I think, "What would Kubrick do?" Would he murder all of them right now?

Saagar Enjeti

He would just ban them after he became Stanley Kubrick, but he dealt with it for a while. By the way, I just went on a Kubrick binge. Man, he was awesome.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

I watched that World War I movie of his, the one from the '50s. That is such an underrated film. I feel like people don't... Whatever. We'll get past it.

Lex Fridman

I guess she paid for -

Saagar Enjeti

A hundred grand, bro.

Lex Fridman

- and the Oprah thing. She paid for the interviews?

Saagar Enjeti

That's another one. I do this for a living. As you can tell, I'm a very cynical person. I did not even know that celebrities got paid for their endorsements. I could never have imagined a universe where Oprah Winfrey has paid \$1 million to endorse Kamala Harris. I'm like, "First of all, you're a billionaire." Second, "I thought you'd do this because you believe."

Lex Fridman

No, to be fair, I think the million just helps do the thing you would like to do. It's a nudge. Because I don't think any celebrity would endorse-

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, yeah, they're not doing it because of the money. You should just do it for free. I can't even believe that you're doing this for money. The fact, what was it, Alanis Morissette, they had to cut her because they didn't have the funds to pay her. I'm like, "First of all, if you

believe, you should just play for free.” But second, again, as a person who is deeply cynical, I still am genuinely shook that we are paying celebrities for their endorsement.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it’s really fucked up.

Saagar Enjeti

That’s insane.

Lex Fridman

Why do you think people on the left who are actually in the political arena are afraid of doing anything longer than an hour?

Saagar Enjeti

That’s a great question.

Lex Fridman

Let me just say, probably most of the people I’ve talked to on this podcast are left wing or have been for a long time. They just don’t go out and say it. Most scientists are left wing. Most vaguely political people are left wing that I’ve talked to. But the closer you get to the actual political arena, and I’ve tried really hard, they just, “Nope.” I had a bunch of people, the highest profile people say 15 minutes, 20 minutes. I say, “Nope.”

Saagar Enjeti

I’m used to that, so welcome.

Lex Fridman

I just can’t imagine a conversation with Kamala or with Joe Biden or AOC –

Saagar Enjeti

Obama.

Lex Fridman

– or Obama that’s of any quality at all that shows any kind of humanity of the person, the genius of the person, the interesting nuance of the person in 30 minutes. I don’t know. Maybe there’s people that are extremely skilled that can do that. You just can’t.

Saagar Enjeti

You should be optimistic because a huge narrative out of this election is that the Democrats massively fucked up by not coming on this show or a Rogan show. Fundamentally, number one, that’s going to change dramatically –

Lex Fridman

I hope so.

Saagar Enjeti

... so be optimistic and keep pushing. Two, this is a good segue actually, I've been thinking a lot about, I know a lot of people listening to this show who are in tech and may have some influence on the admin, this is something I want people to take really seriously, is I was a White House correspondent for The Daily Caller, it's a conservative outlet, in Washington during the Trump years. The most important thing I learned from that was that under the White House Correspondents' Association, the way that the media cartel has everything set up for access for press to the President is fundamentally broken, anti-American, and bad for actual democracy. So let me lay this out at a very mechanical level because nobody knows this. I was a former White House Correspondents' Association member, so anybody who says I'm full of shit, I was there. For example, number one, all the seats in the Briefing Room, those seats are assigned by the White House Correspondents' Association, not by the White House itself. The White House Correspondents' Association requires you to apply for a seat. That adjudication process can take literally years for bylaws, elections, and all these things to do. This means that they can slow roll the entrance of new media online outlets who are allowed into the room. The reason it really matters not having a seat is if you don't have a seat, you have to get there early and stand in the wings, like I used to, and raise your hand like this and just hope and pray that the press secretary can see. It's extremely inconvenient. I'm talking, I have to get there hours early at a chance during a 15-minute briefing. So one of the things is that Trump has is he owes a huge part of his election to coming on podcasts and to new media. Now, because of that, it's really important that the White House Correspondents' Association, which is a literal guild cartel that keeps people out of the White House and credentials itself and creates this opaque mechanism through which they control access to asking the press secretary questions, is destroyed. There are a lot of different ways you can do this. Because what nobody gets, too, is that all of these rules are unofficial. For example, they're just traditions. The White House is like, "Yeah, it's our building, but you guys figure it out," because that's a longstanding tradition. Let me give you another insane tradition that currently exists in the White House. The Associated Press or the Associated Press correspondent gets to start the briefing, traditionally. They get the first question. They also get to end the briefing. When they think it's been enough time, they'll be like, "Okay, Karine Jean-Pierre, thank you," and that calls the briefing over. What? You're not even in the White House Correspondents' Association. You literally just happen to work for the Associated Press. Why? Why do we allow that to happen? So number one, stop doing that. To their credit, the Trump people didn't really do that, but it's a longstanding tradition. The other thing is that what nobody gets either is that the first row is all television networks for logistical reasons so that they can do their little stand-ups with their mic and say, "I'm reporting for [inaudible 02:27:00]." Well, what people don't seem to know is that all the television networks are basically going to ask some version of the same question. The reason they do that is because they need a clip of their correspondent going after the White

House press secretary all out, Robert Mueller, like whenever I was there. So you get the same goddamn version of the stupid political questions over and over again. The Briefing Room is designed for traditional media, and they have all the access in the world. So in an election where you owe your victory, at least in part, to new media and recognizing the changing landscape, you need to change the conduit of information to the American people. And in an election, I don't know if you saw this, but election night coverage on cable news was down 25%, just in four years, 25%. That's astounding. Cable news had a monopoly on election night for my entire lifetime, and yet, my show had record ratings that night. Look, I'm a small slice of the puzzle here. We've got Candice Owens, Patrick Bet-David, Tim Pool, David Pakman, TYT, all these other people. From what I understand, all of us blew it out that night because millions of Americans watched it on YouTube. We even partnered with some Decision Desk HQs, so we had live data. We could make state calls. We're just a silly little YouTube show. My point, though, is that in an election where the vast majority of Americans under the age of 55 are listening to podcasts, consuming new media, and are not watching cable news, where the median age of CNN, which is the youngest viewership, is 68. 68 is the median. Statistically, what does that tell us? There's a decent number of people who are watching CNN who are in their '80s and in their '90s. Yeah, I'm glad you brought up Alex, because he deserves a tremendous shout out, Alex Bruesewitz. He was the pioneer of the podcast strategy for the Donald J. Trump campaign. He got on your show. He was able to get on Andrew Schulz's show, Rogan. He was the internal force that pushed a lot of this. My personal hope is that somebody like Alex is elevated in the traditional White House bureaucracy, that the number of credentials that are issued to these mainstream media outlets is cut, and there's a new lottery process put in place where people with large audiences are invited. I also want to make a case here for why I think it's really important for people like you and others who don't have as much traditional media experience to come and practice some capital J journalism because it will sharpen you, too, giving you access in that pressure cooker environment. Having to really sit there and spar a little bit with a public official and not have as long necessarily as you're used to, it really hones your news media skills, your news gathering skills, and it will make you a better interviewer in the long run. Because a lot of the things that I have learned have just been through osmosis. I've just lived in DC. I've been so lucky, I've had a lot of cool jobs, and I've just been able to experience a lot of this stuff. So I'm really hoping that people who are listening to this who may have some influence or even the viewership, if you want to reach out to them and all them, this is a very easily changeable problem. It's a cartel which has no official power. It's all power by tradition, and it needs to be blown up. It does not serve America's interests to have 48 seats, I think, in the White House Press Briefing Room to people who have audiences of like five. It just makes absolutely zero. Workspace, seats, access, credentials, and also credentials that are issued to other new media journalists at major events should take precedence. Because it's not even about rewarding the creator. The American people are here. You need to meet them. That's your job. I'll just end with a historical thing. Barack Obama shocked the White House Press Corps in 2009 because he took a question from the Huffington Post, a brand new blog, but they were stunned because he knew, he said, "These

blog people, they went all in for me, and I got to reward them." So there's a longstanding precedent for this. They'll bitch and they'll moan. They'll be upset. But it's their fault that they don't have as much credibility. It's incumbent upon the White House, which serves the public, to actually meet them where they are. So I really hope that at least some of this is implemented inside of it.

Lex Fridman

If you break apart the cartel, I think you can actually enable greater journalism, frankly -

Saagar Enjeti

Of course.

Lex Fridman

- with a capital J. Because actually in the long form is when you can do better journalism from even just the politician perspective. You can disagree. You can get criticized because you can defend yourself.

Saagar Enjeti

I had an idea, actually. You tell me what you think. I think a really cool format would be there's a room right near the Press Briefing Room called the Roosevelt Room. A beautiful room, by the way. It's awesome. It has the Medal of Honor for Teddy Roosevelt, and it has a portrait of him and a portrait of FDR. It's one of my favorite rooms in the White House.

Lex Fridman

Fuck, yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

It's so cool. So my idea would be in the Roosevelt Room, which traditionally used for press briefings and stuff, is you as the press secretary sit there, I think there's like 12 seats, something like that, and you set it all up. You have, let's say, Shure microphones like this, and that secretary is going to commit to being there for two hours. New media people can sit around the room. All of this being streamed live, by the way, just like the White House Press Briefing Room. The expectation is that the type of questions have to be substantive. Obviously, nothing is off limits. You should never, ever accept, "I'm not going to be asked about this." Especially as a journalist, you can't do that. Every time they're like, "Hey, please don't ask about this," it's like, actually, that's probably one thing you should ask about. My point being that the expectation is that there's no interference on the White House side, but that the format itself will lend exactly to what you're saying to allow people to explain. Again, in a media era where we need to trust the consumer, my show is routinely over two hours long on cable television. On cable television, the Tucker Carlson program, whenever it was on Fox News, without commercial breaks was about 42, 43 minutes, something like that, of runtime. So I'm speaking for almost triple what that is on a regular basis. The point is that

millions are willing to sit and to listen, but you just have to meet them where they are. So I really hope that a format like that, like a streamer briefing or something like that, I think it's - look, I know they would dunk on it endlessly, but I think it could work.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, I think the incentives are different. I think it works because you, like you saw, don't have to signal to the other journalists that you're part of the clique.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh, I'm so glad you brought that up because that was another lesson I learned. I go, "Oh, none of you are asking important questions for the people. You're asking questions because you all hang out with each other, and you're like, 'Oh, wait.'" So this entire thing is a self-reinforcing guild to impress each other at cocktail parties and not to actually ask anything interesting. I remember people were so mad at me because, this was 2018 or maybe 2017, and I said, "Do you think that Kim Jong Un is sincere in his willingness to meet with you?" something to that effect. They were furious because I didn't ask about some bullshit political controversy that was happening at the time. So in the historical legacy, what was more important? The Mueller question, or Donald Trump breaking 50 years or whatever of tradition with America's relationship with North Korea and meeting him in Singapore and basically resetting that relationship for all time? As you can tell, I read a lot of books. I like to take the long view. Every time I would ask a question, I go, when the future Robert Caro is writing books and he's reading the transcript of the White House press briefing, he doesn't even know who this kid is, he goes, "Oh, that was a pretty good question right there. That's pretty relevant." You got to think about all the bullshit that gets left on the cutting room floor.

Lex Fridman

I love that view of journalism, actually. The goal is to end up as one line in a history book. The goal is to end up as one line in a history book 50 years from now.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes. I just want a quote of what the president said to something that I asked.

Lex Fridman

Yes, in a book.

Saagar Enjeti

That's, "I would be happy. I would die happy with that." If you told me that when I'm like a nine-year-old man, I'd be like, "Man." Right? That means I succeeded.

Lex Fridman

When the AIs write the history of human civilization.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

One of the things I continuously learned from you, when looking back through history, is how crazy American politics has been throughout history. It makes me feel a lot better about the current day.

Saagar Enjeti

It should.

Lex Fridman

Corruption.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes.

Lex Fridman

Just the divisiveness, also. Just the insanity-

Saagar Enjeti

It's been way worse.

Lex Fridman

... of stealing elections at all levels of government, and direct stealing and indirect stealing, all kinds of stuff. So, is there stuff that jumps out to mind throughout history that's just like the craziest corruptions or stealing of elections that come to mind?

Saagar Enjeti

I'll give them the micro and the macro. So my favorite example is Robert Caro, who I've probably talked about him a lot. God bless you, Robert. I hope you lived to write your last book because we really need that from you. But Robert came to Texas. He only intended on writing three books about Lyndon Johnson. He's currently completed four and he is on his fifth, and it's taken over 40 years to write those. And one of the reasons is he just kept uncovering so much stuff. And one of them is book two, Means of Ascent. He never intended to write it, but as he began to investigate Lyndon Johnson's 1948 Senate election, he realizes in real time how rigged and stolen it was. And so I often tell people, "What if I told you that we lived in the most secure election period in modern history?" They wouldn't believe it. But if you read through that shit, I'm talking about bags of cash, millions of dollars, literal stuffed ballot boxes. It's great to be back here in Texas because I always think about that place down in Zapata and Starr County. I'm talking like basically Mexico, where these dons were in power in the 1940s. They would literally stuff the ballot boxes with the

rolls, and they wouldn't even allow people to come and vote. They just check marked it all for you based upon the amount that you paid. Means of Ascent is the painstaking detail of exactly how Lyndon Johnson stole the 1948 Senate election. And nothing like that, as far as I know, is still happening. Macro, we can talk about the 1876 election. Rutherford B. Hayes, one of the closest elections in modern history. It was one of those that got kicked with the House of Representatives. That was an insane, insane time. The corrupt bargain that was struck to basically end reconstruction and federal occupation of the South. And of course, the amount of wheeling and dealing that happened inside of that was absolutely bonkers and nuts. That was what an actual stolen election looks like, just so people know. So on a micro and a macro, yeah, that's what it really looks like. And so look, I understand where people are coming from. Also, let's do - what? 1960? That was pretty wild. In 1960, there was all those allegations about Illinois going for Kennedy. If you look at the actual vote totals of Kennedy-Nixon, wow. I mean, it's such an insanely close presidential election. And even though the electoral college victory looks a little bit differently, Nixon would openly talk about. He's like, "Oh, old Joe Kennedy rigged Illinois for his boy." And he'd be like, "And we didn't even have a chance in Texas with Lyndon pulling." Like, Lyndon stuffing the ballot boxes down there. And this is open on the... They openly admit this stuff. They talk about it. So actually, there's a funny story. LBJ lost, I think, his 1941 Senate primary. And it's because that his opponent, Pappy O'Daniel, actually outstole Lyndon. So they were both corrupt, but Pappy O'Daniel stuffed the ballot box in the fifth day of the seven days to count the votes. And FDR loved LBJ. And it's interesting, right? FDR recognized Johnson's. His talent. And he goes, "Lyndon? You know in New York, we sit on the ballot boxes until we count them." Because he's admitting that he participated in a lot of this stuff. So, this high-level chicanery of stolen elections is actually an American pastime that we luckily have moved on from. And quite a lot of people do not know the exact intricate details of how wild it was back in the day.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's actually one of the things. It's harder to pull off a bunch of bullshit with all these cameras everywhere now.

Saagar Enjeti

Mm-hmm. Transparency too, lack of cash, banking regulations. There's a variety of reasons, but yeah.

Lex Fridman

So that said, let's talk about the 2020 election. It seems like forever ago. Do you think it was rigged the way that Trump claimed?

Saagar Enjeti

No.

Lex Fridman

And was it rigged in other ways?

Saagar Enjeti

Look, this is the problem with language like rigged. And by the way, when I interviewed Vivek Ramaswamy, he said the exact same thing. So for all the MAGA people who are going to get mad at me, Vivek agrees. All right? And if... Okay. I have observed, and I'm going to put my analyst hat on. There are two theories of Stop the Steal. One I call Low IQ Stop the Steal, and one I call High IQ Stop the Steal. Low IQ Stop the Steal is basically what Donald Trump has advocated where Dominion voting machines, and bamboo ballots, and Venezuela and Sidney Powell, and all of the people involved basically got indicted by the state of Georgia. I'm not saying that that was correct. I'm just like, that's what that actually looked like. Rudy Giuliani, et cetera. High IQ Stop the Steal is basically... And actually, these are not illegitimate arguments. The school of thought is it was illegitimate for the state of Pennsylvania and other swing states to change mail-in balloting laws as a response to COVID, which enabled millions of people more to vote that wouldn't have, and that those change in regulations became enough to swing the election. I actually think that that is true. Now, would you say that that's rigged? That's a very important question because we're talking about a Republican state legislature, a Republican state supreme court. Right? The two that actually ruled on this question. So, could you say that it was rigged by the Democrats to do that? Another problem with that theory is that while you can say that that's unfair to change the rules last time around, you can also understand it to a certain extent. And I'm not justifying it, I'm just giving you an example. So for example, after the hurricane hit North Carolina, Republican officials were like, "Hey, we need to make sure that these people in Western North Carolina who were affected by the hurricane could still be able to have access to the ballot box." And people were like, "Oh, so you're saying in an extraordinary circumstance that you should change voting access and regularity to make sure that people have access?" So, my point is you can see the logic through which this happened. And the high IQ version is basically the one that was adopted by Josh Hawley whenever he voted against certification. He said that the state of Pennsylvania, particularly election law, and that those changes were unfair and led to the, quote-unquote, rigging of the election against Donald Trump. Now, there's an even higher IQ, Galaxy Brain Stop the Steal. Galaxy Brain Stop the Steal is one that you saw, with great love and respect, my friend JD Vance, at his debate with Tim Walsh. When Tim Walsh asked him, [inaudible 02:42:36]. He said, "Did Donald Trump win the 2020 election?" He's like, "Tim, I focus on the future." And then he started talking about censorship, the Hunter Biden laptop story. If you take a look at the Joe Rogan interview, Rogan actually asked JD this. He's like, "What do you mean you're in the election? Some version of that." And JD was like, "Well, what I get really frustrated by is people will bring up all of these insane conspiracy theories, but they ignore that the media censored the Hunter Biden laptop story, and that big tech had its finger on the thumb for the Democrats." Now, that is empirically true. Okay? That is true, right? Now, would you say that that's rigged? I'm not going to use that word because that's a very different word. Now,

would you say that that's unfair? Yeah, I think it's unfair. So there's another, a lot of MAGA folks picked up on this one. There was a Time Magazine article in 2020 that's very famous in their crowd, called the... It was like the fight to fortify the election, and it was about all of these institutions that put their fingers on the scale for Joe Biden against Donald Trump. So I will put it this way, was Donald Trump up against the Titanic forces of billionaires, tech censorship, and elite institutions who all did absolute damndest to defeat him in 2020? Yes, that is true. And in a sense, the Galaxy Brain case is the only one of those which I think is truly legitimate. And I'm not going to put it off the table, but this is the problem, that's not what Trump means. Trump, by the way, will never tell you what I just told you. JD will. If you go and you ask any of these Republican politicians when they're challenged on it and they don't want to say that Trump lost at 2020 election, they'll give the hype, the Galaxy Brain case that I just gave. And again, I don't think it's wrong. But it's like, guys, that's not what he means when he says it. And that's the important parsing of the case, right?

Lex Fridman

So first at a high level, Trump or otherwise, I don't like anyone who whines when they lose. Period.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. Although, he did tell you he lost. Did you notice that? That's the only time he's ever said it. Ever.

Lex Fridman

I did.

Saagar Enjeti

You're famous. You're in history for that one.

Lex Fridman

Lost by the whisker.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. "I lost by a whisker."

Lex Fridman

I mean, there is a case to be made that he was joking, I don't know. But there is a kind of weaving that he does with humor, where sometimes it's sarcasm, sometimes not, much easier to showcase in a three-hour interview, I'll say.

Saagar Enjeti

Good call. Go ahead.

Lex Fridman

I couldn't even play with that when you have 40 minutes.

Saagar Enjeti

I know, bro.

Lex Fridman

You're like... I could do just 40 minutes on weaving alone.

Saagar Enjeti

For your style, it doesn't work. And I can tell you how the way I interview politicians is I just do pure policy. So the first time I interviewed Trump, I compiled a list of 15 subjects, me and my editor Vince Coglianese. Shout out to Vince. The two of us sat in an office and then we had questions by priority in each category. And if we felt like we were running short on time, we would move around those different ones. But that was purely, he's the president. We're asking him for his opinions on an immigration bill or whatever. For what you do, it's impossible to do it for you.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. I just want to say that thank you for everybody involved for making my conversation with Donald Trump possible, but I've learned a lot from that. That if I'm told that all I have is 40 minutes, I'm very politely sparing, in that case, Donald Trump, the 40 minutes and just walking away, because I don't think I can do a good job. [inaudible 02:46:06]

Saagar Enjeti

I think that is the correct decision on your part.

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

And I also would encourage you to have the confidence at this point, that you are in a position of something that we call, in the business, the ability to compel the interview. And to compel means to be able to bring somebody else to you and not the other way around. And I think that you and Rogan and a few others are in that very unique position, and I would really encourage you guys to stick to your guns on things that make you feel comfortable. Because those of us in news, we will always negotiate. We're willing to do short form because we're asking about policy. But for the style that you help popularize, and I think that you're uniquely talented and good at, that's very important not to compromise on.

Lex Fridman

Thank you for saying those words. And that's not just in the interest of journalism and the interest of conversations, it's the interest of the guests as well.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, absolutely.

Lex Fridman

To bring out the best in them.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. I mean, I would feel really adding to service. And I would feel like people would not get a unique understanding of my own thought process and my backstory if I was not able to sit here for literally hours, and to explain in deep detail how I think about the world. Not that anyone cares that much, but it's just like all I can do is I hope it's helpful. I want to help people think. Because when I was growing, I was grew up not far from here, 90 minutes from here, in College Station. I felt very uniquely closed off from the world. I found the world through books, and books saved my life so many different times. And I hope to encourage that in other people. I really... No matter where you are, no matter who you are, no matter how busy you are, if you have some time, to either sit down with a book or put on an audiobook, and you can transport yourself into a different world. It's so important. And that's something that your show really helps me with, too. I love listening to your show whenever. Sometimes when I'm too into politics and I need to listen to something, I'll listen to that Mayan historian guy. I love stuff like that, absolutely.

Lex Fridman

I've been in a deep dive on Genghis Khan, reading Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. Jack Weatherford. Fantastic.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, he's coming on.

Saagar Enjeti

Is he?

Lex Fridman

Yeah.

Saagar Enjeti

Amazing.

Lex Fridman

And again, shout out to Dan Carlin.

Saagar Enjeti

The goat, the OG. Dan, I've never met you before. I would love to correspond at some point. I love you so much. You changed my life, man.

Lex Fridman

I met him once before, and it felt any else -

Saagar Enjeti

I was in your interview with him.

Lex Fridman

I was starstruck. Very, very starstruck. And his... I mean, there's so much Painfotainment that I've listened to it many times.

Saagar Enjeti

I think one of his best series that he gets no credit for, Ghosts of the Ostfront. Nobody gives him credit for that one. That's OG. This is a 2011 series. But his Ghosts of the Ostfront on the eastern front of the Nazi war against Russia fundamentally changed my view of warfare forever. And also at that time, I was very young. And to me, World War II was saving Private Ryan. I wasn't as well-read as I am. Now, and I was like, "Oh shit. This entire thing happened which actually decided the Second World War, and I don't know anything about this." So, shout out to Dan. God bless you, man.

Lex Fridman

And his, quote-unquote, short episodes I think on slavery in general, Throughout Human History -

Saagar Enjeti

That was an awesome episode. I actually bought a bunch of Hugh Thomas books because of that episode. I'd never really read about African slavery or the slave trade outside of the Civil War context. So again, shout out to him for that one. That was an amazing episode.

Lex Fridman

Hugh -

Saagar Enjeti

His Japan series, too. I'm going to Japan in a few days, and I keep thinking of what he always talked about in his Supernova in the East, "The Japanese are like everyone else but only more so." And the... God, I love that quote.

Lex Fridman

Okay, he's great. And we ironically arrived at this tangent while talking about the 2020 election.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. That's why podcasting is fun.

Lex Fridman

Because he said lost by a whisker. And now, were dragging us, screaming back to the topic. One of the things I was bothered by is Trump claiming that there's widespread, as you're saying, low IQ theory, the widespread voter fraud. And I saw no evidence of that that he provided. And all right, let's put that on the table. And then the other thing I was troubled by, that maybe you can comfort me in the context of history, how easily the base ate that up. That they were able to believe the election was truly rigged based on no clear evidence that I saw. And they just love the story. And there is something compelling to the story, like this DNC type. Like with Bernie, the establishment just state they're corrupt and they steal the will of the people. And the lack of desire from the base or from people to see any evidence of that, what's really troubled me.

Saagar Enjeti

I'm going to give you one of the most depressing quotes, which is deeply true. Roger Ailes, who is a genius. Shout out to The Loudest Voice in the Room by Gabriel Sherman. That book changed my life too, because it really made me understand the media. People don't want to be informed, they want to feel informed. That is one of the most fundamental media insights of all time.

Lex Fridman

Oh, fuck. What a line.

Saagar Enjeti

Roger Ailes, a genius. A genius in his own right who... He changed the world. He certainly did. He's the one who gets credit for one of the greatest debate lines of all time because he was an advisor to President Reagan. Whenever he broke in, and he was like, "Mr. President, people want to know if you're too damn old for this job or not." And he inspired that joke that Reagan made, where he was like, "I will not use age in this campaign. I'll not hold my opponent's youth and inexperience against him." That was Ailes, man. He did the Nixon town halls. He did it all. He's a fucking genius. And I'm not advocating necessarily for the world he

created for us, but he did it, and people should study him more. If you're interested in media in particular, that book is one of the most important books you'll ever read.

Lex Fridman

You know what? That quote just really connected with me because there's all of this talk about truth. And I think what people want to... They want to feel like they're in possession of the truth.

Saagar Enjeti

Correct.

Lex Fridman

Not actually being the possession of the truth.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, I know. It hit me, too. Actually, Russell Crowe does an amazing job of delivering that line in the Showtime miniseries. So if you have the chance, you should watch it. And look, this is the problem. Liberals will be like, "Yeah. See these idiot Republicans?" I'm like, "Yeah. You guys have bought a lot of crazy stupid shit, too. Okay?" And if actually, I would say liberal misinformation, quote-unquote, is worse than Republican disinformation because it pervades the entire elite media like RussiaGate or Cambridge Analytica or any of these other hoaxes that have been foisted on the American people. The people who listen to the Daily and from the New York Times are just as brainwashed, lack of informed, want to feel informed as people who watch Fox News. So, let me just say that out there. It's an equal opportunity, cancer in the American football.

Lex Fridman

Actually, we started early on in the conversation talking about bubbles. What's your advice about how to figure out if you're in a bubble and how to get out of it?

Saagar Enjeti

That's such a fantastic question. Unfortunately, I think it comes really naturally to someone like me because I'm the child of immigrants and I was raised in College Station, Texas. So, I was always on the outside. And when you're on the outside... This isn't a sob story. It's a deeply useful skill because when you're on the outside, you're forced to observe. And you're like, "Oh." When I was raised was the Bible belt, and people really... People were hardcore Evangelical Christians. So, I could tell. I'm like, "Oh, they really believe this stuff." And they were always trying to proselytize and all of that. And then the other gift that my parents gave me is I got to travel the entire world. I probably visited 25, 30 countries by the time I was 18. And one of the things that that gave me was the ability to just put yourself in the brain of another person. So one of the reasons I'm really excited to go to Japan, and I picked it as a spot for my honeymoon, was because Japan is a first-world developed country where

the vast majority of them don't speak English. It's distinguishably non-Western and they just do shit their own way. So they have a subway, but it's not the same as ours. They have restaurants, things don't work the same way. They have... I could go a laundry list. Their entire philosophy of life, of the daily rhythm, even though it merges with service-based managerial capitalism and they're fucking good at it too, they do it their own way. So, exposure to other countries in the world gave me... And also, just being an outsider myself gave me a more detached view of the world. So if you don't have that, what I would encourage you is to flex that muscle. So, go somewhere that makes you uncomfortable. This will be a very boomer take, but I hate the fact that you have 5G everywhere you go in the world. Because some of the best experiences I've ever had in my life is walking around Warsaw, Poland trying to find a bus station to get my ass to Lithuania with a printed out bus ticket. I have no idea where the street is. I'm in a country where not that many people speak English. We're pointing and gesturing, and I figured it out. And it was really useful. I got to meet a lot of cool Polish people. Same in Thailand. I've been in rural, like [inaudible 02:55:32], Thailand, Columbia. Places where people speak zero English. And your ability to gesture and use Pidgin really connects you and gives you the ability to get an exposure to others. And I know this is a very wanderlust-like travel thing, but unironically, if you're raised in a bubble, pierce it. That's the answer, is seek something out that makes you uncomfortable. So if you're raised rich, you need to go spend some time with poor people.

Lex Fridman

And consider that they might actually understand the world better than you.

Saagar Enjeti

Well, in some respects. I think a lot of rich people have really screwed-up personal lives. So if you're poor and you really value family, you say, "Oh, that's interesting. There seems to be a fundamental trade-off between extraordinary wealth and something that I value. But what can I take away from that person? Oh, put my money in index funds. Make sure that I am conscientious about my budgeting." It's common sense shit, right? And vice versa. People who are very wealthy get so caught up in the rat race about their kids going to private school and all of this. And then, they very rarely engage with... There's that famous study where they ask people on their deathbed what they valued in life, and every single one of them was like, "I wish I'd spend more time with my children." I think about that every time. That I am thinking about pursuing a new work endeavor or something that's going to have me spend significant time away from my wife. And I'm almost always these days, now that I've achieved a certain level of success, the answer is, "I'm not doing it unless you can come with me."

Lex Fridman

One of the bubbles I'm really concerned about is the San Francisco bubble. I visited there recently because I have so many friends there that I respect deeply. There's so many brilliant people in San Francisco.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely.

Lex Fridman

The Silicon Valley. But there's just this - I don't even want to criticize it, but there's definitely a bubble of thought.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, I'm with you. I'm friends with some SV, Silicon Valley people as well. I'm similarly struck by that every time I go. And honestly, I do admire them because they... What I respect the most amongst entrepreneurs, business, and political thinkers is systems thinking. Nobody thinks systems better than people who are in tech because they deal with global shit. Not even just America. They have to think about the whole world, about the human being and his relationship with technology. And coding, in some ways, is an expression of the human mind. About how that person wants to achieve this thing and how you mechanically can type that into a keyboard or even code something to code for you to be able to achieve that. That's a remarkable accomplishment. I do think those people... And people like that too, who think very linearly through math, their geniuses are the ones who can take their creativity and merge it with linear thinking. But I do think that that actually, those are the people who probably most need to get out of the bubble, check themselves a little bit. And look, it's really hard. Once you achieve a certain level of economic success and others, what do most rich people do? They close themselves off from the world. Vast majority of the time, what do you do? Economy is annoying flying. They fly first class. Living in a small house is annoying. They buy a bigger house. Dealing with a lot of these inconveniences of life is annoying. You pay a little bit more to make sure you don't have to do that. There's a deep insidious thing within that, each one of those individual choices. Where the more and more removed that you get from that, the more in the bubble that you are. So, you should actually seek out those experiences or create them in a concerted way.

Lex Fridman

Speaking of bubbles, Sam Harris.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh.

Lex Fridman

He has continued to criticize me directly and indirectly, I think unfairly, but I love Sam. I deeply respect him. Everybody should listen to the Making Sense podcast. It always makes me think. It's definitely in the rotation for me.

Saagar Enjeti

That's a very admirable view.

Lex Fridman

He's, I think, one of the sharpest minds of our generation. And for a long time, I looked up to him. It was one of the weird moments for me to meet him because you listen to somebody for such a long time.

Saagar Enjeti

I feel that way with you, yeah. I'm serious.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's a beautiful moment. Same with Joe and stuff like this.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh, absolutely.

Lex Fridman

It's a-

Saagar Enjeti

It is one of the most surreal moments of your life, to be able to meet somebody who you spend hours listening to. I actually think about that when people come up to me. Because I'm like, "Oh, they're feeling what I felt whenever I..."

Lex Fridman

Yeah. And you see it, you feel it, and you have to celebrate that because there is an intimacy to it. I think it's real that people really do form a real connection, a real friendship. It happens to be one-way, but I think it actually can upgrade to a two-way pretty easily. It happens with me in a matter of five minutes when I meet somebody at an airport or something like that.

Saagar Enjeti

Definitely.

Lex Fridman

Anyway, Sam took a pretty strong position on Trump.

Saagar Enjeti

And has for a long time.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. He has been consistent and unwavering. He thinks that Trump is a truly dangerous person for a democracy, for... Maybe, for the world. Can you steelman his position?

Saagar Enjeti

See, I think a lot of this podcast has been steel manning it because Sam is a big character matters guy. He focuses a lot on Trump's personality. By the way, I'm like you. I've listened to Sam Harris for years. I bought his meditation app. So, nobody's going to accuse me of being some Sam Harris hater. I listened to him for way before, long before even Donald Trump was elected. That's how far back I go with the Sam Harris podcast. I have a lot of respect for the dude. I enjoy a lot of his older interviews. I do think after Trump, he did succumb a little bit, in my opinion, to the elite liberalism view, both of the impetus behind Donald Trump and why he was able to be successful. So in some ways, very denigrating to the Trump voter, but also a fundamental misunderstanding of the American presidency. Because like I said, he really is the one who believes that that narcissism, that character and all of that that makes Trump tick itself will eventually override any potential benefit that he could have in office. And I just think that's a really wrong way of looking at it. I mean, for example, I had this debate with Crystal, and this gets to the whole Trump talking about the enemy from within. And she was like, "He wants to prosecute his political opponents. Do you disagree with that?" And I was like, "No, I don't." And she was like, "So, you're not worried about it?" And I go, "No, I'm not." And she's like, "Well, how do you square that?" And I was like, "Well, I actually unironically believe in the American system of institutional checks and balances." Which kept him, quote-unquote, in check last time around. I also believe in democracy where... This is really interesting, but in 2022, a lot of the Republicans who were the most vociferous about Stop the Steal, they got their asses kicked at the ballot box. Americans also then, in 2024, decided to forgive some of that from Donald Trump. It definitely didn't help, right? But they were able to oversee that for their own interests. As in democratically, people are able to weigh in terms of checks and balances, what they should and should not challenge a politician by. But also, we have the American legal system, and I also know the way that the institutions in Washington themselves work. That fundamentally, the way that certain processes and other things could play out will not play out to some Hitlerian fantasy. And this gets to the whole Kamala and them calling her a fascist and a Hitler. You and I probably spent hours of our lives, maybe more, thinking and reading about Adolf Hitler, Weimar Germany. And I just find it so insulting because it becomes this moniker of fascist. You know what I'm saying? These terms have meaning beyond just the dictionary definition. The circumstances through which Hitler is able to rise to power are not the same as today. And it's like, stop denigrating America to the point where you think... Really, you should flip it around. Why do you think America is Weimar, Germany? That's a ridiculous thing to say. Do you unironically believe that? No, you don't believe that. So, that is personally what drives me a little bit crazy. And I think that Sam has found himself in a mental framework where he is not willing, he's not able to look past the man and his, quote-unquote, danger. And at the end of the day, his worldview was rejected wholly by the American people. Because the character argument, the fascist argument, the Hitler argument, the he's uniquely bad argument has been run twice before 2016 and in 20... Actually, all three times. I guess, it won in 2020. But two out of the three times, Donald Trump has won the presidency. And in his latest one, where that argument has never been made before for a longer period of time and

more in strength by a political candidate, was rejected completely. And I would ask him to reconcile himself to the America that he lives in.

Lex Fridman

I think one thing, maybe to partially steel man his case but also just to steel man the way the world works, is that there is some probability that Kamala Harris will institute a communist state and there is some probability that Donald Trump will indeed... Will fly a swastika with... And deport, I don't know, everybody who's not Scott Irish. I don't know.

Saagar Enjeti

You and I are screwed then.

Lex Fridman

Maybe, is there a spirit test?

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

Okay. But that probability is small, and you have to... If you allow yourself to focus on a particular trajectory with a small probability, it can become all-encompassing. Because you could see it. You could see a path. There are certain character qualities to Trump where he wants to hold onto power.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes, absolutely.

Lex Fridman

First of all, every politician wants to hold onto power. Joe Biden, maybe because he's part of the machine, can't even conceive of the notion of a third term. But he has the arrogance to want to hold onto power, do everything he can.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely.

Lex Fridman

And with Trump, I could see that if it was very popular for him to have a third term, I think he would not be the kind of person who doesn't advocate for a third term.

Saagar Enjeti

So, what? That would require the Senate and the House or 70... What is it? 70- That would require the Senate and the House or 70... What is it? 75% of the states to pass and change

the Constitution. Do you think that's going to happen? No, I don't think it's going to happen, so I'm not that worried about it. Now, you can make a norms argument, and I actually think that's fair, is that he's the norms buster. But with extraordinary candidates and people like Trump, you get the good and the bad. There is a true duality. The norms he busts around foreign policy, I love. The norms he busts around the economy, I love. The norms he busts around just so much of the American political system saying how it's et cetera, I love that. You know what I hate? This 2020 election bullshit. You know what else I hate? I don't know. The lack of discipline that I would want to think that a great leader could have like when he was president and tweeting about Mika Brzezinski's facelift. That was objectively ridiculous. It was crazy, okay? Was it funny? Yeah, but it was crazy, and it's not how I would conceive and have conceived of some of my favorite presidents. I wouldn't think that they would do that, but that's what you get. Everyone should be clear-eyed about who this man is, and that's another problem. The deification of politicians is sick. It's sickening about Trump, around Obama. These people are just people. The idea that they are godlike creatures with extraordinary judgment... One of the really cool things about you and I's job is we actually get to meet very important people. After you meet a few billionaires, you're like, "Yeah, there's definitely something there. But some of them get lucky." After you meet a few politicians, you're like, "Oh. They're like... They're not that smart." That was a rude awakening for me, by the way, being here in Texas, reading about these people. And pretty soon, I was on Capitol Hill. I was 19 years old. I was an intern. I'm actually interacting, and I see them behave in ridiculous manners and whatever. Just treat people badly or say something stupid. I was like, "Oh." I'm like, "This is not the West Wing." I'm like, "This is not a book. These people are just... This is just reality." The weirdest part of my life is I've now been in Washington long enough. I know some of the people personally, the vice president of the United States, literally the vice president-elect, future cabinet secretaries, these people I literally have met, had dinner with, had a drink with, whatever. That's a wild thing, and that's even more bringing you down to Earth. You're like, "Oh, shit. You're actually going to have a lot of power. That's kind of scary, but you're just a person." So even though you don't have to say, "I have my same life experience," take it from me or anybody else who's ever met really famous people, rich, successful, powerful people. They're just people. There's nothing that... There's some things that are unique about them, but they have just as many human qualities as you or anybody else who's listening to this right now.

Lex Fridman

Yeah. For each candidate, Trump is probably the extreme version of that. There's a distribution of the possible trajectories their administration might result in, and the range of possible trajectories is just much wider with Trump.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, you're describing a Bayesian theory, right? I think that's actually a really useful framework for the world, is that people are really too binary. So like you said, there's a theoretical possibility, I guess, of a communist takeover of government and of fascist

takeover of government under Kamala Harris or Donald Trump. The realistic probability, I would give it 0.05% probably in both directions. But there are a lot of things that can happen that are bad, that are not Hitlerian or fascist. There are a lot of things that happen that are really good, that are not FDR New Deal style. One of the worst things politicians do is they describe themselves in false historical ways. So in Washington, one of the most overused phrases is made history. I'm like, "If you actually read history, most of these things are just..." They're not even footnotes. They're the stuff that the historians flip past, and they're like, "What a stupid bucking thing." I'm talking about things that ruled American politics. What if I told you that the Panama Canal Treaty was one of the most important fights in modern American politics? Nobody thinks about that today. It ruled American politics at that time. It genuinely is a footnote, but that's not how it felt at the time. So that's another thing I want people to take away.

Lex Fridman

You tragically missed the UFO hearings.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh, man. My brothers, I'm really sad.

Lex Fridman

My brothers.

Saagar Enjeti

Let me tell you, I love them so much. The UFO community are some of the best people I've ever met in my life. Shout out to my brother Jeremy Corbell, to George Knapp, the OG, to all of the people who fly from all around the world to come to these hearings. It was so fun. I got to meet so many of them last time. Just walk the rope line as people were coming. And the excitement, the... I truly love the UFO community. Shout out to all of them.

Lex Fridman

This is the second one, I guess.

Saagar Enjeti

This is the second one.

Lex Fridman

Do you hope they continue happening?

Saagar Enjeti

It's going to be a slow burn. So one of the things I always tell the guys and everybody is, "Consider how long it took to understand the sheer insanity of the CIA in the 1950s and '60s." So if we think back to the church committee, I forget the exact year of the church

committee. I think it was in the '70s. The entire church committee and knowledge of how the CIA and the FBI were up to all of this insane shit throughout the '50s and '60s is because some people broke into a warehouse, discovered some documents, got the names of programs which were able to be FOIA'd, and we were able to break open that case. It would never have happened with real transparency, like in the official process. So we owe those people a great debt. I guess I could say, now the statute of limitations has passed. My point about the UFOs is I don't know what is real or not. I have absolute confidence and absolute ton is being hid from the American people and that all of the official explanations are bullshit. I have had the opportunity to interface with some of the whistleblowers and other... the activists in the community, people who I trust, people who have great credentials, who have no reason to lie, who have assured us that there is a lot going on behind the scenes. There has been too much misinformation and effort by the deep state to cover up this topic. So I would ask people to keep the faith. It's 2024 and we still don't have all the JFK files. Everyone involved is dead. There's no reason to let it go. Even though we basically know what happened, we don't know. If you read that fantastic book, the Tom O'Neill book about the Manson murders, again, it took him 20 years to write that book and he still didn't get the full story. So sometimes, it takes an extraordinarily long agonizing period of time, and I know how deeply frustrating that is. But when you think about a secret, a program and knowledge of this magnitude, it would only make sense that it would require a titanic effort to reveal a titanic secret.

Lex Fridman

You think Trump might be able to push for... aggressively break through the secrecy, let's say, even on the JFK files?

Saagar Enjeti

I hope so. I have moderate confidence. RFK Jr. has pushed him to do so. I would like to think so. At the same time, I saw him got rolled last time, so I'll hold my breath.

Lex Fridman

Why do you think that happens? Why do you think it gets-

Saagar Enjeti

Remember that whole interagency thing I told you about? That's how it happens. That's another thing. You're presuming that the president has the power to declassify this stuff. I'm saying that I'm not even sure we're there in terms of-

Lex Fridman

So it's basic stability. He basically says, "I would like to declassify JFK files." And they say, "Yes, sir. We'll get that to you in three months." And three months comes by. And then they're like, "Well, there's these hurdles."

Saagar Enjeti

Well, the way you get around it is go, "Let's release some." But these in particular, there's national security secrets is a good case for not releasing them, X, Y and Z. It's like, you get around that. You're like, "Oh, okay. That makes sense." Again, he's a busy guy. He's the president. He got way bigger shit to worry about. So that's the problem, is that unless you have that true urgency... Look, people of immense power have tried. Everyone forgets this. John Podesta was the White House chief of staff. He is a UFO true believer in his heart. He tried. He's talked about it. He tried, at the top level, the number two to the White House, to get the Pentagon and others to tell him what was going on, and they stonewalled him. So people need to understand what you're up against. People are like, "How is that even possible?" It's like, well, go read about the terror that LBJ and the Kennedys and others had in confronting J. Edgar Hoover. Go and read how terrified Eisenhower and some of them were of the Dulles brothers. They were scared. They knew where the power lies. So the presidency... Look, government, deep state, et cetera, they've been there a long time, and they know what's happening and presidents come and go, but they stay forever. So that's the paradigm that you're going to have to fight against.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, it's a bit of a meme, but I wonder how deep the deep state is.

Saagar Enjeti

Much deeper than anyone can even imagine. The worst part is, what the deep state is, it's not even individuals. It's actually an ideology, and ideology is the most... People often think that if we took money out of politics that it would change everything. I'm not saying it wouldn't change everything, but it wouldn't change a lot. But people are like, "Oh, so-and-so is only against universal healthcare getting paid." I'm like, "No, no, no. That's not why. They actually believe it." Or it's like, "Oh, so-and-so only wants to advocate for war with Iran because they're on the payroll of AIPAC." And it's like, "Well, yeah. The AIPAC trips and the money helps. But they think that actually the system itself..." This is a very Chomsky-esque systemic critique, is that any journalist worth their salt would never have the ability to get hired in a mainstream. So he's like, "It's not that you're bad in the mainstream media, it's that anyone good is not allowed to be elevated to your position because they have an ideology." So that is the most self-reinforcing, pernicious mechanism of them all, and that's really Washington in a nutshell.

Lex Fridman

It's again, a bubble, but a bubble that has a lot of power.

Saagar Enjeti

Yes.

Lex Fridman

Who do you think is the future of the Republican Party after Trump? What happens to Trumpism after Trump?

Saagar Enjeti

Like you just said, Bayesian. Let's take various theories, right? So let's say it's '04, it's Bush, Cheney. In 2004, the day after the election, I would've told you this. We live in a Bible belt, Jesus land America. This America wants to protect America, a war on terror against Iraq and the axis of evil, and American people who just voted for George W. Bush. So I would've predicted that it would've been somebody in that vein, and they tried that. His name was John McCain. He got blown the fuck out by Barack Obama. So I cannot sit here and confidently say.

Lex Fridman

What year would you be able to predict Obama? It was just his first time he gave the speech -

Saagar Enjeti

The 2004 speech at the DNC. That was his, "We don't live in -

Lex Fridman

That's -

Saagar Enjeti

- Black America, white America." The John Kerry DNC speech. You honestly could not have predicted it until '07, whenever he actually announced his campaign and activated a lot of anti-war energy. Maybe '06. Actually, I could have said in '06, if I was a contrarian man now, I would've been like, "Yeah, there's a lot of anti-war energy. I think the next president will be somebody who's able to vote..." The explosion of Keith Olbermann and MSNBC, it makes logical sense in hindsight. But at the same time, you're going up against the Clinton machine who's never lost an election. So I would've been afraid. I cannot confidently say. So I'll say, if things go in different directions, if Trump is a net positive president, then I think it'll be JD Vance, his vice president who believes in a lot of the things that I've talked about here today, about foreign policy restraint, about the working class, about changing Republican attitudes to the economy. He would be able to build upon that legacy in the way that George H.W. Bush was able to get elected off the back of Reagan. But H.W. Bush was fundamentally his own man. He's a very misunderstood figure, very different than Ronald Reagan, didn't end up working out for him, but he did get himself elected once. So that's one path. That's if you have a net positive Trump presidency. The other path is the '04 path that I just laid out. If Trump does what Bush does, misinterprets his mandate, screws things up, creates chaos, and it makes it just generally annoying to live in American society, then you will see somebody in the Republican Party... Still, it could even be JD Vance because he

could say, "JD is my natural and my chosen successor," but then he would lose an election and then he would no longer be the so-called leader of the Republican Party. So I could see it swing in the other direction. I could see Republicans or others... Let's say, if it's a total disaster and we'd get down to 20% approval ratings and the economy is bad and stuff like that. Glenn Youngkin or somebody like that who's very diametrically opposed to Donald Trump or at least aesthetically is somebody like that who could rise from the ashes. I'm just saying in terms of his aesthetic, not him per se. So there's a variety of different directions. It's a big question about the Republican base. A shit ton of people voted Republican now for the first time ever. So are they going to vote in party primaries? I don't know. The traditional party primary voter is like a white boomer who's 58-59. Is the Latino guy in California who turned out to vote for Trump with a MAGA hat and rolling around suburban Los Angeles with that... Is he going to vote in the Republican Party? That could change. So the type of candidate themselves could come. So it's way too early to say. We have so many variety of paths that we could go down.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, I think Trump is a singular figure in terms of, if you support Trump, there's a vibe. I know Kamala has a vibe, but there's definitely a vibe to Trump and MAGA. I think even with JD, that that's no longer going to be there. So if JD runs and wins, that would be on principles. Because he's a very different human being.

Saagar Enjeti

He is so different than Trump. You can see his empathy. Remember in the VP debate when he was like, "Christ have mercy?" When Tim Walz was talking about his son? That's not something Donald Trump's saying, okay? It's just not. By the way, this is my own bubble test. I have no idea how somebody listens to Trump and JD Vance is like, Trump is the guy who should be the president over him. Honestly, I don't get it. That's my own cards on the table. I am in too much of a bubble where my bias is to being well-spoken and being empathetic or at least being able to play empathetic and being extremely well-read about the world and thoughtful and somebody like him who's engaged in the political process, but also has been able to retain his values and be extremely well-articulated his worldview. That's my bias. That's who I would want to be the president, but it's a big country. People think differently.

Lex Fridman

By the way, I'm sure you're biased.

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah.

Lex Fridman

I sometimes try to take myself out of that bubble. Maybe it's not important to have read a book or multiples of books on history.

Saagar Enjeti

I'm not saying everybody should be like me, but that's my point. I'm checking myself by being like, because of who I am, that's how I see the world, and that's how I would choose a leader. But that is not how people vote, period. Nothing has taught me that more than this election.

Lex Fridman

I wish they did. I don't know if that's a lesson to take away. I think -

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah, but who are we to say? People are allowed to do what they want. I'm not going to tell somebody how to vote.

Lex Fridman

No, what I'm saying is you take everything Trump is doing everything, the whole... the dance, all of it, and add occasional saga-like references to history books. I think that's just a better candidate.

Saagar Enjeti

I agree with you. Listen, it's my bias.

Lex Fridman

I don't know. I don't think that's bias. I think that's not a bubble thinking. I think it's a -

Saagar Enjeti

It's amazing to me, right? Listen to the JD interview with Rogan. JD, he'll drop obscure references to studies, to papers that have come out, essays, books. This is a very well-read, high IQ, well-thought-out individual who also has given his life to the political process and decided to deal with all the bullshit that this entire system is going to throw at you whenever you start to engage. That's who I would want to be president, but I'm biased, so what can I say?

Lex Fridman

I like how you keep saying you're biased as if there's some percent of the population who doesn't like people to read at all. Okay. What about the future? You hinted at it the future of the Democratic Party. Did you see any talent out there that's promising? Is it going to be Obama-like figure that just rolls out of nowhere?

Saagar Enjeti

Clinton is the better example because the Democratic Party was destroyed for 12 years. From the 1980 election to 1992. They're 12 years out of power. In periods of that long of an era, it takes somebody literally brand new who is not tainted by the previous to convince the base that you can want and convince the country that you're going in a new direction. So I

would not put my money on anybody tainted by the Great Awakening, by TDS, by the insanity of the Trump era. There has to be somebody post that and/or somebody who is able to reform themselves. In my opinion, it will likely not be any establishment politician of today who will emerge for the future. Like I said, my dark horse is Dean. I think the Democratic base is going to give Dean a shit ton of credit, and they should, for him being out. Look, let's be honest, he's a no-name Congressman from Minnesota. Nobody cared who Dean Phillips was, but just like Obama, he had courage and he came out and spoke early when it mattered. By doing that, he showed good judgment, and he showed that he's willing to take risks. So I would hope in America's political system that we award something like that. I do think the Democrats will reward him, but I'm not saying it'll be him per se. But it will be a figure like that who is not nationally known, who has read the tea leaves correctly, who took guesses and did things differently than everybody else. Most of all, I'm hoping that heterodox attitudes, ideas, behaviors by definition after a blowout, those will likely be the ones that are rewarded. So I cannot give a name, but I can just describe the circumstances for what it will look like.

Lex Fridman

Can you imagine an amorphous figure that's a progressive populist?

Saagar Enjeti

It would be very difficult at this point, just because a huge portion of the multiracial working class has shifted to the right, but I could see it. Look, people change their minds all the time. There are people out there who voted for Barack Obama, who've now voted for Donald Trump three times. So a lot can change in this country. If you make a credible case, you've got a track record, you speak authentically and you can try to divide the country along class lines and be authentic and real about it, maybe. I think you have a shot. I still think you're probably going to get dinged on culture just because I think this election has really showed us how important immigration and culture is. Actually, what the left populists should pray for, and they won't admit this, is that Trump actually solves immigration in terms of changing the status quo. You know how in the way that the Supreme Court just ended the conversation around gay marriage? So Republicans were like, "Yeah, whatever. We support gay marriage," because they're like, "That's the law of the land. It is what it is." They should just hope that their unpopular issue is resolved by the president and thus, they just don't have to talk about it anymore. Now, the battleground is actually favorable for them. They get to talk about the economy and abortion. So their least popular issue gets solved by the president by consensus from his mandate, and then they can run on a brand new platform for the new issues that are facing America.

Lex Fridman

All right. Let's put our historian hat back on.

Saagar Enjeti

Okay.

Lex Fridman

Will the American Empire collapse one day? If it does, when it does, what would be the reason?

Saagar Enjeti

Statistically likely. Yeah. Statistically, yes. It's the famous Fight Club quote. It's like, "On a long enough timeline, the survival rate for everything drops to zero." And -

Lex Fridman

I like for all the books you've quoted, you went to Fight Club.

Saagar Enjeti

Oh, I have -

Lex Fridman

I guess the movie, right?

Saagar Enjeti

The book's good though. People should read that too. In terms of why. Again, statistically the answer's quite simple. It usually comes back to a series of unpopular wars which are pursued because of the elite's interests. Then it usually leads to a miscalculation and not a catastrophic defeat. Normally, it comes gradually, and most of the times when these things end, the crazy part is most people who are living through end of empire have no idea that they're living through the end of the empire. I actually think about that a lot from Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by Edward Gibbon. Actually, your episode on Rome was fantastic. People should go listen to that. So there you go. Another really good one, I like to think a lot about the British Empire and what eventually led to that collapse. Nobody in 1919 said the British Empire has just collapsed. Basically, nobody still thought that. They were like, "Yeah, the first World War is horrible. But actually, we came out of this okay. We still have India. We still have all these African colonies and all that, but long periods of servitude, of debt to the United States, of degradation, of social upheaval, of Bolshevism, of American industrial might." And next thing you know, you find yourself at Potsdam and Churchill's like, "Holy shit, I have barely any power in this room." So revolutions happen slowly and then all at once. So could you really put a real pin in the end of the British Empire? It took almost 40 years for it to end. So America's empire will eventually end either from rising geopolitical competition, likely China. Could be India. Nobody knows. It will likely be because of being overstretched by an elite capture, is usually the reason why, and a misreading of what made your original society work in the first place. That is one where... Honestly, all three of those things will happen all at once, and it will happen over an extremely long period of time. It's

very difficult to predict. I would not bet against America right now. I think we have a lot of fundamental strengths. It's such a unique and dynamic country. It really is fucking crazy. Every time I travel the world, as much as I love all these different places, I go, "Man, I love the United States so much." You'll love it more when you leave. I really believe that.

Lex Fridman

Yeah, and it's nice to remember how quickly the public opinion shifts. We're very dynamic and adaptable, which annoys me. I understand that's part of the political discourse saying, "If Trump wins, it's the end of America. If Kamala wins, it's the end of America."

Saagar Enjeti

So stupid. Yeah.

Lex Fridman

But I-

Saagar Enjeti

It's so dumb.

Lex Fridman

I understand that the radical nature of that discourse is necessary to, who mentioned [inaudible 03:29:15]-

Saagar Enjeti

To drive out votes.

Lex Fridman

To drive up votes.

Saagar Enjeti

I like to think about Americans in 1866. I cannot imagine going through a war where some x percent... I think it was like two or 3% or whatever. The entire population was just killed. Our president, who was this visionary genius, who we were blessed to have, is assassinated at Ford's Theater immediately after the surrender of Lee Andrew Johnson, who's a bumbling fucktard, is the one who is in charge. We are having all these insane crises over internal management while we're also trying to decide this new order in the south and how to bring these people back into the union. I would have despaired in that year. I would've been like, "It's over. This is it. The war," I'd be like, "was it worth anything?" If Andrew Johnson is going to be doing this or even in the South, I can't even imagine for what they were going through too. They have to go home and their entire cities are burned to the ground, and they're trying to readjust and their entire economy and way of life is overthrown in five years. That's an insane time to be alive. What do we know? They worked out. By 1890s or so, there were

people shaking hands, union and there's a cool video on YouTube actually of FDR who is addressing some of the last Gettysburg veterans. I think it was the 75th anniversary or whatever. You can literally see these old men shaking hands across the stone wall. It gives me hope. Yeah.

Lex Fridman

Let's linger on that hope. What is the source of optimism you have for the 21st century, for the century beyond that, for human civilization in general? It's easy to learn cynical lessons from history, right?

Saagar Enjeti

Mm-hmm.

Lex Fridman

The shit eventually goes wrong, but sometimes it doesn't. So what gives you hope?

Saagar Enjeti

I think that the of what makes humanity great and has for a long time are best expressed in the American character, and that despite all of our problems, that as a country with our ethos, a lot of the stuff we talked about today, individualism, the frontier mindset, the blessings of geography, the blessings of our economy, of the way that we're able to just incorporate different cultures and the best of each and put them all together, give us the best opportunity to succeed and to accomplish awesome things. We're the country that put a man on the moon, which is the epitome of the human spirit. I hope to see more of that. I think last time I was here, I shouted out, and I love Antarctic exploration. I've read basically every book that there is on the exploration of Antarctica. One of the reasons I love to do so is because there is no reason to care about Antarctica. None. There's nothing down there. Zero. Going to the South Pole is a truly useless exercise. Yet, we went. We went twice. Actually, two people went there in a span of five weeks, and they competed to do so. The spirit that propelled Amundsen and Scott's expedition and people like Shackleton who's like... If you were to ask me my hero of all heroes, it's Ernest Shackleton. It's because his spirit, I think, lives on in the United States. It unfortunately died in Great Britain. Interestingly enough, the Brits even understand that. They're like, "It's very interesting how popular Shackleton is in America." Even though he was Irish and he was a British subject, to me, he's a spiritual American. I think that his spirit lives on within us and has always been here to a certain extent. Everywhere else, I think it's dying. But here, I love it here. There's so many cool things about America. People move around all the time. They buy new houses. They start families. There's no other place that you can just reset your whole life in the same country. It's wild. You can reinvent yourself. You can go broke. You can get rich. You can go back and forth multiple times, and there's nowhere else where you have enough freedom and opportunity to pursue that. We definitely have a lot of problems, but I've traveled enough of the world now to know that it's a special place, and that gives me a lot of hope.

Lex Fridman

I wish I could do a Bostonian accent of, "We do these things, not because they're easy, but because they're hard."

Saagar Enjeti

Because they're hard. Thank you.

Lex Fridman

That's so true. The Scott Irish got us. Well, listen, I'm a huge fan of you, Saagar. I hope to see you in the White House interviewing the president-

Saagar Enjeti

Yeah. There you go. That's right.

Lex Fridman

And-

Saagar Enjeti

That's the only situation you're going to see me in the White House. Yeah. Yeah.

Lex Fridman

... front row and just talking freely. I would love to live in a country and in the world where it's you who gets to talk to the press secretary, to the president, because I think you're one of the good ones, as far as journalists go, as far as human beings go. So I hope to see you in there, and I hope you get to ask a question that-

Saagar Enjeti

That ends up in a book.

Lex Fridman

That ends up in a good history book.

Saagar Enjeti

Absolutely. Well, likewise, I'm a huge fan of yours. For anybody out there who's interested, I compiled a list and I will go and retroactively edit it. Just go to saagarenjeti.io. I created a newsletter with a website that has all the links to all the books I'm going to talk about here.

Lex Fridman

Beautiful. The hundreds of books that were mentioned here. All right, brother. Thank you so much for talking today.

Saagar Enjeti

Thank you.

Lex Fridman

Thanks for listening to this conversation with Saagar Enjeti. To support this podcast, please check out our sponsors in the description. Now, let me leave you with some words from Voltaire. "History is the study of all the world's crimes." Thank you for listening and hope to see you next time.