

Reason for Hope: A Conversation with Nick Kristof

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00:05: A word about my friend Nick Kristof. Nick is a long-time friend, and he's a member of the Aspen Strategy Group. As all of you know, he writes a very important, twice weekly column for The New York Times. I've often thought, Nick, when I read your column, and I read it avidly, you put people first in that column, you don't put governments first, and you push human rights and human dignity first. And because of Nick's extraordinary reporting career, he's won, two Pulitzer Prizes, one for reporting on China, the other for Darfur. He's just written a book with his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, "Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope", which we'll talk about, which I think has deep meaning for Nick, personally.

00:47: He's had an extraordinary journalistic life. He's lived on four continents. He's traveled to 160 countries. And his biography says, "He has survived unpleasant encounters with mobs, malaria and an African airplane crash." I'm sure we'll hear about that. Nick, before we get into our topic of hope and your recent book, I'm just curious, I've known you for a long time, I've never asked you what got you interested in journalism as a young man?

01:20: Well, my journalism career was born here in Yamhill, Oregon. I'm on the family farm right now in Yamhill. And in the eighth grade, there was an organizational meeting to organize a school newspaper, and I hadn't really thought of journalism. I didn't go to the meeting, but a bunch of people did, and they all wanted to be on a school paper, but none of them wanted the burden of editing it and so, they chose me as editor in absentia, and my journalism career was born and I loved it. In high school, I began working for the local community newspaper. And I love both the aesthetic pleasure of writing and also the sense of this is an outlet, a way to bring about change. This was the aftermath of Woodward and Bernstein and Watergate.

02:12: Right.

02:13: And also, when you're 16, there is no better way to impress other 16-year-old girls than to be writing for the local newspaper. And so, I came to really love journalism.

02:24: So the true motive comes out in that statement. [laughter] And Nick, you and I have a very good mutual friend, David Sanger, did you and David meet on the Harvard Crimson staff?

02:35: We met at the beginning of fall, freshman year. There was an organizational meeting for the competition to get on to Crimson, and there we were, and we've been good friends ever since. David was best man at my wedding.

02:50: Very good. So ladies and gentlemen, Nick and I decided that we wanted to have this session about hope, a conversation about hope. I was so intrigued when I read Nick's July 19th column in The New York Times about hope. And I think both of us believe in this radical notion that despite all the problems we're facing, the pandemic, the economic crisis, the racial crisis, the leadership crisis there are hopeful global trend lines. And Nick knows that in my Great Powers class at Harvard Kennedy School I have multi-national classes, usually 16 to 20 different nationalities in

one class of 50 or 60 students. I always poll the students at the end of the course, and the course is about the US-China rivalry and nuclear weapons and war in the Middle East, What are you hopeful about? Where are the analytical trend lines that would lead us to believe that we can actually improve the human condition? And my millennial students never fail to give me inspiration, Nick, that they believe they can cure cancer. They believe that they can create a carbon-free world, they say this, by 2050. And so, you wrote this marvelous column in The New York Times, and I'll just read everybody and I've got it right here, "We interrupt this gloom to offer hope." Nick, what led you to that column?

04:15: So it was a couple of things. One, is really a sense that the US... I'm in a deep frustration over some time, that the US, really for the last 50 years, has taken a wrong path that... We talked about American exceptionalism, but actually until the 1970s, the US in many ways was fairly similar to Europe and Canada. Our life expectancy, our health metrics were similar to those. Our high school graduation rate was best in the world. And it was really since the 1970s that we began to under-perform in healthcare and education and in inequality, and this has weighed on me, partly because this town that I come from, I'm now in Yamhill, Oregon, it's been indicative of that. It's a working class farming community. A quarter of the kids on my old school bus are now gone from these deaths of despair; drugs, alcohol and suicide. And I've often thought that if they had grown up in Canada or somewhere in Europe, they might well be alive today.

05:29: And so, I've been frustrated by the fact that we have, it seems to me, taken a wrong path, and yet really just in the last year, I've begun to think that actually now, maybe there is hope of really choosing a new and better path. And I think that COVID-19 has made it very apparent to people that when you don't have universal healthcare, there are real costs to everybody. In times of chronic disease, then only the disease sufferers pay the toll, at a time of infectious disease, we all suffer. Likewise the fact that we're the only country in the advanced world that doesn't have paid sick leave. Again, at a time of infectious disease, the burdens of that are more apparent to everybody...

06:19: And with the polling on Black Lives Matter, and how much it has changed, the fact that in some polls a majority of white citizens say they agree with the aims of Black Lives Matter, a huge increase from the past. And I guess I've also been struck that history moves in cycles. Arthur Schlesinger talked about these cycles of history, and I wondered if that cycle from the 1970s isn't already in the process of shifting. When Kansas voters rebelled at tax cuts, and Kansas Republicans said, "Tax us more so we can invest in education." I kind of wondered if that may not be remembered as a turning point in that long cycle. So I think this fall we have a chance, the way America did in the 1932 election, to... It may not quite be a new deal, but something in that direction that begins to address a lot of the inadequacies of our society.

07:25: So the book that you and Sheryl wrote, and obviously had planned well before the current pandemic, coincides with the pandemic. If I could just ask you, what a terrible thing for you and everybody associated with your community that so many of your contemporaries have not lived because a social safety net didn't catch them or because of the conditions of life in the United States. And we've seen in the pandemic the gross income inequality in our country, that healthcare vanishes if it's attached to your job, not to your person. And so your book and the pandemic, in a way, have really overlapped, integrated. And so as you talk about the book, you've got real live examples today of what's happening to America.

08:13: That's right. And, of course, in many ways, as you suggest, Nick, the pandemic has magnified those inequities and magnified the toll. One of the families we write about in a "Tightrope" was the Knapp family who grew up... They got on the bus stop right after I did, five kids, the oldest was my year, and four of them passed away when we were... Before we wrote the book. And the lone survivor, Kelan Knapp, had survived because he spent 13 years in the Oregon State Penitentiary. And then, after COVID began actually, this spring he died of a heroin overdose. So now their mom is still alive at 80, and all five kids gone. And I wonder if Kelan... If it wasn't the social... He lost his job, he was certainly socially isolated, as many people are. There's some indications that drug abuse has been increasing. I think there may well be some connection between COVID and that loss. So while I have some hopes that we have a chance for correcting this, certainly in the short term this is devastating in so many communities around the country, and it's particularly devastated people of color and to those at the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum.

09:46: In your column, you have this very interesting notion of comparing our time now in 2020 to 1932, '33, the failure of Herbert Hoover, the triumph of Franklin D. Roosevelt. No one really could have predicted that Roosevelt would become, in a way, for his time, a radical reformer. You quote two people here about what could be possible in our time. Marian Wright Edelman, she says, "Trump is the perfect opposition to have." Lizabeth Cohen, a mutual friend of ours, a professor at Harvard, "It is possible," she says, "That the best thing that could have happened is the crass, self-interested, ineffective policies of Donald Trump." If the president is to be repudiated, we don't know that yet, on November 3rd, is there a possibility of a new progressive era depending on what happens in the congressional elections? Could Vice President Biden, President Biden, lead us forward to really pay attention to some of these major fault lines in American society?

10:51: So I think it's possible. I'd be reluctant to predict it, you and I both know Vice President Biden, he's not instinctively a revolutionary figure at all, but neither was Roosevelt. And at the end of the day, really what happened in 1932, was that Hoover had been such a disaster that he discredited his party, he discredited the entire one wing of the country. And it was because of that that the Democrats in 1932 flipped the Senate, and not only did FDR win, but they flipped the Senate. And then Roosevelt, faced with this enormous challenge, approached governing not in an ideological way, but in a practical, "We've gotta solve this crisis" kind of way. And he tried all kinds of things, and some worked and some didn't work, and of course in the end, economically, he was helped by the mobilization that came with World War II.

12:00: But Vice President Biden has been saying things to the effect that he understands that this may be a historic turning point. You look at polling on some of these progressive economic issues, healthcare, child care, bandwidth for all, raising the federal minimum wage, and there's enormous support for some of these measures. More than 80% of the public believes that the taxes should rise on the wealthy to fund more social programs. 80% of Americans don't agree on anything, they don't agree the world is round, so to get that kind of consensus on some of these things makes me think that there's a fighting chance that we can correct this wrong turn of the last 50 years.

12:54: So speaking historically, after America's first Gilded Age, and the robber baron capitalism of the late 19th century, you have the muckrakers, journalists like you, exposing social inequalities. You had a great reformer in Theodore Roosevelt, and in a way, at the beginning, Woodrow Wilson

with the income tax of 1913. And then of course, you have the failure of Hoover and largely, the laissez-faire policies of the 1920s, the advent of a second progressive era of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Are we at such an... As a journalist, do you think, are we at such an inflection point... We've gone through a period of extraordinary prosperity for the upper limits of American society, the extremely wealthy people, but not for the middle class, certainly not for low income Americans. Are we at such a point?

13:45: I think that we may be in the sense that so much of the path that we've been on has been completely discredited in the way that Hoover's laissez-faire policies were discredited at the time. There was a poll that I quoted in the end of that "Hope" column that noted... I may misremember, but something like, "Only 16% of Americans said they felt proud of the US" in a country where, of course, patriotism and pride has always been something that has been central to this country's ideology. And in a strange way... In 2016, you saw both on Left and Right. You saw this support for Bernie Sanders and support for Trump, this sense that the system is not working, that we have to do new things, and I think that a lot of the country recognizes that something is profoundly wrong, that we have to try new policies, and I... Boy, I hope that we take advantage of this moment. I think it's entirely possible that if the Senate doesn't go Democratic then we'll just have paralysis for four... There are all kinds of things that could go wrong. But do we have a chance, as the US had in 1932, '33? Boy, I think we just may and it may be a better chance than we had in recent years. What do you think, Nick?

15:22: I think you're right. You quote Vice President Biden, who said recently, "I do think we've reached a point, a real inflection in American history." I think a lot of us are trying to think back to earlier times when the American people rose up in a way, and said, "We want a stronger and better and more inclusive government. We want social security," in the 1930s. "We want civil rights, the Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act," so the mid-1960s. "We want health insurance," that leads you to Barack Obama and Obama Care. So I do think, Nick, that there's something there. A lot of people say... And my next question for you, Nick, a lot of people will say, "But we're so divided, red-blue, north-south, urban-rural, how can we possibly get anything done?" But you say something that Condi Rice echoed this morning. You said in your column, "We may have been much more divided in the 1960s." You and I were both young boys, really, grammar school boys, elementary school boys. Martin Luther King killed, Robert Kennedy killed within six weeks of each other, the Vietnam War, the race riots, the incredible violence in American society, the weathermen from the Left, was that a more difficult time for us?

16:39: So in 1968 I turned nine years old, so I'm not a great commentator. But certainly in talking to the cohort that is just a little bit older than us, I'm struck by how toxic relations were between the boomers and their parents, and how many boomers thought that their parents were vicious murderers who were supporting massacres in Vietnam, and completely immoral. And meanwhile, the parents' generation thought that their kids were utterly immoral and gonna destroy the United States. In a way... Those divisions at the dinner table were toxic in a way that is not true now. And even if you go back to 1932, '33, I don't know that we fully appreciate how much hostility there was to Roosevelt both from the Left, from the Huey Longs of the world, and from the Right, the Father Coughlins of the world. The Supreme Court that agreed to it blocked him early on. That also was a time of polarization, a lot of people thought that Roosevelt was a Communist, etcetera, and despite that, we got an awful lot done.

18:00: He certainly did, and I think most historians would say that Roosevelt is right up there with Lincoln and Washington, probably, as our greatest president because of what he did to help on our parents' generation through the Great Depression and the second World War.

18:14: Let me just say something about that too, so there's been this narrative... It seems to me that one of the big problems in the US has not been that we don't have the tools, that we don't have the resources, in many ways it's been the narrative. It's been a narrative that government can't do anything right, and it's been a narrative that it's all about personal responsibility, and that that is fundamentally what determines outcomes. And here in a rural area that has been hurt so badly over the last few decades, I'm struck that it was transformed by progressive government policies. The whole reason people came here on the Oregon Trail was because of a program for the disadvantaged, the Homestead Acts, which had its own issues with Native Americans but was a way of turning landless Americans into middle-class families. And then the rural electrification completely transformed areas like this. The GI Bill of Rights... It was programs like that that invested in the human capital of Americans, that created a middle class, that had enormous returns, and yet, now we seem to have forgotten the role of those programs and we focus on personal responsibility in a way that, to me, seems myopic.

19:39: I wanna add... Just say to the many, many people who are watching this, we're gonna get to your questions. I already see three people, four people, who are lining up to ask questions. Nick, I've got two more questions for you, and then we'll go to our guests. So when I poll my students, I've been doing this for five or six years, it's interesting... These are students from all over the world, majority American but lots of different nationalities. They're remarkably consistent in what they tell me that they're hopeful about, and these are analytical trend lines. They say, in the last poll in May, "We have lifted more than a billion people out of poverty in the last 40 years, why can't we double that for the next 40 years?"

20:21: They say, "Despite the pandemic, the extraordinary progress on polio, it's going to be eradicated, we hope, in the next four or five years." Bill Gates says that he thinks malaria can be eradicated in our lifetime. Half a million children died in Africa last year under the age of five from malaria. Third, my students, men and women, are passionate about the rise of women, to gender equality, to being able to compete in any way possible without the kind of restrictions that their mothers and grandmothers had. And finally, my students are passionate that tech, broadly defined, whether it's AI, or biotech, or quantum computing, or the information revolution, they say can really change life for the better. And I want to get you to react to that because I know you've looked at this for many years in your columns.

21:15: Your students are exactly right, and they're better students of history than the public as a whole. In polls, up to 90% of Americans say that global poverty is either stuck or getting worse. And in fact, as you suggest, the world has been transformed. When you and I were born, a majority of human beings had always been in extreme poverty, had always been illiterate, and about a quarter of kids died before age five. And now, we are down to fewer than 10% of people living in extreme poverty, 4% of kids die by age five, and now we're up heading toward 90% literacy. Every day over the last couple of decades another 325,000 people have gotten electricity for the first time. You just think what that does, 325,000 people getting electricity for the first time, another 200,000

getting plumbing for the first time. Every day in recent years, another 600,000 people have gotten online for the first time, which goes to the tech transformation that you mentioned.

22:41: More people worldwide now have mobile phones than have toilets, and mobile phones are important not just as communications devices, but as a banking system. In many places, it's hard to get a bank account, but you can store money on your phone, and the only other alternative is to buy chickens and that's how you store money, and it's so much more convenient to store money on a mobile phone and to save that way. And so as you suggest, COVID is gonna challenge these gains. We are gonna go backward for a little bit but I don't think that this fundamental narrative of progress is going to be reversed for long by COVID-19 or by climate change, which will be another factor that will test it. And likewise, the rise of women, the historically...

23:39: And you've written about that with your wife, Sheryl?

23:42: That's right. We wrote a book called, "Half the Sky". And girls education, in particular, was something that was always very secondary and I think nothing is more transformative than educating girls. And now in elementary schools worldwide, there is virtually no gender gap in primary education. There still is in secondary education and in tertiary education but in primary education, there isn't. And when girls get an education, their influence on society, their capacity to earn money, their ability to look after their children is vastly increased. And it always frustrates me a little bit that it seems to me the Taliban, and Boko Haram... That extremists get this. Why does the Taliban shoot Malala in the head? Why does the Afghan Taliban throw acid in girls' faces? Why does Boko Haram kidnap Nigerian school girls? 'Cause they understand that the greatest threat to extremism is an educated girl. I wish that we understood that as well, and were as willing to invest in girls education around the world precisely to help reap those benefits, not just for those countries, but for the world as a whole.

25:04: It's interesting you should mention Afghanistan, Nick, because we've been there now, militarily and politically, almost two decades. And when we look back at some point when our troops have left, it may be the most significant thing we did was to build schools for girls and encourage girls to go back to school. Millions of them in Afghanistan, and may that never be reversed at this perilous time where the Taliban seems to be coming back. Nick, a final question. And for those people who wanna ask a question, it's quite simple, just go down to the gray bar at the bottom of your screen. Under "participants", just press the blue raised hand button. We'll call on as many people as we can. Nick, we were talking just before the interview that in government, I would say that 90% of the time of most people in government, and maybe this is the right proportion, is to defend. We're defending the country against all the ills, political, military, of our adversaries. You and I talked about the possibility we might adjust that ratio, and I've talked to my students about this. If there's tremendous possibility for women, for technology, for public health, for extreme poverty to alleviate it, shouldn't we be devoting governments, non-profits, attention by journalists in the New York Times, and you're one of them that does this, to push forward on these trend lines. To make the world better, more just. Isn't that a great opportunity for us?

26:31: What was the Bobby Kennedy quote? I think he was quoting George Bernard Shaw about "Some men see things as they are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were, and ask why not." I think the government could step into that a little more, and indeed when one thinks about the

steps that were most consequential for human development and human well-being in this country and abroad, they often were precisely those proactive steps. The public health and sanitation in the United States transformed Americans. Well, they transformed America's cities, made it much more habitable. The efforts at disease, smallpox eradication. Well, one might put pandemic management efforts in that...

27:21: Right.

27:23: Although they weren't really followed through this year in the United States, obviously. I think about malnutrition. Almost a quarter of kids worldwide are stunted from malnutrition, and that has consequences for their height, but it also has consequences for their mental development, for their cognitive bandwidth, for the rest of their lives. And we know how cheap it is to address that malnutrition and yet, we've been unable to... We haven't treated that as a high priority issue. Early childhood development in this country, as I think about what would have helped those quarter of kids who died on my school bus. There are no easy solutions, there are no silver bullets, but there's silver buckshot. And one of those buckshot is early childhood programs to help kids get on track so that they can have better outcomes.

28:21: Nick, I said at the beginning, and I meant it quite sincerely, you're one of the few people I know, you have a big voice, there you are in the New York Times with a column, who really are putting people first, particularly the less fortunate first, and you're shining a bright light on the problem, so thank you for doing that for our society, and for the world. And let's go to questions. A good friend, Ambassador Tom Korologos, came out of the Rocky Mountains in Utah, and achieved fame in Washington. Tom, you're next. There's gonna be a little bit of a delay between saying that, inviting Tom, and hearing him. Tom Korologos. Ambassador, are you with us?

29:08: I'm with you. Do you hear me?

29:10: We sure do. You have the...

29:12: Hello, the two Nicholases, two of the leading experts in worldwide affairs and other issues. I'm enjoying what you're saying. Let me give a voice here to, yes, there is a chance for a progressive inside the government. Yes, Biden could be a possible FDR, but let me give something else that bothers me. Turns out that the liberal community overplays its hand. Pack the Supreme Court and the filibuster. New regulations, new Green New Deals. All kinds of... I'm out here in Colorado, up in the mountains outside Aspen. I'm at 7800 feet, and the only thing that moves are a bunch of cows, I don't know, standing away, but there are fracking machines around, and I get nervous over some of the backlash to any of these programs, that's gonna... What I'm trying to say is, don't overplay your hand. Yeah, I admit to a lot of the things that you say, but I get nervous over overdoing it on the progressive side. I'm a Republican conservative fussy budget. I'm not sure I know who to vote for, but that's my speech, and thank you for what you're both doing. You're two neat guys, and I like you.

30:56: Tom, you've done so much for the United States, and I saw you when you were Ambassador to Belgium; I know how much you did, so thank you for that question for Nick Kristof. Nick.

31:06: Well, thanks for a good question, and I share your concern about the capacity for progressives to bungle things, and frankly, I think they did in 2016, and if those progressives who had voted for Jill Stein had instead voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016, then we would be in a Clinton presidency right now. Overreaching is something that both parties do, but I share your concern that this may well happen. One of the things that I worry about in particular in the next few months toward the election is that so many liberals are so disgusted by President Trump that they, likewise feel nothing but outrage and disgust for any Trump voter, and they've tended to label them all as bigots and racists. And it is really hard to win votes from people whom you're denouncing as racists and bigots. And it's important to win some of those votes not only for the president, but also for Senate seats. And those 8 million people who had voted for President Obama in 2012, and then voted for Trump in 2016, it's important to win them back and I hope that Democratic voters will fight for those votes rather than scorn them or condescend to them.

32:43: Thank you, Nick. Thank you, Tom. Let's go to... And I hope I'm not mispronouncing your name, Vigyan Jyoti.

[pause]

33:02: Hello. Can you guys hear me?

33:03: Yeah, we hear you fine, thank you so much.

33:06: Thank you, Mr. Kristof, for your work in social justice, and for emphasizing personal responsibility in your awesome book, "Tightrope". Thanks also for encouraging local, sustainable eating as part of Kristof Farms. I appreciate you speaking about chicken abuse in your 2015 New York Times article. So given the current pandemic, which came from animal slaughter, and several people who are now forced to work in these animal slaughter houses because of the Defense Production Act, should we promote compassionate, land-based lifestyle to folks to eat healthy, address malnutrition, reduce their disease burden, and lower their greenhouse footprint and support social justice? Again, thank you for your work.

33:47: I'm afraid you were a little garbled there and I caught bits of it but... Nick, did you get the overall thrust of that?

33:57: I missed the same parts that you did. I know he asked about the virtues of plant-based horticulture and food, and diet...

34:07: Well, I...

34:07: A plant-based lifestyle to eat healthy and reduce disease burden, and reduce the greenhouse footprint.

34:13: Okay.

34:13: There you go, thank you, Vigyan.

34:15: Thank you, thank you. Yeah, as a kid who grew up on a farm I think that the industrial agriculture has been extraordinarily successful at some things, like reducing the cost of food, but it has been extraordinarily costly in terms of the treatment of animals, in terms of the use of toxic chemicals that have ripple effects throughout the environment, and I wish that we put in place more regulatory systems to limit that. I would also though say that consumers are way ahead of the government in this, and you look at the public and the degree to which it has passed animal rights measures in many states regarding cage-free chickens, for example, or veal calves being treated better, farrowing crates for hogs, and so on, so on. I think that these issues... The public does seem willing to actually pay more for food that is not only more healthy, but also raised in a more sustainable way, and pays more attention to the rights of animals. So that gives me, as long as we're in a theme of hope, a certain dollop of hope.

35:46: Very good. Let's go to Elmar Thevessen, please.

[pause]

36:00: Okay, can you hear me?

36:01: Yes we can, thank you very much.

36:03: Wonderful. Thank you, Nick and Nick, for sharing your thoughts with us. Elmar Thevessen with ZDF German TV. I really share your hope a lot because traveling through the country, talking to people, having reported on the Better Angels Foundation, for example, where they try to bring together the red and the blue. We met people who really are longing for change, for reforms, for finding solutions, and finding the better angels, or being the better angels for the others. But being German, I have a question which somehow is more pessimistic. What happens if Trump wins the second term? Or, what happens if Biden, if he wins the presidency, cannot deliver within four years? Because another disappointment for many people might have a huge impact on the political scenery in the United States.

37:02: Nick, I'll just tell Elmar that this morning when John Bolton interviewed for the Aspen Security Forum, he said he thought, and I think he said he feared, that if President Trump was re-elected, he might actually take us out of NATO. And as a former ambassador to NATO, and Elmar, I'm a great, great admirer of Germany, and Chancellor Angela Merkel, what a disaster that would be to the United States. It would be an historical blunder of historic proportions, there's no question about it. So Nick, do you... How would you answer that question?

37:41: If the result of November is that President Trump is re-elected to a second term, then you will not see me doing a hopeful column and indeed, I would worry enormously about what that would mean in terms of foreign policy and domestically. Frankly, I also worry about a war and conflict, whether with China and the South China Sea, whether in the Gulf between us and Iran. There are all kinds of things that can trigger a crisis, and I don't have full confidence in our ability to manage and de-escalate such a crisis while President Trump is in office. I would say that in some

ways, President Trump, I think, has been costly in terms of his erosion of norms and institutions, and there have been, I think, a lot of Americans who think that we will never fully recover. That those norms, institutions have really been damaged to the core. I don't think that that is right if this is a four-year process. And partly, I'm kind of impressed by how well the American institutions have withstood the constant barrage of attacks. You look at the courts, you look at... Well, frankly, journalism, you look at civil service, you look at the intelligence community, look at the military. There really has been an effort to stand by historic norms and institutions. And for four years, they've survived. Eight years, it would be a much deeper challenge and I think that would be catastrophe.

39:29: Nick and Elmar, I worry about some of our institutions in Washington, the abuse of the Justice Department by the Trump administration, the abuse of the State Department, my old home where I served 27 years, and the exodus of officers and the president calling, the State Department and Foreign Service the deep state, what could be more crippling to morale than that? A lot to think about, Elmar. And thank you very much for your question. Let's go to Chris Basgen.

[pause]

40:06: On mute. Hello.

40:07: Chris, we're hearing fine. Thank you.

40:08: Okay, thank you. Nicholas, thank you very much for a very engaging discussion. The concern that I have is that while the progressive improvements of the 30s and the 60s came in the face of a lot of conservative opposition, they at least seem to have come with an agreement on both sides as to what the facts were, and then people could argue about the policy. And today we seem to be in a world where people fundamentally disagree about whether COVID numbers are going up or down, and whether the Russians were supporting Trump or Clinton, and how many people are actually in an inauguration crowd. As a journalist, how do you see the nation returning to a setting where we can at least agree on what reality is and then have a debate on the policies we need to address and how to address them?

41:15: Chris, I think that's a good question and I share your concern on that issue. But I would note that although we tend to think of the past as a time when we did have a shared set of facts, sometimes that shared set of facts was completely wrong or indeed it wasn't shared. You think of in the run up to World War II when there was a pretty broad agreement that isolationism was the best approach to take, or certainly in the 1960s, I don't think there was that shared set of facts about either civil rights issues or about Vietnam or indeed about social policy more broadly.

42:00: But having said that, I think you're... Certainly for my adult life, there has been a... World has sort of followed the Moynihan prescription that you're entitled to your views, but not to your own facts. And years ago, the MIT media thinker, Nicholas Negroponte, this has got to mention another Nicholas here, another Nick here. Nicholas Negroponte said that, "With the internet, people would..." We would develop a platform that he called The Daily Me. And everybody would get information that tended to reinforce their own prejudices. And I think that that is in fact come to pass and that we all do get a form of The Daily Me in some way. And we also tend to be more

segregated by politics these days than we were a generation ago. Clearly, that is a huge obstacle to policy formation, both domestically and abroad. I don't... I go back and forth about whether that is permanent because of the way we consume news, but whether there's a chance to get over it. Europe, historically had something of the same problem. And so, leftists would read leftist newspapers and conservatives would read conservative newspapers and never the twain shall meet. And in fact, Europe tended to evolve past that and developed more of a common set of understanding of reality. Maybe there is some hope that we can as well, but I'm just not sure. I think it's a really interesting question, Chris.

43:41: We have time maybe, Nick, for one more question and a brief answer. And Jennie Newon has been waiting. Let's try to get her in. If you're still there, Jennie. Well, perhaps not, unless we hear... We might hear it right now. Okay, Nick, I think maybe we've lost her. Let me... I have another question. I had a final question ready. Our greatest presidents, I think, as we look back at them, are the people who faced significant national challenges and yet gave people the hope that we could surmount them. Certainly Lincoln in 1860 to 1865. Certainly FDR. In a way, despite the tragedy, Vietnam, Lyndon Johnson on civil rights. In a very palpable way, George W. Bush in the week or two after 9-11. He united the United States and he was courageous in doing so. You called up for your column on July 19th President Jimmy Carter. He's 95 years old, and he said to you, "I know we will see a better future." That really impressed me, 'cause I admire him. Tell us about that conversation, and maybe just sum up your own innate belief that we can... That the American people can rebound from our present troubles and see a better future.

45:21: Yeah, Carter is a good person to end on because he is such an optimist. My sterling memory of Jimmy Carter is, oh, it's been more than 10 years ago, I got a call from his staff that he was gonna make his last big foreign trip to Ghana and Ethiopia, and did I wanna tag along to see his work on river blindness and Guinea worm? And I thought, President Carter's last big foreign trip? Yeah, that's... I wanna be there. And so I flew in. We met up in southern Ethiopia. We're sitting by a stream where river blindness is a huge problem, and I said... My first question to him, "Mr. President, I understand that this is your last big foreign trip." And he looked at me and he got all steely. He said, "What would ever give you that idea?" And his aides were cringing, and it was clear that President Carter planned to be still making big overseas trips until he turned 150. And I just... I admire the passion with which he has helped fight diseases and change the world, and diseases like Guinea worm and river blindness and so much more, and his life has seen so many of these changes. He describes that as a source of his hope, that when he was a kid in Georgia that there were plenty of kids with blinding trachoma for example, and just as we got rid of it in rural Georgia we can get rid of it in Niger and Mali and so on.

47:01: And so I think that the point you made about our greatest presidents, and in some sense, their greatest moments of progress in the country, having come through the cauldron of crisis is an important one. And look, there's no doubt that right now we are in a mess as a country. We're in a mess because of COVID. We're in a mess for many other reasons as well. But it may be precisely that messiness that so discredits the path we're on that then helps lead us to jump to a new... To new and better policies. And we have the toolbox. We can look at what other countries do. On healthcare, there are multi-payer systems or single-payer systems. There are a lot of approaches. There are early childhood programs. There are plenty of ways in which we can make this a better world. And so at the end of the day, I don't wanna have a blind kind of optimism that things

inevitably will work out, but do we have a fighting chance to make this a better country? To make this a better world? Absolutely.

48:14: Nick, you have fulfilled all of our expectations. We wanted... At this very difficult time in American history, we wanted you to talk about why we might also be hopeful that the end is not near, that the American story continues, and hopefully a better America. You've given us that hope. Thanks so much, Nick.

48:34: Thanks for all you do, Nick.

48:36: Have a great hiking expedition with your family, too.

48:39: I'll do that.

48:40: Thanks, Nick.

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