

Speaker 1: Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The program is about to begin. At this time, please turn off all electronic devices. Please refrain from using flash photography during the program. Thank you.

Speaker 2: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome United States Senator Ben Sasse.

Roger Zakheim: Well, good evening everyone. I'm Roger Zakheim, director of the Reagan Institute and we are the home of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute in Washington, DC, just across Lafayette Park from the White House. And I hope all of you have a chance to come visit us at the institute soon. We have our grand opening next week, the doors will be open and you're all welcome. Now as is our tradition at the library, in honor of our men and women who defend our freedom around the world, please stand and join me in the pledge of allegiance.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. You maybe seated. Now, before we get started, there are a few people in the audience I'd like to recognize. First Senator Ben Sasse's wife, Melissa, and his two children, Corrie and Breck. Great to have you here tonight. Senator Jim Talent, the chair of the Ronald Reagan Institute National Leadership Council. Welcome Jim. And of course the executive director of the Reagan Presidential Foundation & Institute, my boss, John Heubusch.

Now tonight, it's my honor to welcome you to the Reagan Library for the latest installment of the Reagan Foundation's Speaker Series, A Time for Choosing. Now, the regulars here at the library and students of history will know where that title comes from. The 1964 nationally televised speech that launched the political career of Ronald Reagan. Then merely known as an actor for his occasional political commentary. But that speech catapulted him to the governorship of this state and then onward to the presidency. And in the process he transformed the conservative movement and the Republican Party. So as we gather here, that party is undergoing another process of transition and transformation confronting another time for choosing. What should it stand for? What are the Republican philosophies we can all agree on? Is there still room for Reaganesque optimism in today's GOP? All of the luminaries who have joined us for the speaker series since last May, and there have been many, tonight's guests may have the best understanding of the history that has brought us to this point.

After all, Senator Sasse wrote his award winning Yale PhD dissertation on, quote, the rise of Reagan's America. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we have a doctor in the house. And before winning a senate seat representing the Cornhusker State in 2014, this former academic, consultant, professor, this is exhausting, but I must go on, DOJ official, health and human services assistant secretary and author, served as the president of Midland University in Nebraska. At Midland, President Sasse he was widely praised for taking a struggling college that was deep in debt and turning it around in just a few years

time. He was recognized as a prodigious fundraiser and more than doubled enrollment leaving the university with a burnished reputation and budget surplus. Sounds pretty good.

Now, Senator, I know you believe in term limits, so I'll just point out that in fewer job hunting beyond the senate, there may be a market for an executive who turns around institutions and turns deficits into surpluses. I can think of at least one position and I hear it comes with a nice house. But getting aside, this speaker series is less about who should run for office and more about what values and policies Republicans should advance, not just for the good of the party, but for the good of the nation. Senator Sasse has set himself apart as a leader, unafraid to criticize what he views as his own party's shortcomings. He's bluntly disagreed with party leaders, voted to impeach a fellow Republican and even denounce his colleagues, quote, jackassery, and that's his word, not mine, and he has a PhD. So it must be an intelligent thing to say.

Now you might think such stances would get him in trouble back home in Nebraska but in 2020, he was easily reelected. One, all 93 counties outperformed the top of the ticket and earned the most votes in history of Nebraska politics. So what lessons does this senator's experience offer the party? In this time for choosing, what direction should the GOP choose? Can we still embrace an inclusive forward thinking philosophy like President Reagan did? And do leaders and voters have what it takes to steer us there? Thankfully, I don't have to answer those questions, that's Senator Sasse's job. So please welcome the multi-talented, free thinking senator from Nebraska, Ben Sasse.

Senator Ben Sas...: Thanks, Roger. I appreciate you.

Roger Zakheim: Of course.

Senator Ben Sas...: Thank you all. Thank you. It is great to be with you. Roger, thank you for that generous introduction. Thank you even more for letting my 11 year old out of the clink. For those of you who don't know there is a holding cell here, and this is my third visit to the Reagan Library, but this is the first time that I ever got to wander through the private quarters and see where President Reagan used to office. And I was pretty impressed with what I was seeing and what I was learning. There's a whole bunch of Ellis island paintings that were how president Reagan thought of the American people. Pretty gorgeous, bits of work and a real inspiration. And I was being careful not to touch anything. And I heard that my 11 year old had been through that space about 20 minutes before and had found a presidential baseball, and evidently you're not supposed to touch.

So he was temporarily put in a cell, but I'm glad Roger that you got him out. So thank you for having me. The Time for Choosing series is incredibly important and I'm incredibly honored to be here. On a more serious note, I would just say briefly that it's my understanding that the president has just addressed the nation. I didn't get a chance to see that. And he was making a bunch of proposals about guns and about mental health issues. And I know that we'll be

having discussions about that next week. I'm not going to speak to that tonight. I don't want to get ahead of my colleague on the judiciary committee, John Cornyn, who's leading the Republican side of that senate negotiation. So I'm not going to speak to that tonight, but I just want to acknowledge that I understand the president just did address the nation on that topic.

I was invited here to speak about the big challenges of the next decade and indeed the rest of the 21st century for our nation, but also for the party of Abraham Lincoln and the party of Ronald Reagan, and for the conservative movement and where we're headed. So we live in an odd time. So I think we should start with an odd fact. And that is that the vast majority of Americans now say that it feels like we're in decline. 80% of the left, more than that of the middle and breaking 90% of the right, say they think the country's headed in the wrong direction and they think we might be on permanent decline. It's not hard to see why. Fatherlessness, the epidemic of opioids and suicide, the loss of community, foreign policy humiliations, runaway inflation, the addictive horror of a 24 hour news cycle. It feels like we're inundated with terrible news.

And that feels new, because as Americans, we aren't used to thinking about bad news as the thing that floods over us. We think of ourselves as an optimistic people or we used to anyway. But in another sense, this angst, it isn't entirely new, because in self-government freedom is always fragile, the stakes are always high. Which means that the to-do list before us always feels a bit pressure filled, that nagging sense that we might be on the verge of decline makes some sense when we remember that each generation has to pass this Republic on to the next generation and passing it on isn't inevitable, it takes work. It feels a bit daunting, partly because it should feel a bit daunting. But when President Reagan reminded us that freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction, he wasn't saying it with a heavy heart. He was laying out a challenge.

It's a challenge that flows from a blessing. His point was this, it's up to us. There's no king going to do it for us. It's up to you and it's up to me to pass along this unbelievable American generation to the next, American country, the American Republic to the next generation. So yeah, it feels a bit daunting, but it can't incapacitate us. It can't render us passive. Every generation has a choice to get up off the couch and build or to resign as the rich kid who lets the family business fall apart. Because make no mistake, the loss of self-confidence that we're experiencing, it has disastrous real world effects. Let's look at the case study of how our entitlement and our drift, and our lack of self-confidence over the last decade, how that produced the debacle in Afghanistan. Let's use that as a case study. The American people, as President Reagan regularly reminded us, have an uncommon gift of common sense on those issues that they choose to tune into.

Unfortunately, most folks tuned out on Afghanistan and the painful consequences, the scars that are going to last followed from that decision that was made by weak isolationists in two consecutive administrations that chose

decline over honor, chose fantasy over facts. The American people, they had better ideas. The American people never for a minute felt that the Taliban could be trusted. The American people never endorsed a surrender agreement at Doha. The American people didn't think that sticking to that foolish agreement, even as the Taliban were brazenly breaking their word, they didn't think that could be spun as a quote, extraordinary success. The American people didn't like being lied to about what was happening at Karzai airport. They didn't like the absurd decision to abandon Bagram Air Force Base that had been secured previously with so much blood. Now, the American people over the last year decided to see the world as it is, not as Flax told them to pretend to see it.

The American people looked at desperate Afghans, many interpreters and drivers who had risked their lives for our troops and to whom we had in turn given our word. We saw them fall off of C-17 wheel Wells, and we felt sick as we should have. We looked at anguished parents who handed babies over barbed wire to strangers and Americans wept. And then we looked at the ass-covering and the blame shifting of the permanent inhabitants of Washington and regular moms and dads in Nebraska, and regular moms and dads in Southern California were indignant. The American people don't like feckless leaders who humiliate this nation. The last two administrations have bowed to the Taliban. The American people are not in favor of that. The American people don't like defeat, but defeat is exactly where the loud isolationists, long of the left and now also of the right were demanding that we go.

The catastrophe in Afghanistan is a stark example of how defeatism at home produces chaos abroad that can then boomerang back on us. And we're in for more of that if we submit to the demands of the prophets of doom and dismay that we should retreat even more broadly. Thoroughgoing isolationism will neither rationalize our national security priorities nor drive us to more hard-nosed alliances and partnerships. These isolationists offer the mirage of fortress security. And what they're really doing is just handing power to global forces that want to make the world more unstable and more dangerous. The new isolationists present themselves as if they're the hardheaded realists, but it's not true. They're the ones with stars in their eyes as they decide to ostrich see only one side of a balance sheet. They pretend that retreat from the world could help us focus on nation building at home and that this can happen pollyannish, miracle with no cost at all.

In reality, national security involves actual trade offs and the retreat they champion comes at a hard high cost. Here's the reality, for the last 75 years with the US as the globe's unrivaled superpower, we have seen shocking peace, we have seen shocking prosperity by every single historical measure. Too often, we pit idealism and realism against each other in an ivory tower philosophy seminar kind of way, that doesn't grapple with the real world we've actually inherited. For in the flesh and blood world of lived experience, American idealism about human dignity, it helped create immense realist, geopolitical stability. And the American military, our might, it enabled the spread of human rights and broader representation, and private property rights, and land reform. And it unleashed

entrepreneurial innovation on every continent, thereby uplifting millions of families and enumerable communities. That's the reality of the last 75 years. So let's state more brass tacks.

American military and economic engagement wasn't some charity. After the Second World War, our grandparents literally built the world. We created a global infrastructure of trade organizations and military alliances that became dang near beautiful, like the pictures of Ellis Island in the president's office upstairs. Reagan led us to avert World War III and to win the Cold War, barely having to fire a shot. But this creative process, it wasn't born of altruism. It was indeed very, very good for the world, but we did it because it was good for America. There's a reason that we are 4% of global population and 24% of global GDP. If America first just becomes shorthand for America alone, then it's a dumb slogan, but it's an even dumber meaning. It would mean America poorer and America less safe.

Engagement by which we really mean leadership, can't be romantic, it can't be naive, for there is no international law that's handed down by some all-knowing benevolent, placeless, global legislator. The hand-wringing and the happy talk that oozes out of the United Nations, where genocidal regimes can share the so-called human rights commission, it's perhaps useful for an occasional sternly-worded letter, but none of these processes do anything to make us safer. There is no abstraction called international law. But here's what there is and this is why we need to engage, and this is why we need to lead. There's a system of rules and norms like the free navigation of the seas that we built and that our parents and grandparents enforced until recently. The US did this because if we didn't someone else would've set the rules and every human on earth would've been worse off over the last three quarters of a century. This system has kept Americans safe. This system has made Americans prosperous.

This system won the Cold War. And the result has been that the US and lots of our allies, and lots of other nations as well, became safer and richer than they would've been without US leadership. It has been very positive sum. Isolationists like to quote John Quincy Adams famous warning about an American going abroad, quote, in search of monsters to destroy, but we're not knights-errant and we never have been. What we've been doing over the last several decades is establishing by every means at our disposal ways to keep the monsters at bay. Because monsters try to come back, monsters threaten, again, just ask Zelensky, ask the moms of Mariupol. America has a decisive role to play on the global stage and that role is more urgent now in our new era of great power politics. The Pax Americana that prevailed after the Cold War has badly frayed in recent years and on the horizon are new adversaries eager to exploit our decline and to expedite our fall.

It will be mostly our choice, whether they succeed. The biggest threat to the American led order is the Chinese Communist Party, and the technologies that they think their centralized system will harness faster and better than our decentralized system. The rise of this belligerent, confident, expansionistic,

indeed imperialistic, Communist Party, it's the competitive challenge that will define much of the next half century. Beijing is not only an economic competitor, although they do have a strong hand over global trade and currency flows that subvert markets and the liberty that markets make possible. Beijing is not only a military competitor, although their advances in AI enabled autonomous vehicles, threaten many links of American technological superiority. Most fundamentally though, 21st century Beijing is now a competitor on the field of ideas with their different vision of humanity. Beijing is proposing a new way of life, an unprecedented digital totalitarianism that would govern and regulate the most intimate details of individual and family, and communal life, trying to turn every person and the devices they carry into the eyes and ears of the regime.

That's what we face. We've already felt how the CCP's tentacles can reach into daily life on this continent. We've seen the OPM hack of more than 20 million Americans confidential information, including their sexual histories and infidelities and their drug experiences that they told FBI security clearance background investigators. China has all of that data now from your SF 86s. We've seen TikTok and 23andMe compile massive location and genetic data on private American citizens. We've seen how Chairman Xi can use corporate lust for access to China's consumer markets as a tool to squeeze cowardly concessions from American businesses and American sport leagues. Concessions like firing employees for saying stand with Hong Kong or the despicable cowardness of C-suites willing to keep silent about the genocide of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, including the organ harvesting that has been disclosed publicly in new ways in the last 72 hours. A tightly interconnected world makes it possible for Xi's thugs to export digital totalitarianism around the world. But technological development isn't something we can wish away nor should we want to.

This must be a reality based party. And that means admitting that the world though disorienting smaller than it has been in the past, is still larger today than it will be tomorrow. It'll still be larger tomorrow than it will be a decade out. The world is going to become more linked, that is inevitable, and thus smaller still ever more into the future, for good and for ill. These threats are real and China's power hungry leadership is coming for us. Whether we reflect sufficiently on this reality or not, it is reality. No amount of pretending or ignoring, or hiding can make that go away. The defining national security question of the next two decades is whether we'll have a second American century or whether we will submit to a CCP led world order. I know which side I'm on. But if America's going to lead the next century, it's going to require us to get our act together and do some big hard things, and soon. This won't be easy.

It's been a long time since this country did big and hard things together, but we have done it before. We come from generations of people called upon to rise and to protect this place and its people, and to do the hard work of building. It's great news what we've inherited, but it also means that we're a bunch of kids who've been living off our grandparents' inheritance from World War II and the

Cold War, and the money's starting to run out and we're going to have to do something. That can be either really bad news, or it can be a chance for us to build something big and hopeful again like they did and like they bequeathed to us. I know what I want. This American rebuild agenda depends first and foremost, on the American people. We need a revival of American self-confidence.

We need leaders who live and breathe that self-confidence so that we can inspire a generation of self-confident Americans and American families, and American communities, and American startups. This is a nationwide challenge. It's a whole of society calling. But here, because of the context, The Time for Choosing series, I want to speak for a minute just to my own party. We Republicans, we have a big choice to make. We can either continue to drift as a party that exists increasingly as a vehicle for the grievances of the angriest oldest folks, or we could be a future focused party of 2030 with policies centered on the future of work and the future of war. We need to give Americans confidence again as they enter a dizzying world where the digital revolution is remaking every segment of the economy and is going to end lifelong work for almost everyone.

The American people are second to none. We could outcompete and outperform anyone, but we're going to need massively reformed institutions and a wave of new institutions that champion and reward hustle and grit. That help every American develop the skills he and she need to flourish. This is going to require a lot of new educational and job retraining institutions. Obviously for everybody 15 to 25, but also because lifelong learning is now going to be required for almost every domain, almost every job, we're going to need these new institutions for 30 and 35 year olds and for 40 and 45 year olds. And no civilization has ever built a community of lifelong learners before. We're going to have to. Whether we like it or not, it's reality, and this must be a reality based party. So we should break up the higher education accreditation cartels. We should make education a dynamic sector again, rather than a soulless 19th century assembly line.

Let's encourage corporate level certification programs so that workers can focus on developing portable skills that will never again be one and done. Let's stop pretending like every college experience has to look like an Ivy League school and that every class should be three hours per week, every semester should be 15 weeks, every degree program is eight semesters. And let's instead unleash social entrepreneurs to build a cornucopia of new arrangements for kids, to build skills for the jobs today and for jobs in data science that don't even exist yet. And let's experiment with hundreds more entry points into education and lifelong education, because we need tens of millions more of our kids to shout aha when the light bulb goes off and to fall in love with learning. Let's promote portable healthcare benefits and job credentialing so that workers can take their policies and their degrees, and their stackable micro credentials, and their certifications, with them across job and geographic change.

Because there's going to be a lot of change, you can't wish it away. Let's take the free market lessons we just learned from project Warp Speed and apply them to other strategic innovations, computer chips, 5G, next generation batteries, synthetic biology. Let's eliminate every single marriage penalty in the federal code and let's promote families, and reverse the stagnation of bureaucrat first central planning. Let's make sure that our party is known as a champion of both immigrants and strong, and smart borders. Let's put technology to use to secure our border and to prevent visa overstays. Let's clear the log jam of cases by sending sufficient resources to expedite the review of asylum cases. Smarter technology and clear policy, not shouted symbolism, must be our answers. But the key here is that we're doing border security to stop illegal immigration, but we want to be the party like President Reagan's library upstairs, his personal office and the library upstairs that wants immigrants who want their kids to grow up in the freest nation on earth.

The new technologies that are disrupting our communities, they're unprecedented in many ways. And yet, like almost all technological developments over time, they're pro and con, they're a mixed bag. These new technologies have simultaneously made us the richest consumers in human history, but stuff alone satiates none of our deepest longings. Work and productivity, and community, meaningful ways to serve and to be needed are so much more important than just more marginal consumption. These enriching technologies also come with addictive and isolating, and alienating temptations. They're frightening, soul deadening risks with these super tools. People don't always know how to say it, but our neighbors feel it. Our neighbors feel less stable. They understandably worry about this loss of control. They feel a loss of agency. And our domestic policy must be laser focused on the disruption of work, giving people the tools they need to remain valuable and valued.

This is part of why merely re-litigating policy fights from 20 or 30, or 40 years ago, just with more anger now is so dumb. It does nothing to solve the problems. It does nothing to comfort those Americans who are freaked out by the instability of job and neighborhood, economy, and culture. We should be tackling these real problems, but somewhat counterintuitively moving from domestic to foreign policy, the biggest riddle in our national security policy is tightly linked to the same domestic policy riddle. And that's because our primary geopolitical challenge is the coming decade's technology race with the Chinese Communist Party. The bad guys keep asserting and indeed now persuading many of our sometimes allies that only central planners can possibly address all the new destabilization that technology is birthing in our time, more strong men, Chaiman Xi tells our allies. We have to have an answer.

We have to have a better answer than he has. Now, as Republicans, we know that more central planning and less freedom can't possibly be the best human dignity affirming pathway to political and economic stability, but we need to put up or shut up. We need to actually demonstrate that a decentralized system of free peoples and the communities that we build can thrive during this unprecedented fluid time. So in a sense, our number one foreign policy concern

remains the same as our number one domestic policy concern. And that's the self-confidence of the American people to navigate this brave new world. But right after that, we must also admit that a smart public sector for 2030 will be an America that again sees itself as, and actually acts like a superpower again. We meet here this week exactly 40 years after President Reagan addressed parliament with a plan to revivify American leadership of the free world.

And much like your Reagan Institute's Westminster 2.0 Working Group report that was released I think earlier this week, we should be leading a system of alliances that not only fortifies the healthy countries, but also inspires the repressed inside the unhealthy countries. We have a lot of work to do. So let's pass a trillion dollar defense budget, but let's radically cut the share that goes to legacy systems and platforms that employ an army of lobbyists. In a new era of cyber and asymmetric warfare, we should make sure that we're getting maximum lethal capacity for every taxpayer dollar spent by overhauling procurement policies that aren't merely too expensive, though they are, but they're primarily way, way, way too slow. Let's build a NATO for the Pacific. We need allies to get back on the offensive against the CCP and those allies need US leadership. NATO is the greatest, NATO in Europe, is the greatest treaty organization in human history. It held the line against the Soviets, and now it's holding the line against bloody Putin.

But as Chairman Xi looks to expand his sphere of influence, we need a new military alliance that's centered far out in the Pacific. This is our main foreign policy work. Let's streamline our intel agencies so that we can win a shadow war with the Chinese Communist Party. Let's arm the Taiwanese military to the teeth, let's amend the Taiwan Relations Act directly to make our security guarantee explicit, no more strategic ambiguity. Let's pair military partnerships with economic partnerships and end the nonsense anti-trade policies of the last two administrations. Pacific NATO should be a free trade zone as well. Trade is a win-win, because when Americans compete, we win. Nobody outthinks, out hustles or outworks the American people. We built in an American order that saw us through the Cold War, and we can build a new American order that will see us through the coming conflict with the Beijing tyrant that is seeking to export his dehumanizing surveillance state autocracy, and the related technologies.

Now, I know that faster than I can get the words out of my mouth, there's a Legion of pessimist on the left and increasingly on the right that'll line up to tell us why we can't do any of that. Their pessimism is poison, and we have lots of peddlers of this poison. On the left and on the right legions of profits of decline now. Since the earliest days of the progressive movement 100 years ago, we always had a blame America first crowd that was ready to tell us why America was evil and then why America could not possibly beat the Soviets, and why America could never be any more than the sum of her sins. It's a long tradition. It inspired Teddy Roosevelt's beautiful homage to the man in the arena and his slap down of their tireless whiny anti-America critiques.

The blame America first tradition, the Americans are too weak to build or to fix anything tradition, it's old. But here's what's new. What's different now is that we have so many on the right who've joined in this whining. More false prophets of pessimism just from a different heretical sect. Fundamentally, they have the same message. In the 2016 presidential campaign, you had two candidates with wildly different solution sets, but their fundamental diagnosis was really the same. The system's rigged. You're getting screwed. You're a victim. The country's going down the tubes. You're victims. The left wants a powerful, nameless, but supposedly benevolent bureaucracy. The right wants a strong man daddy figure. But the loudest of them all agree on one thing, America, the one the founders gave us, the one kept for us by our parents and grandparents, it doesn't work anymore. It can't work anymore. These are not the good faith positions of two big healthy political parties that are just competing about different visions of leadership.

These are predators circling the carcass of the American body politic. Two petty factions within each party ready to fight each other to the death about which of them gets to rule us. We should reject all such warped visions of this glorious inheritance we've received. I don't want a nanny state caring for me from cradle to grave, and I've already got a great dad. Thank you very much. I want us to be America again. It's liars who tell us that our constitution is obsolete and that principled pluralism can't possibly work anymore. And that the very active believing it could is quaint. Since persuasion is dead, so many of them tell us, the only thing to do is to try to use the government to smash the other side. Weaponize the state to go after your domestic opponents. Who we're told we have to regard not just as wrong on a policy here or there, we're supposed to regard the other political party as evil.

They tell us the other political party is the root of everything that ails us. Well, they're full of crap, because the prophets of doom, right and left disagree about almost every particular policy. But they almost always sound like twins, because they agree that the solution to all domestic squabbles is supposedly to give the federal government loads more power, which they're sure will never be misused. It will just be used to crush the people they don't like. Marjorie Taylor Greene and AOC, it's choose your own dictatorial adventure. Matt Gaetz and Madison Cawthron, they might as well be from the far left, because like all prophets of doom, they love ranting to the American people that were just victims. The prophets of doom tradition has always told us that our problems are too big. They're too insurmountable. They tell us we have no agency, we're powerless. But when people feel powerless, when they identify as victims in their stories, instead of as the children of heroes and as the authors of our own destiny, we slip into a lazy, comfortable slouch of decline.

You hear it everywhere today. We're back sliding as a nation. We're rotten to the core. We need to turn inward. The country used to be great. These stories are wrong, but they're dominant today. And if they long dominate in self-government, perception can become reality. America is an idea and ideas depend on stories, shared stories. And therefore the stories that we tell

ourselves, they matter. Being resigned toward decline, that's the wrong story. Finding adrenaline rush and endlessly droning on about the worst 2% of the other side, it's the wrong story. The truth is, America still has an amazing story to tell. We're the only country that started as an idea. A wild, optimistic, world shaking, history changing idea. And it's this, universal human dignity. People are fallen, but we're also insouled and big, and filled with potential, and meant to rule ourselves. The American idea is universal human dignity and limitless potential safeguarded by limited government. Government matters, politics matter, but they can't be the center of our community or of our animosities.

It certainly can't be the center of our loves. This Republic, it isn't perfect of course, but it is this, it's better than anything else the world has ever had to offer. It's the best form of government ever. Each generation has worked to make it better, to build a more perfect union across two and a half centuries. The Americans who we inherited this from, they know where our strength lies. America's strength isn't Wall Street. It isn't Silicon Valley. It isn't the Pentagon. It isn't some bureaucracy. Our strength is measured by the confidence of the American people and our shared American idea about the dignity of people and what people can build. So yes, there are doom scrollers, there are grifters, there are people who make money off prophesying decline. Some of them literally mock their own audiences when the cameras turn off. Some of these folks are even partly right about what is broken, but they're wrong about the biggest things.

They're wrong that the American people are weak. They're wrong that we're content with decline. They're wrong that Americans, some of the grittiest people across history's pages, are okay with passivity. They're wrong about our will and our resolve. They're wrong about our strength and its well springs. For we're actually strong if we believe that our system works. We're strong if we believe that we can and indeed we should make a more perfect union. We're strong if we believe that all are created equal. What makes America great is our understanding that it is God, not government that gives us dignity and rights, regardless of our skin pigment, regardless of our gender, regardless of our place of birth. We're strong if we believe that our ideas about liberty are great and that our constitution is good. And that's never more relevant than it is tonight. These are basic truths.

Self-evident, our founders would've said. And the American people need to hear these truths again. They need to hear the honest, optimistic American story. But let's be clear, if we don't tell it, the prophets of decline will win as they make America lose. I believe that America, still the most powerful nation in the world, still has its best days ahead of it. The story of our forefathers and the mothers of liberty, and our ancestry, their story it's ours if we can keep the Republic. But to keep the Republic means we have to reclaim our politics from those who want power politics to dominate every single national conversation, as so many left and right currently want. This won't be easy of course, but nothing important is ever easy. American revival won't be easy because we're facing not just

dysfunctional government, but also endless fuel from rage peddlers who want this dysfunction and who lust only for performative shouting.

Right now we have a government of the weirdos by the weirdos and for the weirdos. Most real people are tuning out regrettably, but understandably, and they're letting the very online, very angry, dominate our politics. Our politicians now consistently act like Jackwagons and they do it for a reason. It's because they're primarily just performing for other Jackwagons. Echo chamber politicians drinking their own bath water isn't entirely new of course. But what is new and something is new here is the instant feedback loop of social media. Politicians increasingly addict themselves to likes and retweets and they act, and they think, but mostly they just feel like social media is where real life happens. Happily, they're very, very wrong. Yes, there's lots of grandstanding going on, but the grandstands are really small and they're mostly empty. Political Twitter isn't real. Only 22% of Americans use it.

And more than half of the one fifth of Americans who use Twitter, never follow politics on it. The vast majority of traffic on Twitter is driven by well under 2% of the American public. And yet politicians, again, left and right are barely distinguishable in seeking to cater to this tiny minority and the algorithms that drive their addicted engagement. Political algorithms run on rage, we know this. Nobody goes viral for making a good argument, a good faith argument. Nobody goes viral for admitting that there are policy trade offs. Nobody goes viral for being honest that 280 characters probably won't allow enough space to have an honest debate. It is dumb to talk about a particular piece of federal legislation as either the arrival of heaven on earth or the harbinger of hell by Tuesday.

Nonetheless, the loudest politicians and the media demagogues who enable and encourage them, they still go viral daily just by preaching to their little siloed choirs. They get clicks for divisive headlines and for outrageous overstatement, for misrepresenting their opponent's position, for telling their audience that if you're not with us entirely and immediately, then you're the enemy. Cable television obviously suffers from the same problem. Tucker Carlson had the most watched show on cable this year, checking in at 3.03 million viewers one night last month. Lawrence O'Donnell clocked in at less than half that and Anderson Cooper on CNN about 800,000. It sort of sounds like a lot until we remember that this gorgeous continental nation has north of 330 million souls. To review, on a typical day, less than 2% of the nation is watching all cable news combined, less than 2% of the nation. And that 2% is not remotely representative of the country.

The median age of an MSNBC viewer, what do you think it is? 68. CNN, basically the same. Fox evening programming has an even more geriatric audience. Gen Xers and millennials, and Zoomers, the generations that make up our entire future, they're not listening to any of the fan service media. Politicians who spend all day shouting in Congress so they can spend all night shouting on cable, they're peddling crack, most of it to people who are already addicted, but also with some glittery hopes of finding a new angry octogenarian out there. We

don't have the time to talk about today's headlines, but think about our daily supply. Michael Avenatti was convicted a few hours ago or sentenced a few hours ago to multiple years in prison for being a liar. Boy, that was a shocker. And this carnival barker was a guy that CNN used to have on dozens and dozens of times every single month, at one point deciding to push him as a presidential candidate.

Why? Because he was good at carnival barking. The circus might be funny if it weren't so serious, but America's junk food media diet of politainment matters, because self-government depends on having an actually informed citizenry. We need shared facts, but politicized newsrooms and clickbait culture, they don't just make us dumber. The main thing they do is they exhaust and alienate almost all of 98% America. And so our neighbors check out and they allow the very online with their rage addiction to dominate, again, to the exclusion of the overwhelming majority of our citizens. So there are headwinds, there are naysayers and doom peddlers who are content with broken politics and manage decline so long as they get in a really good burn on the other side as America's Republic dies out. But here's the good news. The American people are much, much better than that.

Much more interesting than that, which is why they don't tune in. All of this disengagement by the big majority, although problematic, really can be the source of some glimmers of hope. Why are these folks disengaging? They're disengaging because most Americans have no interest in endlessly scrolling on politicized social media and watching the repetitive cable sort of news that pickles your brain night after night. There's a reason they don't want to do this. They care about other stuff. And lots of it is more important than what they're turning off. Most Americans much prefer to be raising their families and building things than engaging in sludge. One of the biggest things we need right now in American politics is pretty mundane. We need a lot more of these normies to show up just a little bit more often and roll their eyes a lot more often at the performative weirdness.

The opportunity is here if we'll see it. When you ask the American people if they consider themselves more Republican or more Democrat and you don't give them a chance to say none of the above, none of the above still wins overwhelmingly as the people object to the framing of the question. About 28% of Americans now see themselves as members of our Republican Party, about 28% consider themselves Democrats and well over 40% say, to hell with your question. I don't want anything to do with either of those parties. I'm convinced that if you asked this question in this way, and you allowed people to identify as mostly disconnected from both political parties, rather than having to feel that they are one or the other, well over half of all respondents would answer other. So who's speaking to these Americans? Who's offering them an optimistic future focused vision?

Who's reminding them of our glorious civics inheritance? Almost no one. Why not us? Think how long it has been since the American people have heard a big

optimistic Reagan like aspirational message. A 33 year old American has seen a Republican president win the popular vote only once in her entire lifetime. And that was in the aftermath of 911 when the Dems decided to run an Aries marrying, throwback anti-war candidate from the 60s. That is the only time a Republican has won the popular vote in the entire lifetime of anyone 33 or under in this country. Shouldn't the Republican Party have something to say to that woman? We've got to do better. We've got to be speaking to people who tuned out of both parties a decade ago. We've got to be speaking to men and women who can't stand preach to the choir politics, because in the real world, they're used to trying to get things done.

They don't want mere performance. They don't want mere shouting. The time is now. There has arguably never been a better time to make this the majority party than at a moment when so many Americans are hungry for something bigger. They know disruption is on the horizon and they want something optimistic. Frankly, they'd probably just settle for something sane. This is our moment if we'll take it. The other party is increasingly drunk on elite leftism at the national level, woefully disconnected from their historic working class base in places like Nebraska. There is little room for honest debate inside the Democrats right now, when so many are sprinting from the somewhat left to the far left, frantically trying to recast themselves as many Bernie Sanders bobbleheads. Their current student loan forgiveness proposal is a massive transfer from median Americans to richer Americans. Our current president won their primary and then he was elected by claiming that he would be responsible and moderate.

And then he immediately handed the staffing of his White House to far left 20 somethings and a chief of staff who literally lives on Twitter. That is Ron Klain's constituency. This is a disconnected national party right now. And they are trying to choose between shout your abortion and defund the police. That's the range at the national level. Oh, by the way, they have two moderates. Why is it that Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema get so many vile threats from their own party? Their party has no room for intellectual diversity, even though they claim that diversity is one of their fundamental touchstones. There just isn't any right now. They're monotonous, predictable and stale, and really unattractive to the fastest growing demographic in the country, Hispanics, and to the big winnable middle of this country more broadly.

I want to be clear, the Democratic Party's appeal to the farthest left 10% nonsense, it's not good for the country. I wish there were a more credible Democratic Party right now. But it's reality and so it gives us an opening. We shouldn't snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, facing this kind of shoot yourself in the foot stupid tribalism. Why the heck would our party want to try to mirror the same thing? Debate sharpens ideas, debate wins voters by treating them like adults. The namesake of this building preached that someone who agrees with you on 80 or 90% of the issues, or even just on the majority of values, is an almost all the time friend and ally, not a slippery slope tainted enemy. This party should be a big tent. We've got fiscal conservatives, we've got

social conservatives. We have budget hawks and deficit hawks. We have populists and constitutionalists. Like some of the best things in life, it's complicated and it's messy and it's great.

It's what makes a party strong. And frankly, it's what makes me optimistic about the future. What this party cannot be is a cult of personality and grievance. Those are the hallmarks of anti conservatism. I'm a Republican because I'm a conservative and I'm a conservative because I believe in gratitude. Everyone born here is immensely blessed. And the heart of keeping the Republic always starts with gratitude. American conservatives, we don't traffic in grievance. Our party must reject politicians who tell the American people that they're victims. We embrace leaders who tell the American people that we can write our own destiny. Americans have never wallowed in self pity. The people who built this country and passed it on to us and sought to make it better, and more expansive, and more inclusive, they weren't whining. Our history is dominated by people who refused to settle. People who smashed barriers, men and women who built this better nation and bequeathed it to us.

The Harriet Tubmans and the George Washingtons, Susan B. Anthony and MLK, Neil Armstrong and Rosa Parks, Amelia Earhart, and Jackie Robinson, and the ever cheerful, Ronald Reagan. We in this country and in this party, we embrace leaders who understand that America makes legends not victims. American conservatives don't pedal cheap nostalgia. Our moment requires leaders who will look the American people in the eye, tell them hard truths, but not sacrifice the optimism and the idealism, and the aspiration. Americans have the confidence to innovate our way through challenges, for innovation is this nation's lifeblood. We invented the assembly line and the light bulb. The White Wright brothers captured the world at Kitty Hawk. Americans walked on the moon. American companies just built the vaccines that defeated COVID. We're in the middle of a digital revolution that's going to upend a lot. It's going to jostle society, and it's happening whether we like it or not.

Politicians who sell false promises of a return to a 1950s economy, they're selling opioids and dependency. It's the leaders who tell the truth about how Americans can go now and build the economy of the 2050s. Those are the people who empower our citizens. We should embrace leaders who understand that America has innovated, can innovate and will innovate. Conservatives don't shrink meekly away from the global stage. We embrace leaders who have the strength to stand up to despots. Americans ended slavery. Americans defeated Nazis. Americans prevailed over communism. Americans must stand for freedom loving people around the world. Don't listen to leaders who will make excuses for Xi or Putin. Don't listen to leaders who cut deals with the Taliban. Don't listen to leaders who play footsie with genocidal maniacs. We embrace leaders who tell the stories of the freedom fighters, who defend our allies, who champion human dignity, who celebrate the Hong Kongers in the streets, who arm Ukrainians, who sound the alarm for Taiwan, and who refuse to disguise the weakness of isolationism with the cynical false pretense of realism.

This is indeed a time for choosing. This is our moment to choose to reject decline and to build better. Americans have never believed that this is as good as it gets or that our best days are in the rear view mirror, and we're not about to start now. This is our moment to reject the weirdness addicted political bingers who preach Jeremiah out in despair to their little choirs. Healthy Americans have always known that politics and politicians should definitely not be the center of American life. This is our moment to engage the world, not cower and shrink away. Americans have always understood that we are strong because we are good. This is our moment to build an American led future. This is our moment to outinnovate, outcompete and outperform the Chinese Communist Party, formidable full though it is. Because the totalitarian certainty they have is that humans are small and weak, and tamable. Well, they're wrong.

This is not America's anthropology. This is not America's idea about Americans or of anyone else who has been created in God's image. Our view is that men and women though flawed are glorious, and that government although necessary, isn't the point of it. All Abraham Lincoln 180 years ago rendered his judgment at the Lyceum that, quote, if destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men, we must live through all time, or die by suicide. Heavy stuff. Dire, obviously. But what he was saying is implicitly filled with hope, because what he's saying is that we're big. We're big enough that no outside force alone could possibly beat us. Big enough that we can resolve to reform and return, and revive, and rebuild.

The choice really is ours. This is America's moment. The American people are ready. They want better. They want more. This ought to be the Republican Party's moment. The question is whether we, the party of Lincoln and Reagan will again make that big American choice. I know what I'm betting on. Let's call the American people to join us again. Thanks for having me.