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THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW

Your Questions (and Criticisms) of Our Recent Shows

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By Ezra Klein

This is an edited transcript of an episode of "The Ezra Klein Show." You can listen to the conversation by following or subscribing to the show on the NYT Audio app, Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music, YouTube, iHeartRadio or wherever you get your podcasts.

Ezra Klein: Welcome to another subscriber-only "Ask Me Anything." You all sent in a ton of questions. We are going to respond to a small fraction of them.

Joining me is our amazing executive producer, Claire Gordon, who has chosen a bunch of questions that I mostly wouldn't want to answer, if I had my druthers.

But Claire, thanks for being here this morning, jet-lagged from a late-night flight back from California.

Claire Gordon: Hopefully, it will make this more interesting.

The first bunch of questions are really synthesized from a ton of responses we got from the last few episodes, which really flooded our inbox.

Klein: These are the Mahmoud Khalil and Philippe Sands episodes.

Gordon: That's right. And the episode with Yoram Hazony got a lot of responses, too. But definitely the winner in terms of volume of response was Mahmoud Khalil's — not only in our inbox, but it got a lot of response out in the world. In a first for the show, there was a

whole New York Post cover story in response to the interview, with a big headline: "Deport Him!"

So my first question is: Were you surprised that it got that reaction?

Klein: I find it unbelievably saddening that all these people who, two years ago, were styling themselves as great defenders of free speech, listened to an interview with somebody, listened to them speak, and the response is not disagreement, it's: "Deport him!"

As a way of revealing how unbelievably hollow and cynical that moment in politics is, the number of people who I understand built much of their political careers on being defenders of free speech, who again responded by saying: This person, who has a green card, is married to a U.S. citizen and has a child born here, should be deported — whatever you think of what he said, it means that your commitment to that idea of free speech is so paper thin.

So I found that depressing. Not in a way that was shocking — I've always been fairly cynical about what a lot of that politics was built on — but I found that revealing of how little pretense, in the Trump era, has gone into maintaining any kind of consistency with that form of politics.

Gordon: I think it was also revealing of the different things people heard when he spoke.

The part of the interview that got the most reaction — it was also a clip that circulated a lot on social media — was of Khalil talking about Oct. 7 and describing the attack as unavoidable.

> ***Archived clip of Mahmoud Khalil:*** *To me, it felt frightening that we had to reach this moment in the Palestinian struggle. I remember I didn't sleep for a number of days, and Noor was very worried about my health. It was heavy. I still remember. I was like: This couldn't happen.*
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> ***Ezra Klein:*** *What do you mean we had to reach this moment? What moment is this?*
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> ***Khalil:*** *I was interning at UNRWA at that point — the United Nations Relief and Works Agency — at the U.N.'s New York office. As part of my internship, my research and work were focused on Palestine, on the situation in the West Bank and Gaza.*
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> *You can see that the situation is not sustainable. You have an Israeli government that's absolutely ignoring Palestinians. They are trying to make that deal with Saudi and just happy about their Abraham Accord without looking at Palestinians — as if Palestinians are not part of the equation. They circumvented the Palestinian question.*
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> *It was clear that it was becoming more and more violent. By Oct. 6, over 200 Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces and settlers. Over 40 of them were children.*
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> *So that's what I mean by: Unfortunately, we couldn't avoid such a moment.*

A lot of the reaction people heard in his words was someone who was endorsing violence, someone who was at least sympathetic, if not outright supportive of Hamas. What did you hear when he said that?

Klein: My intention with that episode was: Here was somebody whom the U.S. government had, in a very profound way, tried to silence for his speech, moved him around to different detention centers and made a very public example of him, in a way meant to chill, not his speech specifically — the idea that Mahmoud Khalil, this grad student at Columbia, is in any way a threat to U.S. foreign policy is an absurdity, and I think everybody knows it. But you can make an example of Mahmoud Khalil as a way of making other people afraid to speak.

So I wanted to hear his story. If you go to that interview, I'm in many ways more interested in what happened to him. I didn't bring him on specifically, in my view, as an expert on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I'm interested in his thoughts, but the show has not primarily rooted its coverage there, in college activists — not because they don't have things to say that are worth hearing, but because I just don't think it would be the most sensible way to go about it.

The way I heard him talk about Oct. 7, which is a way I've heard a lot of the Palestinian guests I've had on the show and whom I've spoken to off the show talk about it, which is: To them, Oct. 7 is not Day Zero. To them, Oct. 7 is not where this chapter or anything begins. Oct. 7 is a punctuation of tremendous violence — maybe murderous, maybe war crimes.

When I was asking him in a follow-up question, I think Khalil said: Look, there should be an investigation, and people who killed civilians — which he said is, I think, always illegal under international law — should be held accountable for that.

> ***Archived clip of Mahmoud Khalil:*** *What I know is that targeting civilians is wrong. That's why we've been calling for an international independent investigation to hold perpetrators to accountability. It's very important, for those of us who believe in international law, that this should happen.*

But they understand that moment — I think I am portraying this fairly — as revolutionary violence that might be very, in the way it gets carried out, even evil, but it reflects a society in Gaza under tremendous, relentless oppression, where the Israeli policy was to functionally make the experience and lives of the Gazans a nonissue. To try to make "the Palestinian issue," as it gets called, disappear.

Out of that comes a lot of things — including the Great Return March, which did not get a lot of international coverage — but which were more peaceful. And then, ultimately, Oct. 7.

Now to be very clear, I think Hamas is, or was — because I'm not sure how much it even really exists, at this point, as an organization that looks like what it once was — but I think very little has done as much damage, including to Palestinians, as Hamas. And I think Oct. 7 was a series of war crimes. It was a mass murder of civilians, a mass act of terror and barbarism. I don't think it can be explained away.

I think that it was also done to elicit an overwhelmingly violent Israeli response. Yahya Sinwar was not an idiot. It had to have been understood at every level that if you did breach Israel's defenses and you did carry out a mass murder of Israeli civilians, that Israel was going to come in and flatten Gaza.

That was the project, as I understand it. That's what they wanted. And the sacrifice of Palestinian civilians was part of their calculation.

Hamas — as it did in the second intifada, with suicide bombings against Israeli civilians and teenagers on buses and at nightclubs — has always been working with this tactic of leveraging the lives of Palestinian civilians to try to do something that would change the situation of Palestinians. So I think Hamas has done extraordinary damage to Palestinians, to Israel, to everybody.

But when I talk to Palestinians, they understand Hamas more in a lineage — whether or not they like them or hate them — of a sort of revolutionary and insurgent violence, which much more often does target civilians, which gets out of control. And they understand the fundamental oppression is coming from the Israeli side — they look at the death tolls on the two sides.

So when I heard Khalil speak, if you listen to Palestinians, which a lot of people in this conversation don't — the range of acceptable and well-heard opinion tends to come from people with differing levels of commitment to Israel and Zionism — he didn't say anything that sounded surprising to me.

So yes, I understand why it's hard to hear, but I also think that how hard it is to hear reflects to some degree how seldom Palestinians are heard in our conversation. Because to them, what is often hard to hear is the explaining away, the normalization of what they understand as, now, decades and decades of continuous Israeli violence against them and their lives and their existence.

And again, it's not how I see it and not how I see Hamas, but part of my project on the show has always been to accept that there are very different narratives of this conflict, of this moment — not just two, but many, many, many — existing alongside each other. And there's no capacity to see it in any way clearly if you're only willing to listen to one of them.

Gordon: Well, that ties into my next question, which is a critique that we've been getting in the inbox for a while, definitely after the episode "Why American Jews No Longer Understand One Another," and also after Mahmoud Khalil and the Philippe Sands episode on genocide.

The criticism is that a lot of these episodes, and certainly the cumulative effect of these episodes, have been pretty one-sided in focusing on criticism of Israel and not including as much the larger context of Hamas — not just Oct. 7, but Hamas's responsibility in

continuing the war and not putting down arms, not surrendering and still having hostages.

That's gotten a lot of reaction from people. How do you respond to that?

Klein: Israel is, at this point, the primary actor in the war. I wouldn't even call it a war anymore. I'd call it a siege.

If you believe what I believe about Hamas, if you believe what the people sending these emails believe about Hamas, they will tell you, I will tell you — in the same breath, basically — that Hamas is an organization that does not value civilian life, that uses civilian life as pawns. That is why, or partially why, it is classified as a terrorist organization in America.

Yes, do I wish Hamas had done none of this? I wish Hamas had done none of this. Do I wish they would give up all their arms immediately? I do. Do I wish they'd release the hostages immediately? I do.

The fact that they have not, in their incredibly degraded state, does not mean Israel can starve Gaza. It does not mean Israel can commit war crimes with impunity. It does not mean Israel can or should corrupt its own soul in pursuit of something that, at this point, is not even defined any longer.

It's also worth saying that logic goes both ways. There have been deals from Hamas that Israel could have taken, as well. If Israel would withdraw from Gaza, if it would accept a permanent cease-fire, Hamas would release the hostages.

This is partially why you see protests going on in Israel right now, where the families of both the hostages who have been released and those who remain in captivity are demonstrating and leading demonstrations against the Netanyahu government. Because they don't believe — and I don't believe, and nobody believes — that Benjamin Netanyahu's goal is to get the hostages home safely. It isn't.

The goal he has chosen — which I and virtually everybody who studies war or talks to people who study war said was impossible from the outset — is the total and complete destruction and eradication of Hamas, not just as a governing authority or as something that poses a threat to Israel, but as a thing that exists. They have not been able to do that. They will not be able to do that. They have not defined what doing that even looks like or how it will be measured or who will certify that it is done.

Right now, the thing happening that endangers huge numbers of civilians in Gaza — and the hostages — is what Israel is doing. And for Israel to be just continuing to devastate Gaza and kill this number of children and civilians and have hundreds of people killed while lining up for aid — it is a moral atrocity.

If people think I'm focusing on Israel, I am. Israel is the actor that America has a deep relationship with. Israel is the actor that we are sending arms to, that we are sending money to, that we are supporting in this war — these are our arms doing this.

I am a Jewish American with a connection to Israel, so what they do is meaningful to me. What they do affects what it means to be Jewish in the world and what it will mean for my children to be Jewish in the world. So I also care about Israel in a way that I don't care about other countries and other places. I don't think that is always a thing Israelis love, but nevertheless.

And Israel could decide right now to just let the food through. This famine could end with the word of one man. If Benjamin Netanyahu and his government wanted there to be enough food, there would be enough food tomorrow.

I think what Israel is doing now is an atrocity. It is heartbreaking. It needs to stop. And I don't think we know what its consequences will be in the long run.

I think we understood in the years after 9/11 that enraging mass populations over a long period of time sometimes takes a long time to return to you, but it often does return. And the abandonment of that learning, the complete letting go of the idea of what happens if you traumatize entire societies and turn them against you in the most fundamental way and you create huge numbers of people with a burning desire for vengeance in their hearts, who lost mothers and fathers and siblings and cousins and friends and teachers and grandparents — I don't know how you look at this and you don't just look to the future with a kind of horror.

Gordon: You called it an atrocity several times. You did not call it a genocide. You did a whole episode that explored that question and why you don't use that label.

A lot of the reaction to that episode, particularly on YouTube, was: Of course, it's a genocide. Obviously, this is a genocide. I'm almost offended that you would do this episode at this point in time, this long into the war.

And also, there were people who thought that having this whole debate about terminology was beside the point. How do you take that reaction?

Klein: The labeling of this as a genocide began very soon after Oct. 7. And it began at a time when I think that was obviously the wrong term.

As I've said before on the show, there is no country in the world with a capable military that would not have responded to something like Oct. 7 with unfathomable force. If some country bordering China went in and massacred 50,000 Chinese citizens, if there was a government or a terrorist group or drug cartel operating in Mexico that came in and killed 50,000 Americans — the idea that there would be some very tightly targeted counterterrorism response, even if that might be the wise option, is fantasy.

The very early use of the term "genocide" reflects two things. One is that, as I was saying earlier, to a lot of Palestinians, it's not discontinuous — it's continuous. And that what we are seeing now is part of an ongoing effort to erase the Palestinians as a people, to make their lives unlivable, to make the places they live unlivable —

Gordon: Do you understand it that way?

Klein: I understand Israeli society as split, with there being a part of it that does favor functional expulsion of the Palestinians and wants to achieve it by making their lives completely miserable.

Do I think at high levels of Israeli politics that they think they're going to somehow move all the Palestinians out? I don't really. I don't think they're actually planning that far forward at all. I think Netanyahu lives for the next day.

Gordon: Or not necessarily moving them out but to expand the settlements in ways that Palestinian life is just completely controlled and constrained — and to do the same thing in Gaza.

Klein: I think, at least in the West Bank, that has been the strategy. But again, I almost think calling it a strategy that is being coherently applied is a little bit misleading.

But they have been trying to make their lives miserable, and the hope is that at some point they will figure out a way to really take over what they call Judea and Samaria. I think that the side, the faction, that wants actual peace and still believes in any kind of coexistence in a peaceful way, has become very small.

And I understand the largest faction in Israeli politics as fundamentally disinterested. They just don't want to think about the Palestinians. Their intention, at least prior to Oct. 7, was not expulsion. It was not peace. It was not: Make their lives miserable. It was not: Make their lives better. It was: Don't think about them at all.

Israeli politics is like any politics: very, very fractious. Think about our own politics. Gaza — nobody was thinking about the building of settlements in any serious way a couple of years ago. There is no set of plans being debated. It's not like you have the far right putting up their plans for what should happen in the West Bank and Gaza, and then the center has its plan and what remains of the left — or the liberal side — has its plan. There's still not anything like what used to get called the "day after" plan in Gaza.

It's not just that Israel has decided — to the extent it has decided, at least under Netanyahu — it is just going to do occupation for a period of time. But that's never been debated. What it looks like has never been described to the Israeli people. What will be the governing structures of that occupation? Who's doing it?

Nothing there is decided. It is a society that has, on some level, decided just not to think about a future horizon here.

Gordon: So then how much does the intent matter versus the effect?

Klein: I think that's a good question. To go back to the question that some of these listeners asked me: The reason I stay away from the word "genocide," and have on the show, is that I think from very early on, there have been two different ideas there — or maybe more than that.

One is a kind of political project, which I understand, and I don't think is without legitimacy, to change the meaning and the global understanding of the Israeli state and what it wants. The Jewish state is born of the crime that leads to the word "genocide." The Jewish state is born of the Holocaust. For Israel to then become the first state in history to be held accountable or understood as, under the international laws it forms, the first state in history to be accused of and convicted of genocide, would profoundly change what it is.

Now, legally, it doesn't actually change anything. This is the other weird side of this conversation. What is different if Netanyahu gets convicted of genocide — versus crimes against humanity, versus war crimes? Nothing. They carry the same penalties in many

ways. Has there been some different level of international protection for the Palestinians because of the preliminary findings around this? No, there has not been.

So you have this legal definition and legal structure around "genocide" that has one set of meanings and is much broader than what was entailed in the Holocaust. And then you have a political effort that has — I think the term people used to be trying to use here is "apartheid."

That was a question: Could you make people globally see Israel as an apartheid state? Apartheid being, in recent modern history, one of the worst things a state has done.

I think, largely speaking, that effort has succeeded. And I agree with it: I think Israel does run an apartheid state.

Gordon: I feel, interestingly, it has succeeded in the last two years. I remember us doing episodes soon after Oct. 7, and "apartheid" feeling like charged language that —

Klein: I mean, it is charged language, but —

Gordon: But more editorially sensitive language.

Klein: That might be right. So now there's this question of genocide.

For those who just want the label "genocide" applied to Israel, they can apply that label to it. I'm not here to stop anybody.

But the question of what genocide is and where it came from, and the incredible historical tragedy that Israel is now plausibly guilty of it, and tracing that story from its beginning to where it's going — to me, that has carried a lot of force.

To others, for whom it's more settled — fair enough.

What I try to do on the show is to give people a space in which to think about things. As you know, as somebody who watches the inbox, there's almost no complaint we get more often than: How come you just let that thing stand?

Gordon: Or your vocal fry.

Klein: Or my vocal fry.

How come you just let that thing this person said stand?

And the answer is: The show is not here to do your thinking for you. The show is here for you to think in. And I will push to get the answers that I think are the person's real answers. But once I understand what they think, my point is not to then come in with the editorializing that wraps the whole thing in a bow.

It's interesting: My perception of episodes is often very different than the audience's. What I think a person said, what I think their views obviously really are, are sometimes very different than what people hear. I think that's a good thing about the show. I think it should be open to interpretation.

There's something very head spinning about having Khalil on one week, and you get a New York Post cover — you know, "Deport Him Now!" — and my inbox is full of people saying: How [expletive] dare you? How dare you have him on? How dare you let him say that?

And then the next week, it's from the other side: How dare you explore even the question of genocide? How dare you not just say it's all settled?

There's not really a way right now to create work that everybody whom you might want to reach can hear.

Gordon: You have a wildly impossible job in these interviews. But I will say, you do push back differently in different conversations, and the episode that got a lot of reaction before Mahmoud Khalil's was the Yoram Hazony interview. Interestingly, it was not explicitly about Israel–Palestine —

Klein: But implicitly, yes.

Gordon: Implicitly, it sure was. And a lot of the reaction that we got was circling the idea of how you heard his theory with regard to race.

You said at one point in the interview, where he's making the point that national conservatism is not racialist, and you said: I take that point. But trying to restore and then maintain — I think his language was like the Anglo-Protestant "core" in the U.S. and give each country its core — that smacks a little racialist.

How do you understand the line that he is drawing there?

Klein: I think that in this case, there are certain words people feel like if they can get the word agreed on, then the word holds so much power that it will somehow win the argument for them. And it won't.

I don't think Yoram Hazony's project is actually racialist because I understand it's fundamentally an Israeli project. I first met Yoram when I was on my reporting trip to Israel, and I went to see him. I remember thinking, after I had had coffee with him, that I really understand better the national conservative project, being in Israel and understanding it's imported from there, because Israel has become such a fundamentally unified, increasingly right-wing ethno-state.

Gordon: How does that make it not racialist?

Klein: It's not racialist.

Gordon: Can we define racialist?

Klein: They're not all Ashkenazi Jews.

Gordon: But I think they see Palestinians as a different race.

Klein: Maybe they do, but you can say Israel is a lot of things and Israeli Jews are a lot of things, but they're not one race under any definition we have of race.

Gordon: I think they're redefining it. I think they have a different framework for race than we do in the U.S.

Klein: I don't think they do. But see, I feel like this is the thing: It is religious. It is maybe ethnic in some way, but the idea that Arab Jews coming from Egypt, Morocco, Iraq and Russian Jews and Eastern European Jews — and for that matter, Ethiopian Jews, who are sort of separate and come with different complications in that society — the idea that's a racialist project, I mean, the conflict with the Palestinians, I don't even think is fundamentally racialist, either. It's about land. I don't think that the issue has to do with a view of race and Palestinians. It very much has to do with the politics and supremacy over land and the desire to have full dominance and Jewish supremacy in that land.

Gordon: It's still about a hierarchy based off ethnicity, with a religious component.

Klein: OK, that's fine. But now we're just defining it away from being, certainly, what in American terms would be racialist.

Gordon: OK. Yes. This feels like we're getting lost in semantics.

But you understand that his theory is about privileging certain ethno-religious groups over others that don't necessarily map neatly onto skin color?

Klein: Yes, I think this comes through very clearly. I am happy to say I don't think it's fundamentally, or in all of its incarnations, going to be built around race. But in every place it's going to be built around something. That something is going to be, in my view, probably very problematic.

Maybe that will map onto race or what we think of as race or what we have decided to call a race. Maybe it won't. Maybe it's going to be some mixture of races, a mixture of race and religion, mixtures of race and religion and history — or just of history. It can become many, many different things. But it's going to be about a core group that they have somehow decided is the real group, and that group is supposed to maintain a sufficient level of dominance and control over society.

And in Yoram's view, when that group loses its control over a society, loses sufficient numerical majority, whatever it might be, that society, its cohesion, its unity begins to dissolve.

My view, I think articulated pretty clearly in that episode, is that that's wrong. And one way you know it's wrong is that the strongest country in the world does not abide by that. In fact, the states and particular parts of this country that have driven so much of its success, innovation, genius — New York, where we are right now, California is another, Texas is another — are the places that least abide by that approach.

You also have to understand that when he was building these ideas, Hazony did not look like he was winning in Israel. And now Israel has given into itself as a right-wing ethno-state. And Hazony and ideas like his are completely pre-eminent — they have very little challenge. But it wasn't always like that.

So he has been in a fight in his country that's more like the ones we're in, in this country and right now. The other side of that fight is functionally lost.

I think that if you look at the way Zionism has been adopted as an almost aspirational identity by the American right wing, and if you look at the American left: For a long time, going back way before Oct. 7, identifying with the Palestinian cause was a way of identifying with oppressed peoples around the world. It had long become, much to the

confusion of many American Jews, part of a basket of left causes. You would go see a protest about the Iraq War, and you would see a bunch of "Free Palestine" posters. But Zionism wasn't quite like that.

And now Zionism, which I've now seen and talked to people on the right who have adopted it in a way they really hadn't five years ago — to them, it's an embrace of a kind of strength.

Gordon: Do you think Hazony has played a big role in that?

Klein: I don't think specifically him. I mean, maybe some. Maybe the NatCon project has played some role in it. But I also think that it has been part of this moment in which there is maybe a fetishization or a belief that —

Gordon: Weird time to do it.

Klein: No, but it's not, actually. It's not a weird time to do it.

Because if you look at people like Elon Musk, JD Vance and, in a weird way, John Fetterman — a lot of different political figures who are on the right-of-center of the spectrum in different ways — there's a sense that — I mean, there's not really a different way to put it than this: that American society became liberalized and feminized, and it has lost the appreciation of strength, of martial ambition, of aggression, of territorial expansion, that were what made this country great. Its frontier spirit, its expansionist spirit.

There's a reason Donald Trump is fixated on territorial expansion — Canada, Greenland, etc. — maybe Gaza, sometimes, when he's telling it — and this sense that what made countries great in the 18th and 19th and the early 20th century was somehow pushed to the side by — it wouldn't have been called this then but "wokeness," neo-Marxism, whatever the enemy du jour is.

And what we've been left with are these countries denuded of their strength. Because we're now just countries of lawyers and bureaucrats and people telling you why you can't do anything. We're terrified of risk, and even words cause us harm, and words are violence, and we need safe spaces — it's all part of a generalized sense that America became soft.

And Israel sits, for many of these people now, as an example of a hard country — a country that did not become soft, that is rich and highly educated. The Israeli stock market has been doing amazingly. Israeli tech companies are very strong. And the people serve in the military.

Gordon: Even the women serve in the military.

Klein: And when they were attacked, they destroyed the people who attacked them and now have decapitated Hezbollah and bombed Iran.

So the meaning of both — I mean, there's a meaning around "Palestine," but there's a meaning around "Zionism" that has expanded now. It's not just about the ethno-state, but it's about the martial state.

So I think you have to see some things going on here that are not really about the Israel–Palestine conflict. They're about what kind of country we were and people wanting to go back to that, thinking that we actually made really profound wrong turns in the 20th and 21st centuries. And that Donald Trump, with his very 19th-century approach to everything, is bringing us back to the world and attitude that fostered our greatness and the cruelty that is part of it. I mean, there's a reason you have this attack on empathy as a concept.

Gordon: Can a woman ever be president, Ezra?

Klein: Yes, I think so. But you're going to have to beat this stuff back.

Gordon: That's a nice segue to American politics. Move away from Israel-Palestine. Put that to bed.

Onto what Democrats should be doing right now. This question is from Brenton P.:

> *Lately, there's been debate on the left about whether Democrats should continue playing by the rules and acting with restraint, or adopt a more aggressive scorched-earth approach, similar to Trump's style. Is it time to take a tougher stance and push through the issues Democrats care about?*
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> *For example, should they consider expanding the Supreme Court, accelerating the transition to green energy while imposing stricter regulations on fossil fuels, or withholding federal medical funding from states that restrict abortion access? These steps might seem drastic, but given the current political climate, some argue that the traditional approach is no longer effective.*
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> *What are your thoughts on this?*

I would add to that question about the current seeming race to the bottom on cravenly political gerrymandering that Texas started.

Klein: So I think you have to take these in different pieces. I am very much of the view that if Texas and other red states are going to do gerrymandering, the blue states are going to have to respond in kind. And that the hope for the end of this is that people get fed up with gerrymandering and we end the practice nationwide, somehow or another.

Gordon: That's a hopeful end.

Klein: It is, but there's no other approach right now. This idea that you can unilaterally disarm while the red states are gerrymandering their way to some kind of attempted permanent majority in the House — you can't do that.

If you look even at just basic game theory, oftentimes in these sorts of dilemmas, the optimal theory is what's called tit for tit —

Gordon: [Chuckles.]

Klein: Or tat for tat, if you prefer — that you do what the other side does, and when the other side changes, you also change. But the idea that you can just let the other side run roughshod over you — that doesn't work.

So I think what Newsom is doing is the right thing. Not because anybody on the left wants this to be the place we end up, but you can't just hand over control to the people who want everything to end up in a terrible place. It's very unfortunate. Life sometimes gives you bad options, and you have to choose the best of them.

I think the thing elsewhere on that list actually reflects questions that we have to think about, not just as politics. The way the questioner asked that question: The other ways aren't effective — well, your way might not be effective, either. It was very ineffective in many ways for F.D.R. to try to pack the court, though some people credit it with kind of cowing the court.

It seems here to me that Donald Trump cowed the court somewhat. This will be brought up or explored in a future episode, but the court — I thought they would give Trump 20-ish percent of what he wanted in order to avert a showdown. But I think they're giving him 60 or 70 percent of what he wanted.

It might play out very differently under Democrats. I don't know the answer to that.

But I am not, and I never have been, against efforts to remake the court. I would definitely put term limits in place, not because I think you need term limits but because I think you actually need retirement ages in politics at this point. For the court, I would like to see 12-year terms so you don't have this absolute insanity around lifetime appointments, where you're just waiting for people either to die or to retire strategically.

And I do think you have a gerontocracy problem — that has gotten worse on the left, by the way, among the Democratic Party. You look at who the elderly members of Congress are who have died just in this election cycle, and it's Democrats.

I mean, the disaster — you can really tell the story of American politics in Democratic retirements that did not happen. What if Ruth Bader Ginsburg had retired in 2013? When many of us, myself included, wrote pieces saying: Please retire. Democrats are going to lose the Senate in 2014, and you have no idea what will happen after that. Please retire.

And we got howled at by people saying: How dare you say that? Ruth Bader Ginsburg is an American hero.

And she did incredible damage to democracy. There's a very, I think, reasonable argument that if Trump had not had that open seat to promise to the evangelical right, he would not have been able to build the alliance that helped him win what was, in 2016, an incredibly close election. And even if Trump still wins in 2016, at least right now you have a 5-4 court — not a 6-3 court.

Then, obviously, Joe Biden. You can't run counterfactuals. But I think that retirement ages would make a lot of sense.

Then there are other things that wouldn't. I think a place where Democrats have to be really careful is that wielding incredible power to do very unpopular things does not make you politically strong. And so being attentive to and aware of public opinion is meaningful here.

That's particularly true, by the way, when they have the disadvantage they do in the Senate. The Senate is built to overrepresent rural voters and states with a lot of rural voters and small states. And that just means that in order to maintain any kind of majority in the Senate, Democrats have to win.

I've seen different estimates of it, but to win, they need to overperform by something like 4 to 6 percentage points, which is quite hard. Right now, if they're going to take back the Senate, they need to win in places — like Ohio, Kansas — that have become very, very difficult for them.

I think people also want to see you fighting. But you have to pick what you're going to wield power on thoughtfully. Gerrymandering is unpopular. The amount of money spent on politics is unpopular.

Wielding power incredibly aggressively, if it makes you horrendously unpopular and you already have a disadvantage in the House and Senate, is not a great strategy. So the only cautionary note I'm offering here is: It's fine to be, on some level, ruthless, and there are many places where I'd like to see a lot more ruthlessness from Democrats. But that cannot become an excuse for not thinking strategically about where the country is and how to meet it or how to lead it.

Gordon: I was just remembering that our last "Ask Me Anything" was basically the week your book came out.

Klein: I remember that. [Laughs.]

Gordon: It was exciting days for you.

Klein: "Abundance," available anywhere you might want to buy a book. Or an e-book.

Gordon: A lot of people have.

Klein: Or an audiobook.

Gordon: Where is it? Is it still in the charts?

Klein: Twenty-one weeks, which is pretty [expletive] cool. I don't think I would have seen that coming.

Gordon: All right. So just to start off, what has been the most exciting thing for you in terms of seeing these ideas get embraced in different places?

Klein: I think the fact that they've actually gotten embraced in different places, that legislation is moving in different parts of the country that is "Abundance" oriented, that I'm hearing from the politicians moving it, that the book has been a permission structure for them, a spur for them, a way of thinking about things for them.

And also, to my surprise, how big of a role it's playing in other countries. So "Abundance," the book, has become a big deal in the U.K., where it has become a big book on Downing Street. In Canada, where Mark Carney's "Build Baby Build" agenda has been very aligned to it — I'm not saying we were the inspiration for it, I don't think we were — but we know that a lot of people in that government are reading the book.

In Australia, it has been talked about a lot, and there have been these articles about how it has become superpopular in the Australian government. It has been really interesting to see a book that was very rooted in American politics for me, somewhat in California and New York and some other big blue states — Derek and I wouldn't have written the book the way we did if we didn't think that the problems generalized. But the degree to which people in other places, where I don't know their problems, and I don't know their politics, feel the problems generalized has been very exciting to me.

Gordon: Is there a particular part that you see people mostly grabbing on to, or as being most immediately reflected in the performance?

Klein: People are grabbing on much more, I would say, to the critique of how highly bureaucratized liberal governments work and then fail to work. They're grabbing on much less than I had hoped — and this might be my failure as a promoter of the book's ideas — to the idea that "Abundance" is very much about how you build a goal-oriented liberalism as opposed to a process-oriented liberalism.

But a goal-oriented liberalism requires you to think very hard about your goals, and one of the arguments of "Abundance" is that we should be picking goals that reflect and lead the way toward much different levels of material prosperity.

So in America, one of the big questions around that is housing, which is the biggest part of most working families' budgets. But we also talk a lot about energy, and one of the projects of the book is to move the energy conversation beyond just decarbonization and preventing the worst of climate change and to actual clean energy abundance.

The idea that energy is a nucleus of wealth and that our conversation about energy and the environment shouldn't just be about avoiding terrible things from happening but making possible abundant futures that right now are almost unimaginable — that's very important to me.

There's a reason we have so much about science and technology in the book. These are incredible ways to solve problems that don't even currently appear solvable. As somebody whose partner has some really difficult health conditions, whether or not medications and treatments appear for the things that afflict the person I love most is a really important question of health care policy to me. Health insurance that cannot buy treatments for my spouse, because those treatments don't exist in some cases, is worth a [expletive]-ton less than health insurance that can.

So I think we could do a lot more in terms of getting people to talk about a much more future-focused form of liberalism — a liberalism that imagines a future that is quite different and just, in different ways than the present.

We do a fairly good job of that in liberalism around redistribution, parceling out what we have very differently. And that's very important. I'm not an opponent of that. I'm not questioning that. I want a better health care system than we have. I want a fairer tax system than we have.

But there's a lot we need to do to make things that are not currently possible, possible. We can only redistribute what we already have. What about what we don't yet have?

What future do we want? What does that future look like? What does it have that we don't currently have? And then how do we work backward to achieve it?

That, I think, is something I'm still trying to figure out how to more effectively inject into abundance discourse.

Gordon: That politics is the art of making the impossible possible?

Klein: But not just possible. Politics is the art of making the impossible conceivable.

One of the things that worried me most about Donald Trump at the dawn of his second term was the alliance he had made with the tech right and with Elon Musk and other people, who, in addition to being very, very rich and very, very powerful, are also fundamentally influencers around the future.

Elon Musk is the most important futurist influencer alive right now. If you're a young person and you're really into rockets, the person you are into is Elon Musk.

If you look at what gets called the manosphere, this collection of podcasts, it's very futuristically focused. They're very interested in A.I., they're interested in —

Gordon: Crypto.

Klein: Oh, yeah. Crypto's another big part of this.

That alliance breaking down — not the crypto alliance, which is still there, but the alliance with Musk and Trump destroying our scientific institutions and scientific funding — means that there is an opportunity for liberals to take back the future.

But that requires developing a vision of the future that isn't just about how you don't like what current technology is doing. It also requires coming up with an agenda in which you put a genuine optimism about what is possible with technology and connect it to a genuine view about how to get that technology and govern it and distribute it fairly — and are able to talk about it in a way that is compelling and exciting to people. And that I don't see happening yet.

Gordon: We have time for one last question, from Jess K. about your Munk Debate experience. We aired the audio on our feed. Do you have a behind-the-scenes tale for us?

Klein: So the Munk Debate: We had this debate. It was me and Ben Rhodes from "Pod Save the World." And then on the other side, Kevin Roberts, the head of the Heritage Foundation and an architect of Project 2025, and Kellyanne Conway.

Here's what I thought was so interesting about that debate: I went into that debate very worried about how it would go — not because I thought anybody in Canada would think that America was at the dawn of a new golden age but precisely because nobody would think that. The debate was scored by audience movement, and I thought we had an incredibly hard task.

I didn't want the headline to be "Rhodes and Klein Lose Munk Debate to Roberts and Conway on Whether or Not America's in a New Golden Age." Even if what had happened was that we had started with all of the audience agreeing with us, and because of that, because we had no targets for persuasion, we lost 2 percent.

In the end, we started with 85 percent of the audience agreeing with us and gained a point. So technically we won — which is good.

OK. I thought we did a pretty good job in that debate, but if I had been on the other side, I could have beaten us. What I found so interesting was when I watched Conway and Roberts, just knowing — I'm a good debater, I think. And the thing you know as a debater is that you're trying to win people over.

But to debate that effectively, you would have needed to be willing to give ground to what the audience already thought and believed. You would have needed to portray yourself as an honest broker in the conversation in ways that built your credibility with the audience.

So then when you said: I understand why this looks kind of crazy to you. I understand that right now, at the beginning of this administration, we're in a period of massive disruption, that tariffs are all over the place. You're furious. But what we're doing is resetting the system to achieve X, Y and Z. Here's how we're going to do it, and here's how it's going to be good for us both — I think I could have run that argument if I had needed to.

And they didn't really run that argument.

Gordon: Their argument was just like: Everything has been brilliant all the time.

Klein: I don't want to say literally that is what they said. But you can go back and listen to it. It's on our feed.

And when I listened to Roberts and Conway, I just didn't feel like their audience was in that room. And my co-debaters were very worried about someone from the Trump administration hearing them say something Donald Trump wouldn't like, and that maybe some enemy of theirs or somebody who was in the room would have reported it back, and then they would have lost influence in the orbit. I felt like they were being watched.

Gordon: That's a weird feeling.

Klein: Look, I could be totally wrong. I don't mean to be slandering anybody. In a way, I'm doing the opposite. I think they're both better debaters than they showed up as that night, and in obvious ways. And there were just moments in the conversation where either these habits are so internalized now that they're just second nature for people who are in the Trumpist orbit. Or there is a genuine level of fear that you will be caught on camera or on a tweet or something saying something that is negative about Dear Leader, and it will get back to Dear Leader or the people around him, and your enemies will use it to knife you.

Gordon: Having actually been on a debate stage and felt that feeling, do you now see this as an affliction more clearly across the Trumpian right?

Klein: Well, I've always seen it as an affliction across the Trumpian right. It's been true for a very long time. It was less true in the first term — people were much more willing to criticize Donald Trump. Now, in the second term, they're really not, on the right. And it has made them justify things they never would have justified before.

It creates these weird dynamics. I think you saw this a bit with the Epstein files, although this was one of the first places you began to see cracks. But the initial impulse was to endlessly blame Pam Bondi or Kash Patel. But you can never say Dear Leader did anything wrong.

The king is always getting bad advice. The king is never wrong.

Gordon: And the specific fear underneath that you think is that he has the power, if he sends one tweet, to make your life hell and send the troll armies out against you? And also that your career within Republican politics just might be done?

Klein: I've said this on the show before: On the one level, there's a lot of room for dissent in the MAGA coalition. You can have a very wide range of views, say, on vaccines. I think actually, frankly, a wider range of views than Democrats are currently able to have, or were able to have in 2024, at least.

Because in the MAGA coalition, the thing you cannot have a wide range of views on is one thing. It's a unidimensional test, which is: Donald Trump is great. You can't have the wrong view on the 2020 election. You can't have the wrong view on Donald Trump. You can't be a critic of his.

You can't be what Larry Summers was to Joe Biden during the inflationary period, where he was out there really hammering them but remained actually somebody they talked to a lot and were trying to bring back into the tent. Dissent on policy and debate was much more open because it wasn't necessary to believe that Joe Biden was the Sun God — or at least to pretend you believe Joe Biden was Sun God.

But in the Trump coalition, you have to treat Trump pretty much like the Sun God. And if it gets back that you're not — all power and influence flows in that world from him. If he comes out and says: Heritage is a trash organization that has been screwing up MAGA for years now, created all these problems of 2025 — that's basically the end of Heritage, at least as a viable player for a while.

If Kellyanne Conway is on the outs with Trump world, that's it. What are you if people don't believe you're close to and listened to by Donald Trump? Then you're just — what? Some Never Trumper? You're Liz Cheney? Like, who are you?

So the sense that people on the right now talk about Donald Trump like they're being watched by the Stasi is very alive for me. I think you see it if you turn on Fox News on any given day.

And I just felt it to be true there in a way that I think, if it weren't true, they would have beaten us. Because in fact, you were never arguing for the people in the room. You were arguing for one person who you have no idea if he would have ever known this had happened. But if he ever did, and he didn't like it, you were screwed.

So that was what I took away from that debate.

Gordon: You said I wasn't allowed to end this episode on hope, but is that not hopeful, perhaps, for the Democrats, if they're up against a party that has to be so self-censored?

Klein: Oh, yeah. I mean, again, I don't think it's hopeful that we have this kind of coalition in charge in America. But if you're asking: What are Democratic opportunities? Yes, the structure of Trumpism for a talented Democratic candidate or set of candidates offers a lot of opportunities.

Do I see people who seem to me to be taking it? Not yet. But we're not at the point where you have individual voices rising up that much. There's going to be a brittleness to the Republican coalition.

If you're JD Vance or Marco Rubio and you want to be the nominee, and Trump is polling at 36 percent but will slit your throat politically if you say anything went wrong and he did anything wrong — and yet he and his administration are viewed as pulsing symbols of corruption and incompetence — that's going to be a very hard election to win.

Now will the American people feel that way by then? I don't know. But it's going to create some problems for the right if Trump is not seen by the rest of the country as the Sun God he insists his own people treat him as.

Gordon: I think that's hope.

Klein: [Laughs.] How far we've fallen, Claire.

Gordon: [Laughs.] And we're out of time. Thank you so much, Ezra.

Klein: Thank you, Claire.

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