

#1621 How Democrats Lost Their Way On Economics And Are Starting To Find It Again - Members

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the award winning Best of the Left podcast, in which we come to understand the neoliberal legacy of the new Democrats, which continues to loom large, but also see that it really does seem like the progressive wing of the party and the broader demand for populous economic policies has had a positive effect. Now people just need to know that it's happening. Sources today include *Prospect Generations*, *Against the Grain*, *Start Making Sense*, *The Majority Report*, *The National Rational*, and *The Bitchuation Room*, with additional members-only clips from *Deconstructed* and *Start Making Sense*.

But before we dive in, a quick note: we are talking a lot about the Democratic party and some specific Democrats today, which may bring up feelings for people. You may feel particularly hostile towards Democrats, you may feel defensive of them, or somewhere in between. I have more thoughts that I'll share at the end of the show, but I'll leave you now with the suggestion that you set emotional feelings aside and think of [00:01:00] these clips as I've intended them, not to pinpoint a place for blame, but to learn from the past so that we can do better going forward. Criticism has two definitions: expression of disapproval is the one we most often think of related to politics, but the other is the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of something. This is more often used in relation to literary works or art. I think we'd all be better off if we more often applied the latter to politics rather than the former.

American Socialism - Prospect: Generations - Air Date 4-6-23

HAROLD MEYERSON: The view of the Biden administration on the left is understandably complicated. He certainly has adopted some of the Bernie platform. But he is not Bernie. He is not even the most articulate representative of his own approach there. There are others who can do that better. And so, even when he , you know, is fighting, has been trying to push things like free tuition, free public universities [00:02:00] and affordable childcare and such, it doesn't rally, you know?, it's not wrapped up in a nice package that really kind of excited the people you were just talking about who remain currently and somewhat understandably unexcited.

LUKE GOLDSTEIN: Right. Right. These are the two bases though, you know, of the party. Yeah. Yeah. And so it's somewhat in tension. Also, I think probably the other major challenge that we'd want to touch on here is exactly that though the kind of Bernie wing has gotten closer to the Biden administration, probably, you know, closer than in recent memory, that also has its own problems. Which is that without fully being in power, you're still also kind of blamed for certain policy failures or strategies. There's a target on you and not everything [00:03:00] is fully in your control as well, which I think going forward, is going to be one of the bigger problems that the organized left has to deal with.

HAROLD MEYERSON: That's historically been a problem with the left. I remember, you know, I attended the two speeches Bernie gave, one in 2015, one in 2019, at Georgetown University here in Washington, which were billed as his defining "My Kind of Socialism" speech. And in each case, he really didn't reference earlier socialists. He didn't even reference his hero, Eugene Debs, except in passing, but he pointed out that a lot of what he was about was just fulfilling what Roosevelt was for. The Roosevelt State of the Union address in 1944, an economic bill of rights... so, there is this sense of mashing things together and after his first version of the speech in 2015, I came back here to *The Prospect* and wrote a quick piece saying, Well, when Franklin Roosevelt was president, the Republicans said he's really a socialist. [00:04:00] Today, Bernie Sanders said the Republicans were right. And so, yeah, just attacking the kind of moderate social democratic policies can be advanced by a Biden or by many Democratic members of Congress as socialist. You get the attack without actually being the person who puts it through, who implements it, or even who can claim credit for it.

You know, I mean, when the left has succeeded, the left's version of success, at least in this country, is it argues for a program and 20 years later it becomes sort of center left and it gets adopted in attenuated form. The socialist leader, Norman Thomas, who led the Socialist Party in the thirties and forties, some people would say to him, Well, you know, Roosevelt has carried out your program. And Thomas would say, Yeah, it was carried out on a stretcher. This is the kind of conundrum that the American left and the American socialists often confront.

LUKE GOLDSTEIN: Yeah, right, right. And another topic that I [00:05:00] thought would be good for us to get into: today there's the rebirth of the socialist left. There's also a rebirth of the new Brandeisian, anti-monopoly left. Now, these two groups are clearly in coalition with one another, at least in terms of the political terrain today, and, certainly throughout American history, are really both drawing on similar traditions, at least, you know, the populist uprisings of

the late 19th and early 20th century, and of course, the New Deal. These are really the two planks of the New Deal program, you know, antitrust and social programs. I'm wondering how you see the way these two groups have, at this period in time, at least, come together. Because of course, philosophically, there are some key distinctions as well.

HAROLD MEYERSON: And not just philosophically, sometimes operationally. One of the best unions in the country, the Communication Workers of America, the CWA, [00:06:00] which, God bless it, was the only major private sector union that, from the 80s and the 90s and the aughts and the teens, kept striking and winning when every other union had given up striking as something they couldn't win. So, the CWA had worked out a deal with Activision and Microsoft, and Activision and Microsoft, said, Yeah, we'll let you unionize the workers. We'll go neutral. We will not oppose it. But the antitrust people are vehemently against Microsoft's basically purchase, but called a merger, of Activision because it certainly reduces competition.

So, you get these distinctions and sometimes these distinctions are a concern. With the worker concern, you are concerned about the nature of the corporation and with antitrust you're concerned about the scope of the corporation. So, you know, that's an inherent obstacle, but there is so much that nonetheless unifies these groups, even [00:07:00] while these divisions exist that, notwithstanding CWA versus antitrust, I see it less of a conflict and more of a being able to work together.

The Legacy of the New Democrats - KPFA - Against the Grain - Air Date 8-17-22

LILY GEISMER: There's a group of Democrats who come into office in 1974. They're called the Watergate Babies. The name assumes that they were opposed to Nixon, but actually who their big main opponents were, what they were acting against, was actually the Democratic Party. And a feeling that the kind of Great Society, New Deal approach was outdated and that the party was too beholden to that style and needed to rethink the ways in which it addressed issues of poverty and inequality, but also the way that who it envisioned as its core constituencies, and particularly were critical of the Democratic Party, the ways in which the Democratic Party was beholden to organized labor and wanted to shift the party in a new direction away from those older kinds of relationships.

And they still believed in that, in the ideas that it's [00:08:00] government's responsibility to help people in need, to create equality. They just increasingly start to see different mechanisms such to get there.

SASHA LILLEY - HOST, AGAINST THE GRAIN: When you say that they saw the need to shift away from organized labor, who did they envision as their model constituents?

LILY GEISMER: So they speak it--and this is something I actually address in my first book as well which was about suburban liberals--they primarily see as the core constituency of the Democratic Party and who it should be really securing as its base, really, suburban knowledge workers and more moderate suburbanites who they understood to be this critical worker of the future.

And I think that it's actually goes in 2 ways. So on the one hand is this idea of that's the kind of base that can be a more stable base for the party. But the other thing that they start to increasingly believe in--and this goes to their bigger vision of shifting away from older sort of model of the Democratic Party and liberalism--is towards the different types of political economy. [00:09:00] And that leads them increasingly towards a more post-industrial model, in particular this idea of really rooting the nation's economy in new sectors, so what becomes known as the new economy, but especially in the tech sectors, finance and free trade, and they become early proponents of a more globalized economy in the 1970s.

So that has an idea of there's an economic component to that. But it's also focused on political strategy, and those are the kinds of sectors that many of their own constituents worked in, or the people that they were trying to target. And so the two go hand in trying to create a new base for the party, but also a new mechanism for for economic growth in the country.

SASHA LILLEY - HOST, AGAINST THE GRAIN: Was there a political component in wanting to move away from feeling beholden to the unionized working class?

LILY GEISMER: Absolutely. I think that becomes really critical to a lot of the messaging. And there's this whole idea, so when Gary Hart, who's one of the early standard bearers of this idea, and so they're called the [00:10:00] Watergate babies and they get known as the Atari Democrats. But when he comes into office in 1974, he says we're not a bunch of little Hubert Humphreys. And that's actually an explicit reference to Humphrey's relationship to the labor movement and this notion that particular kinds of Democrats had

become so basically beholden to organized labor and so they wanted to move away from those ideas. There's either somewhat hostility towards labor or just ignoring or not addressing questions of labor in a lot of their platforms and then also in their core economic agenda.

SASHA LILLEY - HOST, AGAINST THE GRAIN: How did the ideas of the New Democrats differ from those that we associate with the right? Those of Milton Friedman or Margaret Thatcher?

LILY GEISMER: So some of these ideas and what my book traces as they become articulated early through in the 1970s through these Watergate babies who become the Atari Democrats because of their connection to tech, and then it really takes off with the New Democrats and the Democratic Leadership [00:11:00] Council which gets founded in the mid-1980s.

And the critical difference is they, in many ways, someone like Reagan or Thatcher, believe in the market as both a means and an end, that they see this faith in the market to do its various different work to help. And it's less this idea of helping people. It's much, much more focused on individual responsibility and individuality. And so that's a more traditional kind of neoliberal model.

The new Democrats still believe in certain ideas of some mechanisms of that it's a responsibility of government to help people. They just increasingly see them using market means to get there. And so it's more about, that's the kind of the means and the methods to get to traditional liberal ends.

While by 1990, the DLC as part of its platform this idea that the goal is to expand opportunity, not government, they still believe in a space for government. And the idea really is they see government as a catalyst. So it's the responsibility of government to connect the public and [00:12:00] private sectors. So that still has a place for government in a way that the traditional Thatcher or Reagan approach does not. So they express hostility to big government bureaucracy and that's one of their critiques of the Great Society approach, that it was overly bureaucratic, but they're not anti-government in the same way that someone like Reagan or Thatcher was.

SASHA LILLEY - HOST, AGAINST THE GRAIN: So would it be wrong, then, to conclude, as some have, that the path that Democrats ended up taking, the New Democrats who emerged in the 1980s particularly, was a rupture from the Democratic Party tradition of the New Deal? It's certainly been framed that way. How do you understand their relationship to that longer historical tradition?

LILY GEISMER: This is where the academic in me comes out, where it's complicated. So on the one hand, I think it actually stands for forms of continuity and change. And so some of this has to do with how you interpret the New Deal. [00:13:00] And in many ways, they're actually building on a New Deal approach. The New Deal itself always was a--and the scholars are increasingly looking at this--had some of the roots of neoliberalism in it. It advocated shoring up markets. That's when they particularly embrace the Keynesian model. They also really believe in public-private partnerships and other mechanisms such as a mechanism of delivery. So to me, those are the places of continuity.

I think the critical difference and rupture comes in the ways in which they want to connect the markets and government. And so in my book, I look at a lot of this idea of doing well by doing good. And the traditional New Deal approach was doing well. So building up the economy and then having compensatory welfare programs that's attached to that, so big government programs. The New Democrat approach is to combine those things. And the idea is that you can grow the new economy and that's going to help people, but also that you can use traditional [00:14:00] mechanisms --not traditional, actually; new economy mechanisms like finance from finance, tech and trade, and those can actually help poor people as well. So it's fusing those together. And that, to me, stands for a different kind of approach of the Democratic Party. So they're much, much more focused on using market means than previous generations of Democrats were, and especially when you look back to the kind of New Deal or Great Society models.

One of the things in the book I look at, they're very critical of the New Deal and the Great Society often in their language, and they have this constant mantra that the solutions of the 30s can't meet the problems of the 70s or the 80s or the 90s--they updated each decade.

But one of the things that's important about it is that actually much of their criticisms of the New Deal and Great Society aren't necessarily accurate depictions of the New Deal or Great Society, especially overcharacterizing how redistributive those programs were. And so I think in some ways the New Deal was never a universal program. It was never universal welfare. It was always work based. So it's [00:15:00] actually limited in that capacity. And it wasn't as redistributive as it often gets subsequently presented. And the same thing goes for the Great Society, which was not a redistributive program. And so I think that those are some of the ways that you can see more continuities too. And so they rhetorically position themselves as a separation. But if you actually look more closely, there's more continuities than might initially appear.

Clinton's 'Fabulous Failure' Part 1 - Start Making Sense - Air Date 10-4-23

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: Clinton's idea was that a globalized economy would give the United States the high technology, high-skilled entrepreneurial heart of the world economy, and indeed, we did get Apple, but also, in that era, we got Walmart, we got McDonalds, we got Amazon, low-wage, low-skilled retail companies that have fought unions ruthlessly. How much of that is Clinton's responsibility?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Well, obviously these things were happening independent of the President. Clinton didn't come in with that idea that you just expressed. He was [00:16:00] defeated, and then by the second term, very much, Clinton and the people around him are talking about a new economy. That's the phrase, "New economy," which meant Silicon Valley, transformations of telecommunications, all of that, and they were very excited about it. They thought, "Well, we don't need regulation."

"We can have deregulation. We can have free trade because we're going to be on the top." I think they were seduced by that idea, and really, the new economy was not just Silicon Valley, it was Walmart. It was low-wage service sector. I mean, and when you look at the number of jobs being created, the number of janitors and home healthcare workers, and retail clerks does, in fact, far outstrip the number of computer programmers and things of that sort.

I mean, I could go into this, there were still some things in the second term that they did. For example, CHIPS, the Children's Health Insurance program, which was a kind [00:17:00] of consolation prize for not getting health insurance. The big plan, that went into effect, very successful, and all the Clinton people were very proud of that, and they're right to be, because it helped tens of millions of kids. But basically, the economy was increasingly financialized, and tremendous deregulation, which really were ticking time bombs which would in fact explode in the next decade.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: So your argument in this book is that Clinton's turn to the right was not, I'm quoting, "Not merely a product of defeat at the hands of corporate enemies and political foes. It was also bred by a series of illusions, his illusions." And in some cases, the chickens didn't come home to roost for a long time. It was eight years before we got the financial crisis in 2008. How much is Clinton to blame for that?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: This is the deregulation of derivatives. It wasn't as if these things, where there were no people [00:18:00] inside the administration saying, "This is a bad idea." There were. Now, derivatives are kind of insurance products that are really wagers, that seemingly are safe bets, because some companies are not going to go bankrupt, and therefore, you can have a highly, highly leveraged insurance, as it were, and you'll come out okay, but sometimes it doesn't happen. So the idea of the deregulation of derivatives, they're sold without any regulations.

There was a big debate about this. A woman named Brooksley Born, who was head of the Commodities Futures Trading Corporation, which had usually, in the past, "Oh, it would regulate hog bellies and corn futures." Well, futures on stocks, futures on other kinds of financial instruments, which derivatives were, she wanted to regulate them and said, "This stuff is growing by leaps and bounds, it's unregulated, and it's going to explode." Fortune Magazine had articles, "Yes," saying that. They call them alligators in [00:19:00] a swamp. They're ready to snap, but Rubin, Robert Rubin and Larry Summers and others, they all, again, came down on Brooksley Born with a ton of bricks, and a financial law was passed, which completely unregulated derivatives.

These things grew by the trillions and trillions of dollars, and then they imploded in 2008 and nine. It just completely imploded.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: Looking at lessons that Clinton's successors learned from his failures and disasters, Obama did pass his number one priority, a national healthcare program. Obamacare is not what we wanted, it's not what he had promised, but he succeeded where Clinton failed. What had Obama learned from the failure of the Clintons? Why did he succeed, where the Clintons failed?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Well, I think he succeeded because he did see the problems of Clinton, which was various sectors of capital, big insurance, certain kinds of insurance companies, [00:20:00] pharmaceuticals, abandoned ship. They said, 'No, we don't want to do that.' So Obama said, 'I'm going to structure this so Walmart can be on board, so the big insurance companies will make more money.' These deals, you think of Obama as kind of an idealistic character, they made some real crude deals in the run-up to that, and therefore, the big insurance, Big Pharma, the low wage retailers were not opposed. The Republican party, yes, was 100% opposed to Obamacare, but I think the fact that it passed anyway, that there weren't that many defections among the Democrats, indicates it's because the big players, the big companies, they said, "Yeah, we're going along with this," and they weren't going to lobby against it, and they didn't.

So I think Obama learned that. He also put a tax, paid for it with a progressive tax, which I think Clinton was afraid to do, and I think that turned out – that was also one of the reasons for opposition, but that turned out to make one of the most progressive features of Obamacare, [00:21:00] is in fact, its tax system.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: That was eight and nine years after Clinton. 16 years after Bill left office, Hillary lost the presidency to Donald Trump, and you call election day 2016 the Clinton's day of reckoning. Let's talk about that. Is Trump really part of the Clinton legacy?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Well, insofar as he, for a moment there, and clearly, his main appeal is ethnonationalism and worse, but in '16, he did, in fact, win some of those Midwestern states that had been hollowed out by trade with China, and China was not a fair trading partner in any way, shape, or form. China certainly was managing its trade with the U.S. Anyway, Trump took advantage of that. And I would also say that by 2016, I mean, if you're in politics for 25 years and Hillary was, you become a more tempered kind of [00:22:00] figure, and so she really, she'd had no program that could really excite, and Bernie, Bernie Sanders, he didn't have to denounce Hillary to make her look bad. He just had to say, "This is what I stand for."

In comparison, she just looked tepid, really. And so Trump squeaks in there. I mean, she still won three million more votes than he did, but nevertheless, he squeaked in there, and the Clintons are in the doghouse, and I think they were not in the doghouse until 2015. Bill had given a very good speech in 2012, defending Obamacare at the Democratic National Convention. Hillary was kind of a popular Secretary of State, but it was when Bernie, on one side, Trump on the other, that just put the Clintons in the doghouse.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: You say Trump's victory over Hillary had one salutary impact. What was that?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Usually, when the Democrats get defeated, they move to the right. That was true after [00:23:00] Carter, and I think it's true after Clinton defeated by Bush. Usually, they move to the right, but when Trump wins, the Democrats move to the left. I think part of the reason is that the Democrats more united, the Southern Democrats were gone. The other thing, of course, is that Trump did put on the agenda, issues of trade in a way, and I think the illusions about free trade and creating, for example, democracy in China or civil society in China, I think those were coming apart, and in fact, today are, no one would make the point at either economically or politically about the virtues of free trade.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: Last question, what do you think Joe Biden has learned from the failures of Bill Clinton?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Well, Joe Biden was a centrist Democrat, really, a kind of Clinton loyalist, but he realized that a kind of industrial policy or reindustrialization was important, both economically and politically in the Midwest, and [00:24:00] he brought into his administration some people who would've been considered really radical in the 1990's: Lina Khan at the Federal Trade Commission and others, and Brian Deese in charge of industrial policy at the National Economic Council. He has brought all these young left liberals or even radicals in, and given them positions of responsibility and pushed through some very large trillion-dollar bills involving infrastructure and the welfare state that were way beyond what Clinton could even have conceived, and I think that Biden thought, 'Well, there's a thirst for that, and I'm going to do it.'

A Win for Workers: New Ruling Empowers Unions In Fight for Representation | Harold Meyerson - The Majority Report w/ Sam Seder - Air Date 9-10-23

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: One of the things we kept hearing over and over again for decades, literally for decades, since Clinton, was we're going to have Medicare negotiate for drugs. The big thing 20 years ago was card check. Card check, card check, card check. That was one of the big disappointments that didn't happen during the Obama administration. And this is like card check light. Walk us through what [00:25:00] this does.

HAROLD MEYERSON: Sure. Well, Democrats are aware that the National Labor Relations Act has been steadily weakened by court decisions and some of the NLRB rulings when they were controlled by Republicans. And they've been trying to strengthen labor law, basically all the way back to Lyndon Johnson's presidency. And every time they've tried under Johnson, under Carter, under Clinton, under Obama, they have never gotten to 60 votes in the Senate. So as a result, in the private sector, when workers try to unionize, it's a very, very common practice for employers to do things that are illegal, according to the National Labor Relations Act, like firing the workers who are leading the campaign to unionize, for which the penalties are virtually non-existent. And because this has been completely the norm, increasingly for the last [00:26:00] 40 years, most unions have ceased doing major organizing campaigns.

I remember when John Sweeney was running for the presidency of the AFL-CIO in 1995, one of his talking points was that, if you added up all the unions and looked at their budgets, they were spending about 3 percent of their budgets on organizing, because they knew they would lose.

All right. The new--not new, but Biden's appointee, confirmed by the Senate as general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board, and she is basically the boss of all 500 lawyers working for the Board across the country, Jennifer Abruzzo, has been determined to, as much as it is possible, restore that original National Labor Relations Act--which was written to give workers the right to collectively bargain--restore it to the point at which it was effective. She put that out in a memo shortly after she took office, in a memo to her lawyers. And [00:27:00] she got a case that she brought before the Board, which the Board issued this Cemex decision on Friday. What the decision says is: If enough workers to constitute a majority have made clear they wish to affiliate with the union by signing cards or some other measure, the employer then has a choice: the employer can voluntarily recognize the union, which 99.9 percent of the time the employer will not do, or the employer is legally obligated to file for a Board-run election, then--here's the teeth in the decision--then if the employer commits an unfair labor practice, the very sorts of things they routinely commit by forcing workers to go to propaganda meetings that are anti-union, by firing pro-union workers and so on, those are unfair labor practices, but there's been no [00:28:00] penalty. In this case, if the employer during the runup to the election or during the election itself commits an unfair labor practice, wham! The union is immediately recognized. And the company is ordered immediately to commence bargaining with the union.

That is a *huge* change.

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: Okay, so one of the examples I used yesterday was Bessemer. When Amazon workers at Bessemer, Alabama, I think it was a warehouse, they signed cards. They want to get a union, so they apply, essentially, to National Labor Relations Board. The National Labor Relations Board looks at those cards, determines that they're valid, and says, okay, we're going to issue an election, right? And because Amazon obviously does not want to have a union. And then the election, how long out was there? Are there constraints on how long out that election has to take place within?

HAROLD MEYERSON: Absolutely not. And [00:29:00] delay is a common tactic of employers who do not want to have a union, it can be delayed. And the more you delay it, the less workers generally are determined still to push through. And in the case of Amazon--where the average Amazon warehouse

worker lasts about eight months on the job before the demands of the job, which are ridiculous, just wears that worker out, and he or she quits--a delay is fatal.

SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT: But Amazon does, they bring in managers from all around the country. All of a sudden it's like three managers for every worker there for a brief period of time. I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. And they bring in young union-buster lawyers and they bring in union busting teams, and they start to intimidate people and they do all this. And so in Bessemer, the election happens, but afterwards, the union, or the would-be union, files grievances. And the National Labor Relations Board says we recognize these grievances, and they call for [00:30:00] another election, and they end up losing that election.

But now, once they got to that point where they recognize the unfair labor practices, boom! The union exists.

HAROLD MEYERSON: Boom and second boom--the company is ordered to go to the bargaining table with the union.

Stephen A. Smith Goes In On Hillary Clinton Following "Get Over Yourself" Remark - The Rational National - Air Date -3-24

JIMMY FALLON: Biden versus Trump. And we know that.

HILLARY CLINTON: It is. It is!

JIMMY FALLON: What do you say to voters who are upset that those are the two choices?

HILLARY CLINTON: Get over yourself. Those are the two choices.

JIMMY FALLON: Yeah. I love that.

And, and, you know, it's kind of like, one is old and effective and compassionate, has a heart and really cares about people. And one is old and has been charged with 91 felonies. I don't, I don't understand why this is even a hard choice, really. I don't understand it, but we have to go through the election and

hopefully people will realize [00:31:00] what's at stake because it's an existential question, what kind of country we're gonna have, what kind of democracy we're gonna have, and people who blow that off are not paying attention because it's not like Trump, his enablers, his empowerers, his allies are not telling us what they wanna do. I mean, they're pretty clear about what kind of country they want.

DAVID DOEL - HOST, THE RATIONAL NATIONAL: Hillary Clinton once again reminding us how terrible of a communicator she is. Even though there are elements of this that I think are also obvious, and I agree with, couching this in the idea that telling people to get over it is the way to get them out to vote, I think it's absolutely the stupidest way to go about it. I mean, and don't take it from me, take it from her election loss. This is the only person to lose to Donald Trump. So, uh, Hillary Clinton, if she wants to help Democrats, needs to stop making public appearances. But let me get to Stephen A. Smith's reaction to this.

ABBY PHILLIP, CNN HOST: Stephen, great to have you on set. So what do you make of that? "Get over it?"

STEPHEN A. SMITH: I don't think it was a very wise statement on her [00:32:00] part. How did that work out for her in 2016? I think that's something that we have to recognize. Yeah, she won the popular vote, but at the end of the day, she wasn't the president of the United States. It was him. You can look at her not campaigning in Wisconsin in the last days, not campaigning in Pennsylvania in the last days. You can look at some of the stuff that they were saying about her that sort of distracted things from where it should have been in terms of Comey and his report from the FBI. You can bring up a whole bunch of things. But at the end of the day, the last thing you need to do is to do anything that could agitate a potential voter in this particular election.

DAVID DOEL - HOST, THE RATIONAL NATIONAL: Hearing him talk about Hillary Clinton and politics and getting this bang on just makes me wish he's paid more attention to hockey. I would love to hear his opinion on hockey. He's a great communicator. He's very engaging. He's very opinionated, but he's someone that I think holds maybe a little sway, in terms of, at the very least, he gives you the idea, or gives you an idea, of how typical people [00:33:00] think. And this is bang on. And, as I said, there's more to it, to his argument here.

But, just on the points he made: Hillary Clinton needs to understand that she is the reason she lost the election, and she does not understand that. I mean, her book is all about blaming everybody else for her election loss. This unwillingness to look at the mistakes that you made as a politician, take

accountability for that, and learn from those mistakes. Hillary Clinton does not possess those abilities. And if she had, she could have been a great voice for Democrats. If she had learned from the mistakes that she made, realize that she wasn't speaking to working class voters, realize she completely ignored certain stations that she took for granted, realize that she completely sidelined Bernie Sanders and the entire movement he had built throughout 2016. If those lessons were learned, then she could have been a solid asset for Democrats, if she had come out of that with those lessons. But clearly she has not.

Now, I want to get to Smith's last half of his comments here. [00:34:00]

ABBY PHILLIP, CNN HOST: What do you make about the actual argument that she's making? I mean, she's basically saying two old people, yes, but they're substantively different. I mean, one has 91 counts against him.

STEPHEN A. SMITH: Absolutely. Well, listen, Nobody's brought that up more than me: 4 indictments, 91 counts, impeached twice. I'm not voting for him. I've said that to a lot of people. I've said that to you. But at the end of the day, what I'm saying is, is that at some point in time, you got to take into account what the voters thinking about. The voters, a lot of them out there, tens of millions of them out there, by the way, don't care what he's going through right now. They don't care about his guilt. or innocence, his perceived guilt or innocence. They don't care about the 91 counts. They're thinking about their lives. And a lot of times we see politicians taking the positions that they're taking and while we can respect their candor and their honesty, they do seem a bit detached at times from what the voters are actually feeling and what the voters are actually thinking.

Nobody wants to hear that from Hillary Rodham Clinton at this particular moment in time, because especially if you're Joe Biden, what are you really, really worried about [00:35:00] right now? You're worried about folks coming to the polls. You're worried about them showing up to the polls to vote for you. You're not worried even about them voting for Trump. You're worried about them not showing up to vote for you. That doesn't exactly encourage them to get up out of their seats and go to the poll.

DAVID DOEL - HOST, THE RATIONAL NATIONAL: This is the message that is often lost on the Democratic party. And in a bit here, I'm going to get to some polling showing you just how bad things are looking currently for Joe Biden and how they clearly need to turn it around by, at the very least, pushing Hillary Clinton off television.

Let's, at the very least, try to avoid that. Because telling people that already are not feeling great about Joe Biden to get over it, when has that ever worked in any situation? If someone's mad at you and you tell them to get over it, are they going to go, Oh, you know what? You're right. I'll get over it now. Has that ever been effective in any situation?

So, turnout is the most important thing here. Democrats win when turnout is high. They lose when [00:36:00] turnout is low. This election is not a horse race between Biden and Trump. It's a horse race between Biden and the couch. If people stay home, Biden will lose.

Looking at polling and looking at people who people previously voted for compared to, you know, if they may vote for Joe Biden or not, people that are potential Democratic voters did not vote for Donald Trump last time and they have no plan to vote for Donald Trump. They plan to stay home or vote for Biden. So, Trump is not your competition. Pointing out Trump's, you know, the fact that he's a criminal is obvious. People that would vote for Biden at this point already know that. Reminding them of that is not necessarily going to get them to come out and vote. You have to both present a... it's both a message, but it's also action.

Biden is currently the president. And there are a number of issues where the Democratic voter base, especially younger people, marginalized people, are very upset with him for good reason. His Middle East policy currently is [00:37:00] supporting mass destruction. This is not a winning position. It's both morally the wrong thing to do, it's also politically the stupid thing to do. If he continues doing that, at the very least, he's losing Michigan. So, there has to be a massive turnaround on Middle East policy specifically. But even when it comes to every other issue, like, this is less about Trump and a lot more about Joe Biden.

What Good Things Has Biden Done In Four Years? - The Bitchuation Room - Air Date 4-3-24

DAVID DAYEN: The Inflation Reduction Act gave a host of grants, I think 369 billion, that's what it was assumed to be, that was the estimated cost. Turns out it's going to be much, much more expensive than that. And that's actually a good thing because what it means is these credits, which go towards energy efficiency, which go towards renewable energy production, which go towards rebates for electric vehicles, which go towards charging stations, which go

towards a whole host of things across the... and all attempts at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, [00:38:00] turns out they're very very popular and Goldman Sachs about a year after the IRA put out an estimate and said we're actually going to give four times as many tax credits as we thought we were.

Where we've seen this so far is in a boom in manufacturing construction costs. So, first you have to build the factory, right? If you're making, whether it's a factory to produce minerals for the clean energy transition for electric vehicles, or for batteries, or whether you're building electric car factories, whether you're building renewable energy sites, you got to build them first. So, you're going to see this first in the construction. And if you look at a graph of manufacturing construction, it's a straight line upward and it happens right at August 2022 when the Inflation Reduction Act comes into force. So, that's a good thing. We don't know that those jobs are going to be good jobs, that are created.

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI - HOST, THE BITCHUATION ROOM: I mean, he had Sean Fain, he rolled out Sean Fain, you know, head of the UAW. So, you, arguably they would be [00:39:00] union jobs.

DAVID DAYEN: Initially, but it's nowhere in the law does it say they have to be, right?. And there are ways that the administration is trying to nudge that forward. There's a....

WAJAHAT ALI: Inshallah. It's the inshallah policy.

DAVID DAYEN: One good case study was in, I believe it was in Alabama. There's an electric bus factory, Bluebird, and they got a grant from the EPA, okay?, to do electric buses. And in that grant it said, You have to be neutral if there's a union activity, an attempt at union bargaining at the plant, and there was an existing union organizing campaign going on there. And so the company had to remain neutral in that campaign and the campaign won. We actually wrote about that. It was in Georgia not Alabama. It was in Macon, Georgia And we wrote about that in *The Prospect* as part of our "Building Back America" series, which you can look at if you go to prospect.org.

So, those are good examples. And then we have other [00:40:00] examples like, you know, a good one that we've written about is the, uh, it's part of the CHIPS Act, it's a different bill. But it's the semiconductor factory they're making in Phoenix, and it's a company called TSMC, Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, making this huge, huge campus in Phoenix...

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI - HOST, THE BITCHUATION ROOM: Wait, it's from Taiwan? I thought this was all about "America's stuff", without Asian sounds on it.

DAVID DAYEN: Well, in fact, TSMC is one of the largest, if not the largest, semiconductor manufacturer in the country and has a monopoly on a lot of these high-end chips. So, if you're going to deal with a company trying to bring them, shore them onto the United States, you're going to have to go through that. But unfortunately, TSMC isn't sort of down with letting American workers do this. So they tried to import a bunch of Taiwanese workers. They were bringing... we went to the factory and there were all kinds of license plates from Mexico there. They're bringing in foreign workers from everywhere. A lot of these workers can't talk to each other. It's led to delays at the [00:41:00] plant...

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI - HOST, THE BITCHUATION ROOM: Sure, sure.

DAVID DAYEN: ...we found at the plant that was because of this miscommunication.

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI - HOST, THE BITCHUATION ROOM: Oh my God.

DAVID DAYEN: So, you know, there's the good version of this and the bad version of this. And, I would say TSMC is maybe part of the bad.

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI - HOST, THE BITCHUATION ROOM: There's a lot we could talk about. I mean, I really appreciate you because it is wonky, but it's important. It just, like, all of these fix its and changes, again, I would say like nibbling at late stage, rampant capitalism and trying to reign it in in various ways, whether antitrust or whether these initiatives, and yet it still feels like, Is this enough to stop the coming fascist takeover and/or like the complete collapse of the economy and class warfare? I mean, like literal...

DAVID DAYEN: Well, it's tough, but I mean, the area where I think you could, that I at least see the most hope is, is an antitrust, where we've had a number of really positive developments in a really recent period of time over the last 34 months. [00:42:00] We saw the Justice Department sue and have what looks to be a fairly successful trial against Google that could end up with a breakup of that company's dominance over search. There's another Google case over there, *Ad Tech*, which they control every side of the transaction on, where that case is going to trial in May. We've seen high profile mergers be broken up, like the Jet

Blue-Spirit merger, which the Justice Department blocked. There was another merger between - speaking of semiconductors - between NVIDIA and a company called Arm, that was blocked. Adobe was trying to merge with somebody, that was blocked. I almost can't name all of them because... there's a more recently a case has been filed against Amazon. There's a case that was filed against a proposed merger between Kroger and Albertsons, which would create the biggest supermarket in the US, and Kroger has 20 different names, right? So, you're talking about Ralphs, you're talking about King Soopers, you're [00:43:00] talking about like, you think it's like two companies, but it was actually like 30 different mergers that would be going on there.

Anyway, the Justice Department antitrust division and the Federal Trade Commission have really created a sea change in our relationship, the government's relationship, to corporate power. And, uh, you know, presidencies are not monoliths. There are good people and bad people in administrations. There certainly are policies that I violently disagree with that are being undertaken by the Biden administration, but there are also, you know, when you talk about these binary choices in elections, it's also about Lina Khan. It's about Jonathan Kanter at the DOJ antitrust. It's about Rohit Chopra at the CFPB. That's doing really good stuff. It's about the National Labor Relations Board, which is doing amazing work. So, you have to look at this as a whole.

WAJAHAT ALI: I'm critical of Biden, but if you look at his policies and what he's done with the American Rescue Plan, if you do with the Inflation [00:44:00] Reduction Act, you know, the promise to raise taxes on the billionaires, make them pay their fair share of taxes, there are a lot of wins. I think the failure is that they still haven't been able to communicate these wins in an effective way to the voters. And I think the best way to do it is do the compare and contrast. This guy, raising taxes. I will, like, lower taxes. This guy, you know, doing tax cuts for the rich. I am not for that. You know, this guy wants to eliminate Social Security and Medicare. I just feel like if they do that type of very simplistic messaging, and bank on the wins, then people will know. Because otherwise people have no, like, people have no idea.

BONUS Price Controls An Inflation Solution That Doesn't Screw Workers - Deconstructed - Air Date 7-7-23

RYAN GRIM - HOST, DECONSTRUCTED: Can you talk a little bit about the way that price has come to be understood by the mainstream economics profession, and the way that the idea that price could be under democratic

control really was—as far as I understand it—the real battle that was fought in the 1950s ‘60s, ‘70s, but has vanished as [00:45:00] a battle. It is now just kind of assumed that it is off the board—that these are matters of physics, rather than matters of laws.

JAMES GALBRAITH: No, it’s not an unreasonable interpretation of that course of economic thinking to say that the experience of price control and of wage price guideposts—which continued up until the first days of Reagan’s administration in 1981 when the last vestige was abolished (the Council on Wage and Price Stability in the White House)—that the idea that the price mechanism and freely adjusting prices is the core of a well-functioning and efficient economy was, in a sense, aimed at demolishing those structures and removing them from the sphere of legitimate discussion. And were very [00:46:00] successful in doing that.

But the reality is, first of all, that no modern economy, certainly, and I doubt that any economy—even going back to classical times, any real-world economy—has ever actually functioned that way. And the assumptions required, even in theory, to make a freely price-adjusting economy into an efficient system are assumptions which basically violate it. They’re completely unconnected to the world in which we actually live. They rest on the notion of so-called “perfect competition,” in which every business is a very small operation competing with many other identically situated very small businesses to supply—equally disorganized—a vast number of independent households, and that’s not the way the [00:47:00] world is organized. In fact, practically every major line of activity is organized through structures in which a relatively small number of major enterprises are involved.

The realization in the 20th century that you could, in fact, control prices, was based on the fact that there were large organizations that were already controlling them. So you simply shifted some of the authority to an institution that was serving public purpose rather than relying on the good behavior of individual enterprises.

RYAN GRIM - HOST, DECONSTRUCTED: And, despite what feels like the complete victory of the Milton Friedman view of prices, it does actually feel like there are still assumptions embedded in us as people—that price controls are important. And what I’m thinking of is Biden’s use of the strategic petroleum reserve. That was—very directly—a White House effort to [00:48:00] control prices.

JAMES GALBRAITH: Absolutely, absolutely. And it was a successful effort. They were faced with a major spike in oil prices, which followed a major slump

in oil prices. And what happened in the slump in 2020, among other things, was that the price of oil properties—for example, in the Permian Basin—fell to very low levels, which meant that they were a very good bargain for private equity and others to move in and take control.

Those entities—their behavioral pattern, their focus, is on shareholder return. They're not out to maximize production, they're out there to increase the return to their investors; you could read about this in the press in Texas, in the oil country.

When demand recovered they had a plan for increasing production, but it was not to increase production to meet [00:49:00] the demand, but something below that, and allow the price to rise dramatically. Which is what it did. And the effect of that was that on the barrels that you were producing, you enjoyed a very healthy windfall. The White House, obviously aware of this process, stepped in, with releasing from the strategic reserve, and that then caused a peak and a decline in the price of oil.

The price of gasoline, which is what ends up in the Consumer Price Index, follows that process with a lag. That's the price which, of course, is politically sensitive. That's what people see at the pump.

RYAN GRIM - HOST, DECONSTRUCTED: Are there other examples of that, that an administration could handle? Because it feels like an a-ha moment for a White House to say, "Oh wait, it is politically popular to control prices. We can control prices. We're going to be punished." Because in a lot of the political debate you hear Republicans attacking Biden for the price of eggs, or the price of [00:50:00] this, that, or the other thing. But you never hear them suggest what they're going to do if they get into power.

JAMES GALBRAITH: Well, there were a range of things in the supply chain that were affected by the pandemic, obviously. The delays in the buildup and congestion at Long Beach and Los Angeles for a certain period of time were a factor driving up shipping costs and delivery costs. And, again, the administration did have people working on that problem, which eventually gets smoothed out. So, yes. I think that over a spectrum of specific interventions, you can have an effect.

Another area was with the—which I think was simply resolved over time—was the shortage of semiconductors as a result of the decision by semiconductor producers that forecast in the pandemic that people would be buying a lot more household appliances and [00:51:00] fewer automobiles. And when they then

didn't produce the semiconductors for new cars, new car production got jammed up, and the effect of that was to drive up used car prices. Used car prices you can't control. That's an asset, which is, basically, anything the dealer can get you to pay, you will pay. So, they rose by 50 percent or so, and that shows up in the Consumer Price Index.

So, again, these are supply issues which can, in fact, be addressed and resolved, and may take some time, but they're not related to some notion that households had too much money to spend.

RYAN GRIM - HOST, DECONSTRUCTED: The fact that Weber is now an in-demand policy advisor around the world, with countries asking her, "What can we do about prices? How can you help us?" shows us that there's some purchase there in government spaces, but I'm curious. In the economics field, is there any more openness to this way of thinking about the economy? Or is there going to have to [00:52:00] be an entire new generation that comes around?

JAMES GALBRAITH: I think it's very hard to get serious openness on this question. There were some measures taken in Germany, and Isabella Weber was involved with the commission, and I think it was basically her idea for a price cap on natural gas for households that was implemented. But the reality is that, in order to do this, you have to have governments that are seriously capable of implementing that policy. And that means they have to be somewhat independent of the mainstream economists. And the economics profession has become so hidebound in its views on these matters, and so committed to a particular ideology, that one cannot be optimistic that sensible ideas will prevail anytime soon.

BONUS Clinton's 'Fabulous Failure' Part 2 - Start Making Sense - Air Date 10-4-23

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: We think of Bill Clinton as the centrist who triangulated with [00:53:00] Republicans to move American manufacturing offshore, as you say, complete the transformation of the industrial heartland into the Rust Belt, eviscerating the American Labor Movement, adopting right-wing ideas like ending welfare as we know it. Of course, he recruited Wall Street support for the Democratic Party by deregulating banks and telecommunications. And he proclaimed the era of big government is over. Reagan himself couldn't have said it better. But, you say that's not the program Bill Clinton campaigned on. When he first ran in 1992, he ran—you say—as a Progressive. So tell us about the Clinton agenda in 1992,

which I guess begins with James Carville's unforgettable slogan, "It's the economy, stupid."

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Right. Clinton did run as a more progressive figure, certainly than Jimmy Carter and anyone since LBJ, and he had a lot of ideas and people [00:54:00] around him. The phrase "industrial policy," which is now in the news—Biden's "Build Back Better" is really "industrial policy." He was in favor of that. His health reform proposal was actually to the left, I think, of the one that was eventually passed under Obama.

He wanted to keep his eyes focused on the economy, not on culture war issues, which some of his advisors were in favor of, and of course, the Republicans were beginning to do at that time. And so part of the failure is a failure of a progressive initiative.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: Let's start with healthcare—which for millions of people, was the biggest failure of the Clintons. We thought Bill and Hillary were going to transform the country and create universal coverage, health insurance for all Americans. The plan was that they thought they had the support of some of the most powerful forces on the business side—the big insurance companies that would make a lot of money from a government program that paid [00:55:00] them—and also, they thought they had the support of the big, unionized employers like GM, who would not have to pay health benefits to workers if the government took over. So by preserving private insurance companies, they thought, it seemed like this would pass and become law. What went wrong with the Clinton health care plan?

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: That's right. There was a big slice of American capital that was burdened by healthcare costs—usually the manufacturing sector—and they wanted something that would relieve them of that cost, and the Clinton plan would do that. And those firms would then have some influence on the Republican party. They overestimated that, for sure. Of course, it had opposition, and it wasn't just from the right-wing of the Republican party. Newt Gingrich's power was growing a kind of hostility to any sort of reform, but what was also happening was I think the Clintons misjudged the shape of where power really lay in the [00:56:00] economy: less with General Motors and more with Walmart.

By the way, they weren't the only ones. The editors of Fortune Magazine had kept the retailers—low wage, low benefit retailers—out of the Fortune 500 until the year 1995, and then they say, "Well, I think we better put Walmart and Sears..." What happens? They come up number four or number five, and by the

year 2000, Walmart's the biggest company by sales and by employment in the country. So the Clintons misjudged that.

That's why I think the shape of American capitalism, the nature, where certain people are strong, where they're weak in terms of trade, in terms of finance, this is essential for historians to understand why Clinton failed and why today—is Biden going to succeed or fail? I think we have to understand those things. That's what I'm trying to get at. It's not just the foibles of Bill or Hillary or anyone [00:57:00] else . It's really more fundamental than that.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: Clinton brought us a lot of the economic changes that Reagan had argued for—the market ruling everything, Wall Street in command—but when Clinton became President, you point out in the book, there were other varieties of capitalism in the world, and several of those were a lot closer to what Clinton tried to do in Arkansas and what he and a lot of his advisors were interested in—using the power of the state to boost the economy. And he brought people into his cabinet who wanted him to do that, especially Robert Reich, the Secretary of Labor. So there was a big debate inside the Clinton administration, and the progressive side had some good models in the world and some good arguments. Arguments that Clinton was sympathetic to.

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Yes. Initially, yes. Paul Tsongas, who ran against Clinton in the '92 primaries, he had a phrase. He said, “The Cold War is over. Germany and Japan won.” And Clinton agreed with that basically. [00:58:00] Germany and Japan represented these different models of capitalism, a kind of social market in Germany, and in Japan, a kind of finance, banks, big companies, all much closer together in a corporatist arrangement.

Clinton, as governor of Arkansas—a very poor state—he was desperately trying to figure out how to industrialize it and get more jobs and better jobs. He went all over the world, to Northern Italy, to Germany, Japan, et cetera, looking for models. Not just investment—“Oh, we have cheap labor, come!”—but looking for models. He didn't really want that cheap labor argument for investing in Arkansas. He had people he brought into the administration. Robert Reich, who, today, is actually much more to the left than he was in 1992, but the other figure who, I think, is very interesting is Laura Tyson, who was at Berkeley. She and others had this roundtable on international economics. They were very much in favor of both industrial [00:59:00] policy at home, meaning, “Yes, we're going to target new investments in the same way that Biden's doing it now,” and also managed trade abroad, meaning, “No, we aren't going to just let the free market.” So when Clinton had to decide who was going to be

chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, this tells you about his mindset at this time.

Who were the candidates? Larry Summers, who would go on to be a very conservative figure, although his background wasn't that, Paul Krugman, who of course, now is very famous, but at that time, he was very much an advocate of free trade, and Laura Tyson. Laura Tyson was by far a less distinguished economist than the other two, but she was an advocate of industrial policy of the same sort that Clinton and Reich, and Ira Magaziner, and many others were thinking about. So she was made head of the Council of Economic Advisors. Unfortunately, as head of that council, I don't think she did that much with it, but she was selected because of her particular economic [01:00:00] policies.

JON WEINER - HOST, START MAKING SENSE: You say the Treasury Department became the most important force in the Clinton administration. Explain that.

NELSON LECHTENSTIEN: Yes. Well, I say there were two forces that Clinton could not control, and it was quite frustrating. One was the Federal Reserve Board, run by Alan Greenspan, which has been independent for more than half a century, and is always an independent force for any president. The second is Treasury, where first Lloyd Bentsen—a more conservative Texas Senator—and then mainly Robert Rubin, were Secretary of Treasury.

The reason I say that, in theory, all cabinet positions are subordinate to the President, [is] the weight and authority of the more orthodox—or you could call them neoliberal, and we could define that phrase in a second, neoliberal—economists at Treasury were so great that I found time and again Clinton would have some progressive idea, "Hey, can we limit executive salaries?," [01:01:00] or, "What about the East Asian countries are getting all this hot money? What can we do about that?" and he'd send this over to Treasury. And back would come a five-page, single-spaced, well-argued, “

JAMES GALBRAITH: No.”

Final comments on the way we think about political criticism

JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT: We've just heard clips today, starting with *Project Generations*, looking at a bit of history of socialism in America. *Against the Grain* looked at the legacy of the new Democrats. *Start*

Making Sense looked more specifically into the legacy of the Clinton administration. *The Majority Report* looked into Biden's much more positive approach to labor. *The Rational National* discussed election messaging through the lens of recent comments from Hillary Clinton. And *The Bitchuation Room* looked at some of the good things coming out of the Inflation Reduction Act.

That's what everybody heard, but members also heard bonus clips from *Deconstructed*, looking at the potential effectiveness of price controls. And *Start Making Sense*, examining some of the reasons Clinton wasn't able to accomplish some of his more progressive ideas. To hear that and have all of our bonus [01:02:00] content delivered seamlessly to the new members-only podcast feed that you'll receive, sign up to support the show at bestoftheleft.com/support, or shoot me an email requesting a financial hardship membership because we don't let a lack of funds stand in the way of hearing more information.

Now to follow up on how I opened the show, I discouraged you from getting too hung up on blame so that we could focus on learning from the past for the benefit of the future. And I had this thought fresh in my mind, after a recent email exchange with a listener. Listener Alan wrote in, after hearing me make a criticism of Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Basically, I said that the fact that the film focuses more on voluntary individual actions, rather than encouraging people to rally together and demand collective governmental action and policy was a missed opportunity. While individual action is necessary, depending on voluntary action was never going to be enough and regulation that both [01:03:00] imposes new rules on industry and also incentivizes individual action was always going to be much more effective and couldn't come soon enough. The Inflation Reduction Act is seen by many climate activists as the largest climate action legislation we've ever attempted. But the IRA was passed 16 years after the release of *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Now, I don't think that it was within Al Gore's personal power to have sped up that timeline on his own. But we all would have been better off if we could have spent a lot less time debating our personal carbon footprints and which light bulbs we should be purchasing for our homes, things that help a little, and focused more on the types of regulation that would have major impacts by going after the sources of the vast majority of carbon emissions. And, not to go too far down this path, but it is an interesting and important point I think. The film, by focusing their activism suggestions on changing your light bulbs and such, was actually playing into this long-running sleight of hand game that corporate polluters [01:04:00] have played time after time. Cigarette companies sort of started this off by running campaigns to basically blame smokers for smoking illnesses rather than the cigarettes. Litter problems that are endemic to

single-use plastic we're blamed on litterbugs, not the makers of single-use plastic. For those who know that, like, the "crying Indian" commercial from the seventies, know that that ad was funded by polluters, not do-gooder environmentalists. And also that actor was Italian, not Native. That's just a side note. Additionally, the encouragement to recycle was also funded by those same companies to give plastic a better image in the minds of consumers, even though their own scientists told them that recycling wouldn't work at scale. And I think that the plastic pollution in the oceans and the microplastics in all of our bodies, gives a pretty good sense of how that worked out.

And then climate change was no different. The major polluters blamed [01:05:00] carbon emissions on individual choices, not corporate polluters. And it was even the polluters who came up with the idea of the carbon footprint calculator, the one factor that I would rank above all others in helping to convince people that navel-gazing on their own personal choices was the way to save the planet rather than getting together to demand systemic change. So, no matter how well-intentioned or how much other good was done by spreading awareness of the problem, I still think that's a valid criticism of Gore's film.

But getting back to listener, Alan, he wrote in to defend Gore by highlighting much of the good he's done for the cause. And we ended up going back and forth a few times with me trying to explain the narrowness of my criticism. Not that I was trying to discredit Gore entirely or anything. But by the end, I still didn't feel like we were really understanding each other. But it was something in Allen's last email, that helped it click for me in a new way. He said that because of all the other good Gore had done, it was "petty" [01:06:00] to criticize the film in the way that I was. And I sort of rolled that around in my head for a bit. I was like, "petty". Petty. And I was like, Oh, wait, I think we're using the word criticized differently. So, even though I don't think arguments should be won or lost with the use of a dictionary. I do think that they're useful for figuring out disconnects in communication. So, "criticism", as I mentioned at the top of the show has two definitions. The first is the expression of disapproval of someone or something based on perceived faults or mistakes. The other is the analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of literary or artistic work, but I argue that that should apply beyond literary or artistic work.

And, you know, arguably both of those could accurately describe what I was doing to Al Gore's movie anyway. But taking a look at the thesaurus, I think gives an even better sense of not just the definitions of words, [01:07:00] but how they likely feel to someone else when they hear the word, right? So, alternate words for criticism in the first definition include censure, reproof, condemnation, denunciation, disapproval, disparagement, fault-finding... you get the idea, right? Like, coming down hard on something. But alternate words

to the second definition of criticism: evaluation, assessment, examination, appreciation, appraisal, analysis, judgment, commentary, and so on.

And then you're just, since I was on a roll, I went ahead and looked up "petty" as well. And the definition of petty is, characterized by an undue concern for trivial matters, especially in a small-minded or spiteful way. And I was like, Okay, this could not be more clear. Allen, in my [01:08:00] best possible interpretation, probably thinks that what I said about Al Gore was in some way out of spite, quite likely small-minded, and due to the comparison with the overall amount of good he's done, relatively trivial and not worthy of concern. Right? Whereas, you would never say that about someone who is just doing an evaluation, an assessment, an analysis, which is how I saw what I was doing.

Now today's topic: there was a critique of the Democratic party and some specific Democrats as well. So I wouldn't be surprised if there were similar feelings that came up on both sides. Some may have heard that criticism of Hillary Clinton and thought, Yeah, that's right. While others probably heard it and got annoyed and felt defensive over. Personally, I think neither of those thoughts is particularly useful. If you find yourself getting excited about criticism of a person, that's just about finding someone to blame because it's cathartic to have an outlet for feelings of frustration, [01:09:00] someone you can direct those feelings at. And if you're a reflexively defensive, though you may be justified in defending against some petty criticism, you may also end up dismissing and ignoring legitimate evaluation, assessment, analysis, what have you, that's intended to try to learn from the past for the sake of improving the future.

So, for my part, I'm going to keep my criticisms substantive and purposeful, not petty, and I hope others will do the same, not just for a healthier debate, but for the sake of making real progress.

That is going to be it for today. As always keep the comments coming in. I would love to hear your thoughts or questions about this or anything else. You can leave us a voicemail or send a text at 202-999-3991, or simply email me, as listener Alan did, to jay@bestoftheleft.com. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show and participation in our bonus episodes. Thanks to our Transcriptionist Quartet, Ken, Brian, Ben, and [01:10:00] Andrew, for their volunteer work helping put our transcripts together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her behind the scenes work and bonus show co-hosting. And thanks to all those who already support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships. You can join them by signing up today at bestoftheleft.com/support, through our Patron page, or from right inside the Apple podcast app. Membership is how

you get instant access to our incredibly good and often funny bonus episodes, in addition to there being extra content, no ads, and chapter markers in all of our regular episodes, all through your regular podcast player. You'll find that link in the show notes, along with a link to join our Discord community, where you can also continue the discussion.

So, coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington DC, my name is Jay, and this has been the *Best of the Left* podcast, coming to you twice weekly thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from bestoftheleft.com.