

[INSPIRATIONAL MUSIC]

**STEVEN SIMON:** Thank you all for participating, coming to this week's Starr Forum. We know you're taking time out of your day to do this. We want to make it worth while. And I think we will. I am Steven Simon I am the Wilhelm Fellow this year at the Center for International Studies at MIT. And I'm here today to introduce our speaker, Spencer Ackerman. I want to tell you just a little bit about him, and then just a sentence or two about his book, and then turn it over to Spencer Ackerman for his introduction to our discussion of his important book.

Spencer has worked as a national security correspondent for nearly the entire war on terror. And he currently publishes a Substack newsletter called, *Forever Wars*. So look for that. He has worked for the *New Republic*, *Wired*, *The Guardian*, and the *Daily Beast*. Most recently, he's reported from the front lines of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay. He shared in the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for public service journalism for Edward Snowden's NSA leaks to *The Guardian*, a series of stories that also yielded him other awards, including the Scripps Howard Foundation's 2014 Roy W Howard Award for Public Service . Reporting, and the 2013 IRE Medal for Investigative Reporting. Spencer's *Wired* series on islamophobic counterterrorism training at the FBI won the 2012 online National Magazine Award for reporting.

So an extremely impressive record as a reporter and as an analyst. And he was, I think the right person on the stage today to tackle the question of the rise of Donald Trump, and related to deeper trends in recent American history. The book, I just want to say, came out in an interesting moment. There are several books that emerged quite recently on this topic, that is to say, on the political discord in the United States, the increasing divisiveness of American politics. Very serious problems that we're all thinking about and writing about quite a lot. The thing about Spencer's book is that it takes a unique approach, and against the background of this broader burgeoning politics now by seeking to explain how we got to where we are through the lens of national security as it developed in the wake of the 9-11 attacks.

It's kind of an audacious approach to take. And and we'll discuss why that might be after he himself tells us what his book is about, and what his thesis is, and what the significance of his book is given the state of contemporary American politics. Spencer over to you.

**SPENCER ACKERMAN:** Well, thank you very much Steven. And thank you very much to everyone attending, to MIT. It's an honor to be here, and thank you to so many of you for registering. So I'll try and keep my spiel as short as possible so we have time for dialogue and interaction. My book came out of some confusion and observation during the first couple of years of the Trump administration, and how all of the different explanations on offer for the rise of Trump and the acceleration of a kind of very brutal nativist politics. All kind of missed this one thing. And by missed, I mean just didn't sort of grapple with it, wasn't interested in it.

And that's that the United States had for an entire generation been waging a disastrous war. And the impact of that on our politics is something that very often gets bifurcated into sort of two silos, neither of which are really equipped to deal with it. First, national security reporting, this sort of thing that I've done from career, tends to try to separate itself away from national politics and politics reporting as much as possible. And then also, when discussing national security's impact on American politics, that discussion over here tends to be not particularly connected to material events, consequences in history, just on how they impact a momentary political discourse.

And so what I sort of traced back in *Reign of Terror* was how the 9/11 era, the era that starts in American history. After the attacks of 9/11, opens a door to allow the empowerment of a tremendous amount of racist, nativist, and violent impulses that are extant throughout American history. The war on terror doesn't really create its own things outside of the narrow technocratic senses. But it does in fact allow a politics of extreme racialization, as we'll see American Muslims, immigrants more broadly experiencing, as well as the creation of an apparatus. I shouldn't say the creation so much as the reorientation and empowering of an apparatus of repression that starts as an emergency measure, but to become the new status quo, resetting the boundaries between liberty and security in its wake. And then ultimately, in the 2010s achieving a kind of symbiosis with the mode of capitalism that we're currently under, what the Harvard Business School Professor Emerita Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.

And now in the book, I sort of go across these 20 years of history, institutionally, operationally, politically, and culturally to talk about the 9-11 era, and the meaning of the war on terror, 9-11's impact on American politics. And to just go kind of mashing up institutionally and operationally real quick, it's important to talk about what the war on terror is. Very often, we think of it, particularly when we use terms like the forever war and so forth, as something that happens exclusively overseas, as synonymous with Afghanistan, with the Iraq war, with to be frank about it, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Mali, Niger, the battlefields of the war on terror, which are quite expansive. But in fact, it is also simultaneously something that's happening inside the United States.

And what is that? I think it's best expressed by the CIA's former Counterterrorism Chief in 2002 testimony, a guy named Cofer Black, he'll go on to advise the presidential candidate Mitt Romney in 2012, when he very bluntly says in congressional testimony, after 9-11, the gloves come off. What are the gloves? The gloves are the law, and adherence to the rule of law, and understanding that politically, institutionally, legally, there are things and boundaries beyond which the institutions of the security state must not tread. The Constitution in other words.

So to go through this really quickly to give a sense of what I mean, a lot of this will be familiar to people here. But just to make it concrete, the NSA violates the Fourth Amendment and previously unimaginable scale. It will reflect a lot of the culture of the war on terror when in leaked documents that we learned from Edward Snowden, it will refer in placeholder texts to people it's putting under surveillance as, and forgive my language, this is theirs and not mine, Mohammed Raghead at Yahoo.com, things like that. The CIA tortures, including sexually tortures, in a warren of secret prisons that brutalized at least 119 people, and feeds an untold number more into its allies torture chambers.

Under pressure from the White House, it provides intelligence analysis as a pretext for a war of aggression. Later on, it will conduct drone strikes and what recently has been uncovered, will also engage in its own bulk surveillance involving Americans data. The FBI conducts raids nationwide of roundups of American Muslims, and then spends decades coercing people into informing on their friends and neighbors, including placing spies in places of worship. The NYPD, which is the country's largest police force, becomes in my hometown of New York City, effectively a secret police including with CIA people detailed to it, that infiltrate Muslim neighborhoods without any suspicion of crime, it's a practice they call raking. And this will lead them into such absurdities as spying on a student organization's whitewater rafting trip.

The establishment of a Department of Homeland Security that places immigration in the context of counterterrorism, and what will become more important kind of in the sort of middle 2010s, it's also a mechanism for redistributing public money to police departments under the pretext of counterterrorism and obtaining new resources like drones and cell towers simulators, who ultimately end up as is kind of a way of funding police operations, while militarizing. The Pentagon does this as well, but the Department of Homeland Security's funding mechanisms just dwarfs this. The military, it becomes a permanent jailer at Guantanamo Bay. It also practices torture, including sexual assault there, and also throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. Its leadership, the military leadership, acquiesces to wars of aggression. It consistently lies to the public about prospects for success in those campaigns. SEAL Team Six, already very poor case institutionally in good order and discipline, is empowered by the war on terror and commits war crimes, including mutilation of corpses which become widespread and covers it all up.

Throughout all of this, we'll turn politically, the war on terror is a bipartisan and elite enterprise. It was never something demanded by the public, as testified to the fact that so much of this both in conception, in operation, and in maintenance is surrounded in sometimes outright deceit, other times manipulative language, and other times very euphemistic language. Political and economic elites in both parties, often with tacit or outright support from the security leadership, present an open ended war that lacks a clear definition of the enemy. That's the meaning of the phrase war on terrorism, and considers that the only serious response to 9-11.

They reject, and this becomes a key aspect culturally of what the war on terror is, that the United States foreign policy in the Middle East bears any responsibility for the attack, and accordingly the war on terror intensifies a violent approach to the Middle East, North Africa, and Southwest Asia. While conservatives and liberals attempt distinct and at times divergent approaches to the issues prompted by the war on terror, they share a foundation of American exceptionalism whereby not only does America deserve its global hegemony, thanks its two uniquely virtuous position in global affairs. But the rules America and its allies place upon the world don't need to bind Washington.

Now to be a bit self-critical, elite journalists on both the left and the right share these presumptions, and in the main, operate within them to provide an analytic framework that presumes both America's innocence, and the necessity of the war on terror. So much public discourse of the war on terror occurs within that framework. What is the war on terror culturally? First, it's what we understand now using some contemporary language, is the cancel culture. Witness someone like Susan Sontag, one of the Premier American figures in literature after 9-11 is vilified until the end of her life, because she writes three paragraphs for the New Yorker about a week and a half after 9-11 talking about how America is insisting so much on its innocence as a way of licensing things to come, not thinking historically about what material forces it unwittingly contributed to bringing about terror in the United States, and then treating it all is as kind of an infantile process.

MSNBC literally fires Phil Donahue, the cable host for opposing the Iraq invasion. There is a fetishization of the security services and especially the military. For liberals, this is a conscious overcorrection of how the culture remembers Vietnam era military service. The defining cultural figure of 9-11 is Jack Bauer, a fictional character from a Fox TV show called 24. This guy is a torturer licensed by the United States to stop terrorism. And his real enemies are in fact terrorists as the show unfolds, but bureaucrats, civil libertarians, journalists, and politicians who inhibit him from torturing evil people. There's an amazing quote in 2006 from one of the right's most important legal figures, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia in which he says, hey Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles. Are you going to prosecute Jack Bauer for his methods?

What else it is culturally is a racialization of American Islam. You see this starting with President Bush. The right interprets 9/11 and metaphysical terms, discusses it in terms of good and evil, all to avoid a discussion of material circumstances, and to license violence. It cultivates a widespread social and political understanding, and see this with NSA language I mentioned before, that Muslims in Islam threaten America. And it works to distinguish white supremacist violence, which is so potent six years before in the Oklahoma City attack, as something other than terrorism. The war on terror instructs that terrorism isn't a thing that peoples and states do. It's a thing that only some people are. The war on terror's iconography is a man with a flag, a gun, and implied in the background, a cross, a Jack Bauer figure.

Politically, what happens most astonishingly from the perspective of those who watch this war and those who carry it out, is that it's a disaster. And the experience of that disaster prompts a variety of political responses, particularly from establishment figures. The Democratic Party, starting from the very beginning of the war on terror, acquiesces to it, embraces it out of a very deep political fear of irrelevance. The Republican Party exploits that fear to the absolute hilt. And then, what they seem not to get after the Iraq war becomes a debacle, the Afghanistan war becomes a debacle, and even despite successes like the killing of Osama bin Laden, there is no effort at wrapping this all up into something with a finite and sensible conclusion that looks something like victory.

On the left, this results in, during the Obama administration not only the entrenchment of the war, but the reconfiguration of it after sanding off a lot of its more cruder and more particularly sort of epically violent, in the case of torture, edges to it, to something that looks more technocratic and is more sustainable. This is something that the right interprets through its fury at Obama. And through that fury, understands Obama in the context of what the war on terror has taught people, that Barack Obama according to the conspiracy theories spread about him, is a foreign Muslim who is not a political opponent, but in fact an enemy, an ally of the terrorist groups that the United States has to fight lest it ultimately experience 9/11, after 9/11, after 9/11.

And that's what the war on terror culturally becomes during the Obama presidency. The meme of birtherism really shows you how all of these things in the context of the emergency nationally speaking of the war on terror use all of the nativism, all the extant racism. It's not that the War on Terror is the only thing that produces Trump. Really far from it. But it is in fact a place of understanding where the nativist movement goes, and what opportunities it will ultimately take hold of, and what tools it will use when in power.

Under the Trump administration we see this really enforced, not only from all of the war on terror figures surrounding Trump, whether it's Mike Flynn, or his first department of Homeland Security Chief John Kelly, or Gina Haspel, one of the CIA's torture generation who becomes his CIA director, but you also see it in the way that he, Trump that is, expresses this fury, channels this fury while promising to dial the violence of the war on terror back up to a civilizational level at those who he sees as aligned with Barack Obama in betraying the United States. Forcing it through the prism of Obama to explain what it understands, MAGA, his movement understands, as a national humiliation, which is as Trump puts it, that we don't win anymore, that we're not taking a kind of imperial tribute in Iraq and Syria by seizing oil, and so forth.

And also, Trump understands in a way that elites who maintain ownership over the war on terror in both parties seem not to anticipate, that because of their identification with this thing that they had previously used as a mechanism for entrenching their political power, it can be used against them when the war on terror looks far more like a humiliation than a triumph. This will lead, during the Trump administration, to a conclusion that I think, in retrospect, looks pretty ordained through all of the impunity that elites maintain throughout the war on terror, which is that they will, under Trump, push the boundaries and redefine what a quote unquote terrorist is.

In the summer of 2020, against Black Lives Matter demonstrators, against people that they say are anti-fascists, and this very distinct feeling of cultural disempowerment, cultural and civilizational besiegement, military worship, law enforcement worship, and subsequent play acting of it is very clearly on display, as well as in some cases, I think something like 12% of arrests and charges thus far is actual military experience in the January 6th Insurrection.

I'll leave it there. We can talk about absolutely all of that. I apologize for speaking so long.

**STEVEN SIMON:** No apologies are necessary. That was really bracing, and quite interesting. I've just got one sort of short question to ask. We're beginning to get some questions in the Q&A column. And we have a half an hour, a little more than half an hour. So I want to give everybody a chance to chip in. I guess my question is was the war on terror a sine qua non for the Trump administration?

**SPENCER** I am afraid I am a mere journalist and will need you to translate some Latin for me.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** OK, so it's really simple. Would Trump have been elected president of the United States had it not been for the war on terror?

**SPENCER** Well, again, I don't want to portray the war on terror as a monocausal event. I don't think history works that way.

**ACKERMAN:** I think it is a substantial motivating factor and structural factor behind his presidency. It's very important to remember, is Trump a kind of famous cultural figure during the first years after 9/11? But he very quickly aligns himself, with his media savvy, as a figure who is constantly advocating for whatever the most violent position on offer is while not committing himself so fulsomely to any specific course of action. As a protean figure, he understands how useful that is.

His rise to political power is tied intimately with the war on terror. Because his rise to political power is birtherism. Birtherism has, as its agent, not the fact of the conspiracy that Trump-- I'm sorry-- that Obama isn't an American. But it's the war on terror that makes birtherism tell people that Obama is an enemy as opposed to an opponent and a danger, a threat to them. Because he is, in fact, a foreign Muslim understood to be a terrorist.

And then, of course, Trump not only, in the famous Trump Tower golden elevator speech where he announces his candidacy, he's talking about ISIS constantly. ISIS, obviously, would not exist had the United States not invaded Iraq. As well, it would not have prompted the war on terror, would not have prompted the overwhelming global refugee migrations from the Middle East and Southwest Asia that become just enormous political challenges and prompt a rising nativist politics into civilizational politics in both Europe and the United States.

So I think that, most certainly, if Trump-- if there is no war on terror, I think Trump and his form, his style of politics and the constituency for it faces just obstacle after obstacle, perhaps even insurmountable ones. I don't believe that, without the accumulation of, at that point, 15 years of weariness with exhaustion with cultural bitterness and so forth, that the war on terror represents, particularly inside US politics, that Trump, in fact, is possible.

**STEVEN SIMON:** OK. So just to sum up, you don't think Trump would have been elected president had there been no war on terror.

**SPENCER** I think it's, for simplicity sake, sure. We can put it like that. Obviously, there's a global economic disaster created by Wall Street in 2008. That's an enormous factor. Of course, there is a ton of structural, social, and economic rot that starts in the late '70s with the rise of neoliberalism that hollows out a lot of commitments the state previously makes and a lot of democratic opportunities.

**ACKERMAN:**

There is the hangover of the United States' unipolar moment after the fall of the Cold War, which kind of goes searching, politically speaking, for kind of enterprises like the war on terror that justified the relationship between national security and national politics. And then, of course, there is an extent cultural war between particularly elite politics and the Democratic and Republican parties that's happening in the 1990s despite the very unequally distributed but, nevertheless, certainly, comparatively speaking, period of prosperity, that the war on terror becomes an outlet for and latches itself on. But it's important to look at all of these forces that the war on terror licenses and brings back to power. And there, you can see in their admixture how they create this rather straight path for politics like Trump's.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Yeah. Before we turn to questions, I was just going to point out that Obama was elected in 2008 and reelected in 2012, despite birtherism. And even though law enforcement tended to take sometimes aggressive posture towards American Muslims, by and large, the kind of whiplash that American Muslims might otherwise have experienced after 9/11 really didn't. In part, because Trump-- I mean, in part, because Bush himself was so careful to exculpate American Muslims and insist that they had no role in 9/11. And this wasn't about Islam per se or Muslim piety and especially on the part of American Muslims.

I think Bush did a lot of things that were really wrong, including invading Iraq, which was kind of a blunder. But it tempered the American public response, popular response to the American Muslim community, which was otherwise quite vulnerable. Now, if Trump had been president back then, well, who knows? It's kind of a wild counterfactual. But he might have whipped up the kind of anti-Muslim sentiment that actually Bush did not. And, in a way, he prepared the ground for Trump's 2016-- for Obama's 2008 victory by taking the sting out of the Muslim angle. So--

**SPENCER** Yeah. Go ahead.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** I mean, it's just another way of looking at the things that you're looking at.

**SPENCER**  
**ACKERMAN:** Well. Yeah. No. Definitely. I think we definitely disagree about that. I think, to challenge that narrative a bit, if you've spent time interviewing American Muslims about the atmosphere of the past 20 years and their experience of what political and cultural, social life has been, you get an entirely opposite story. You get a story of things like-- let me just give you one example that's very local.

I'm a native of Flatbush, Brooklyn. And part of, adjacent to Flatbush is a neighborhood, very small neighborhood called Little Pakistan. Little Pakistan, after 9/11-- and it's important to remember there are no Pakistanis implicated in 9/11. There are no Pakistanis among the hijackers and so forth.

The NYPD, what was then the immigration enforcement agency, the INS, the FBI began aggressively slipping notes underneath the doors of people in Little Pakistan telling them that they had to very urgently check in at police stations. They had to turn themselves in for detention in functionally incommunicado conditions. This happens not only in New York. This happens in Michigan. This happens in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington DC.

And, particularly if you listen to the experiences of youths, they talk about the ways in which they feel persecuted by even their teachers, as if they are not New Yorkers themselves. They are constantly facing a harassment that goes from cultural and religious to racial. They understand Bush's remarks about this as being essentially a wink and a nod and a mixed message.

His coalition, when you look at what Bush says, and it's true. And it's important that Bush does say that Islam is not responsible for 9/11. But then he constructs an apparatus that treats it as if it is, that all the needed components for a war on Islam already exist within the war on terror. And that is what Trump ultimately will utilize.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Spence. Good answer. To the rest of the Q&A. I don't want to--

**SPENCER**  
**ACKERMAN:** Yeah.

**STEVEN SIMON:** I could easily monopolize this time because it's really a fascinating conversation, especially the point that we've just been addressing. It really deserves more attention. But let's turn to others in the room. Let's go up the list.

This is from Jay Wilberforce, who has made a number of contributions here to the discussion. I think his first question touches on things that we've talked about. I'm going to read it very quickly.

I don't see how any of this contributed to the willing eagerness of large numbers of voters to vote for Trump over Hillary Clinton. We kind of touched on that. Much of it is quite true, I believe. But Americans have grown tired of mass illegal migration and liberal hypocrisy about this reality, "liberalists" in quotes, as we, they, are actually experiencing it in real time. Until Trump, no political figure would even talk about growing uneasiness and deepening resentment, especially "phony elites"-- again in quotes-- espousal in essence of no borders. I think it's a good question.

**SPENCER**

**ACKERMAN:**

Sure. And I would just say let's look a little bit at the political trajectory of precisely that consideration, the consideration of immigration as not just a legal and political phenomenon but also a cultural one, one of-- as it's constantly discussed now on the right among figures that valorize Trump-- as a replacement of a current electorate with an existing one. Look at how a figure who has been such a crucial ally to Trump on this, someone like Kris Kobach. Well, what was his job after 9/11?

He was John Ashcroft's immigration advisor at the Justice Department. Along with Ashcroft, he, at times, against the wishes of the INS, constructed these roundups, constructed immigration fitting it within the context of the war on terror and, accordingly, militarizing the treatment of immigrants not just at the border but inside American borders. It gives immigration a security cast to it that Trump is reacting to over a series of 15 or so years that this takes place.

It's also something that, in 2006 and '7, really breaks after alongside the dissatisfaction with the way the Iraq war is going, Bush's ties to the right, and, in particular, kind of rising nativist forces that will take up this banner and also this militarization in the Tea Party and the MAGA movement. Culturally, you see this mixing with concerns about the war on terror all the time, the rise of militia figures that, like the minutemen along the border, that use kind of military cosplay and hunt for immigration-- that hunt for immigrants, and, throughout the course of the Obama era, the hysteria-- none of it real. None of it based on absolutely anything-- that ISIS and al-Qaeda are coming up through the southern border and so forth.

What the question reflects is that it has the MAGA movement and this immigration conception that it possesses has seeped so deeply within the war on terror that this militarization infuses it. I don't think that the questioner is misperceiving, from their perspective, the liberal hypocracies that surround it. It's the liberals that created the Democratic Party, that creates the Department of Homeland Security, and takes this kind of very euphemistic, at times, deceitful, and disingenuous rhetoric.

Obama, of course, deports vastly more people than Trump does. Obama puts children, unaccompanied migrants in cages like Trump does and seems, very often, to get a kind of pass on all of this. But all of this comes within a context that is inextricable from 9/11.

**STEVEN SIMON:** So let me ask you a question posed by Michael Singer. And this is-- I don't know. Let's see what you think.

**SPENCER**

OK.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** Given that the global war on terror and a long war is manifestly a disaster and seems to be emerging in the public consciousness as a failure, what potential do you see for reform or dismantling of the massively expanded national security state, given that any proposal to do so risks a political third rail of, quote, "weak on defense, not supporting veterans, et cetera," political attacks? That's a good question.

**SPENCER**

It's a great question. I think that there is this kind of burgeoning reconsideration of the war on terror. And the

**ACKERMAN:**

question is, how far will it be able to influence elite politics? The Biden administration has-- I mean, look, you can really see the continuities of the war on terror even in their seeming departures.

Biden has withdrawn from Afghanistan. And in a very controversial position in August, while facing a tremendous amount of elite criticism for it, particularly how disastrously it did, in fact, go, he sticks to it kind of as a matter of first principle. He starts talking in very expansive terms about the unacceptability of maintaining a forever war. The trouble is that, outside of the deployment to Afghanistan, very little of the war on terror has, in fact, architecturally, institutionally been, in fact, abandoned, jettisoned, rolled back, repealed, and so forth. And now we are facing a circumstance in which vastly more Afghans are having their lives and livelihoods threatened this winter because of economic sanctions the Biden administration has chosen to place on postwar Afghanistan, far, far more potentially lethal than the entire eight-- I'm sorry-- the entire 20-year war itself.

So this really is an enormous political challenge. I think what will ultimately determine the answer to the question is going to be the way in which outsider forces in politics can both mobilize and use the war on terror as part of and repeal of, roll back of the national security state and so forth, on both the left and the right as part of a broader package of what they wish to force either political party to do in terms of more massive social and economic reforms.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Well, that's depressing.

**SPENCER** Yes.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** So now let's dig a little deeper here. There's a really good question from an anonymous attendee, which goes like this. Historically, we have often displayed a disturbing level of nativism. Is there a version of this country without it? How do we change course toward a more untied politics with these factors and fear-based policies and cultural experiences so deeply entrenched? That sort of overlaps with the previous question. But it really gets to something deeper about trends in American history and the structural factors underpinning American society.

**SPENCER** Yes, absolutely. I want-- I commend the question. I try-- that it didn't or I labor not to treat the war on terror as a

**ACKERMAN:** departure from American history but, instead, try and treat it as something that the United States does throughout its history. The first people of the United States shackles in stress positions and forces into conditions of prolonged nudity and prolonged fear, paranoia, extensive surveillance, and so forth, our enslaved people that it kidnaps from Africa and sells as property and then enshrines as property. It is contained in Native genocide and the ways in which the military generation that completes the conquest of the West is the same generation that becomes the officer corps in the Spanish-American war. That begins-- pardon me-- waterboarding people and using other torture techniques in the Philippines and introducing that as a legacy into the US military and what will become, over the course of the 20th century, a national security state.

All of these continuities run very deeply, I think, in settler colonialist countries like the United States, like Israel, like Australia, like Brazil. I think nativism, because it is, in fact, a settler populace that becomes politically hegemonic, socially and economically hegemonic as well, will always have this element of nativism precisely because it's about telling people who come here and who might have been encouraged to come here under conditions of attracting necessary and cheap labor to tell them that, ultimately, this country is not, in fact, for them. The way you get over it, the way you conquer it, the way you beat it, the way you discredit it is the same way that the United States-- and in particular people in the United States from marginalized communities have always done it-- is through expanding democracy inside the United States, expanding democratic opportunities, solitaristic opportunities inside the United States.

It is an oppositional politics of solidarity and resistance that has made the United States as free as the United States ultimately is, as judged by the people who have to endure the greatest repression within the United States. It is not the Constitution. It never has been the Constitution. It has to do with resistance that people put up under conditions of repression for democratic opportunities that make everyone freer, that makes everyone safer. This is, ultimately, evident in so many struggles for civil rights throughout American history.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Powerful response. Let's crack on. So here's an interesting one from Rick Gander, a member of the audience. He asks, if you look at what Trump used to attack Hillary during the campaign, it seems, to me, the vast majority had to do with the terrorism factor, Benghazi, email security, as well, of course, of her connection with Obama as a person and his policies. I assume you'd endorse that view.

**SPENCER ACKERMAN:** Yes, indeed. You'll see, in the book, that I go into all of these episodes in some degree of depth. I would also say that it's important to look at Trump and the way that, under MAGA, the Republican coalition's position on the war on terror is upended and complicated in significant ways by the way in which Trump sees the war on terror through figures of identification, like Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, people he portrays as inhibiting what the real war on terror is. And that's the meaning of the catch phrase radical Islamic terror.

What that phrase means, in context, is disciplining what terrorism we're really talking about and distinguishing white political violence, political violence committed by white people from the kinds of political violence that Trump believes, the mechanisms, the apparatus, the opportunities, the authorities of the state ought to be oriented against and vigilante action licensed against. That, ultimately, along with the identification of the security apparatus and the war on terror with these liberal and technocratic elements as it gets to the kind of entrenched quagmires of the war on terror under Obama where nothing quite ends. Things seem to grind on constantly.

After the killing of Osama bin Laden, Obama makes, I believe, a very fateful decision not to argue that the war on terror has ended but, in fact, to contribute to it going out somewhere into the future. And no one, through any of the killings of now two ISIS leaders since, has been able to explain how this thing fits up into any sort of conclusion. Trump is able, not only to contextualize that in a narrative of humiliation, but to extend that to discrediting those in elite politics and institutions that might be saying things like, this guy has a tremendous amount of criminal exposure and also connections including important foreign-policy connections to overseas adversaries of the United States. And he has a very powerful explanation for that, which is, the people accusing me of all of this have gotten you into quagmire after quagmire and have lied to you through all of it.

**STEVEN SIMON:** It's disappointing.

**SPENCER** Yeah. It's not great.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** Yeah. So let's move to the religious right. So there's a good question here on that. I mean, you've touched on the religious right, I think, quite deftly. But Dr Paul Krieger in our audience asks the following. He says, the potent and rich religious right has influenced American politics in mysterious ways since before Trump. But, even more, how quote, "connected" do you think the religious right was in bringing about the January 6th insurrection? And do you think their influence will continue to seriously define the American political landscape? If so, how? If not, do you find that religious rights influence will either decline or continue to influence American politics? What do you think?

**SPENCER**

**ACKERMAN:**

I'm going to apply the question of, how directly responsible do I think that is? Because I think that takes a greater deal of kind of empirical focus than I have devoted to that angle on that question. But I think your point is something that I spend a great deal of time on, particularly in the second chapter of the book, which is to analyze how leading figures on the religious right interpret 9/11 and the war on terror. And they interpret it expressly religiously, starting at the first post-9/11 convention of the Southern Baptist conference.

From the stage, Islam is written out of the Abrahamic faith. The prophet Muhammad is described as a pedophile. Islam is treated as a rapacious threat to Christian civilization, that 9/11 has only been the latest instance to prove. And, a lot of times, I go back to that bifurcation and the way that national security coverage in journalism typically unfolds; very often, that was neglected as a serious consideration with the way the war on terror was being interpreted on the religious right, how figures on the religious right, despite whatever it was that President Bush said about Islam, they push it over more like, yeah, yeah, yeah.

But we really know who's terrorism we're talking about, that becomes even more potent beyond specific boundaries within the religious right coalition. You look at things like the 2010 intense hysteria over the construction of a Muslim but more cosmopolitan cultural center near the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. That becomes interpreted as the Ground zero mosque.

Something as culturally, religiously, and politically despicable, like the equivalent of Mehmet the Conqueror turning Hagia Sofia in Constantinople into a mosque, a symbol of marauding Islamic triumph and tribute. That takes hold around the country. The wave that we see of vigilante violence, particularly after then, is really, at that point, removed from the boundaries that you brought up, that President Bush, in his rhetoric, tried not to make respectable. But I think the subtext, particularly the religious subtext, really took on a kind of life of its own and became a prism, a very important prism. Through which, we not only interrupt the war on terror, used to stand as whose terrorism was not or ought not to be.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Yeah, that's an interesting take on this. So let me follow it up with maybe a concluding question or two because we need to reserve just a couple of minutes at the end for housekeeping and advertising upcoming sessions. So I guess the two questions I have-- or one's big and one's small. I'll ask the small one-- well, I'll ask the small one first.

So one way to look at the problem that you're analyzing in your book and allies so powerfully in this session here is it just leaves me wondering whether you believe in contingency. So let me explain what I mean by that. Except for some hanging chad, Al Gore would have been president. There's a conventional wisdom, perhaps unexamined conventional wisdom, that he would have prosecuted the war on terror differently to the way that Bush did.

So the first, the small question is, if you believe in contingency, in this mode, does Trump look as inevitable as you've presented him? The second question-- I'm going to get him both out of the way.

**SPENCER**

**ACKERMAN:**

OK.

**STEVEN SIMON:** The second question is, so if you had been president in 2001 when the attacks took place and coming from temperamentally, logically, and even perhaps, for the sake of the counterfactual, aware of what the future might hold for the United States, depending on the response that the government made at that moment to the 9/11 attacks, what would have been your course of action? Outline, for us, what the appropriate response would have been that you would have elected to pursue had you been president at that time.

**SPENCER ACKERMAN:** I think I can do both of them at the same time. And I thank you for the question. So, with Gore, we have to look at what, after 9/11, Democrats, in fact, said and did and the way that they argued for the war on terror, the way they understood the war on terror. And you quickly see the, if not full unanimity, agreement with Bush on all of the important premises that I believe make the war on terror a disaster.

And this ties into what I would have done and would have not done. And Gore, in probably his most important pre-Iraq invasion remarks clarifying all of this, his remarks that say like don't invade Iraq, he lays out what is, essentially, a war on terror without the Iraq war. And I think that's probably what you would have gotten from a President Gore. Because that's what not President Gore actually said contemporaneously.

I think he would have felt all of the political pressures, the exact same political pressures that a President Ackerman would have felt too. And I mean those pressures not necessarily from people. The war on terror is not something people demanded. The war on terror is something elites oriented the war on terror to understand as a prism the attacks of 9/11.

And that gets into what I would have done, which is absolutely not that. Obviously, 3,000 people are dead. And that must be redressed. Like justice doesn't occur without a redress of that. These were my neighbors. I'm a native New Yorker.

What needed to happen after 9/11 was a very sharp focus on capturing, I believe, bringing to trial, and, thereby, discrediting the people who carried out 9/11, the elements of al-Qaeda that, in fact, do that and them alone. The biggest conceptual disaster behind the war on terror is the war on terror itself, the idea that you can fight an amorphous war against an enemy that you never define but understand as something, broadly speaking, involving Muslim political violence. None of that can find its way to any conclusion. It will not only generate its enemies. But it will, in the case of as we learned with ISIS, make its enemies larger and worse.

What the United States needed to have done-- if I could have given the post-9/11 speech, I would have-- perhaps not in that direct speech, but what I would have done is conceptualize and orient the 9/11 attacks within what Susan Sontag got at in those first days of her essay, which is that the United States was not facing an uprising of global Islam. The United States was facing reprisal for the ways in which its policies in the Middle East were violent, extractive, and exploitative, that the United States underwrote an unjust political and economic system in the Middle East. Then it created enormous conditions of both oligarchy, despair, and alienation.

And the United States needs to do-- this is both me as a journalist and for your thought experiment-- what President Ackerman would be saying. What the United States needs to do is what any doctor needs to do and pledges at every moment. Clearly, not the doctors in the war on terror for the CIA. But, first, do no harm. Stop doing all of these violent, expropriate, and extractive things.

This will also mean there has to be a larger reckoning with what American foreign policy is and what it's for and how national security is increasingly about the security of American hegemony at the expense of the security of American people. That is what I believe happened on 9/11. And that is what I believe occurred in terms of a US response every day ever since, continuing now. Thank you so much for this opportunity to discuss this.

**STEVEN SIMON:** That was great. That was a great response. I guess we're out of time. Let's see. Well, I just want to, before we part, I just want to reiterate that your book is on sale at the MIT Press bookstore and at a 25% discount to those who attended this event. And you've got a number to call in your chat bar. In the meantime, I'm hoping you sell a lot of books, Spencer.

**SPENCER** Well, thank you.

**ACKERMAN:**

**STEVEN SIMON:** I'm counting on that. And it was great having you. And count me in any time you have an event anywhere. I'll be there.

**SPENCER** Well, thank you so much for this opportunity. It's been a real thrill to be able to talk about this with an MIT

**ACKERMAN:** audience. Thank you all so much.

**STEVEN SIMON:** Cheers. Bye.