

Starting Over: The Center-Right After Trump **A Niskanen Center Conference on December 11, 2018**

PANEL 2: BEYOND POLARIZATION — SEARCHING FOR A VIABLE CENTER

Moderator: Brink Lindsey

Panelists: Mindy Finn, Pete Peterson, Jonathan Rauch

Brink Lindsey: Okay, we're going to go ahead and start the second session. Welcome everybody. My name is Brink Lindsey, I'm Vice President for Policy at the Niskanen Center, and I'm joined this morning by Pete Peterson from the Pepperdine School of Public Policy, Mindy Finn from Stand Up Republic, and Jonathan Rauch from the Brookings Institution, although he's here today in his capacity as a member of the board of Better Angels. The topic for this session is, "Beyond Polarization: Searching for a Viable Center." Now, the familiar term is "vital center," but that seemed too optimistic for 2018. We're not really looking for centrism that's in the vital pink of health; just centrism that has a pulse would be an improvement over where we seem to be today.

Brink Lindsey: But the question here that we're going to be grappling with is, in the midst of this sort of replay of Yeats' "Second Coming" poem — the gyre's widening, the falconer's calling out but the falcon's incommunicado, and the center is not holding — what do we do about it? How, in this age of extreme polarization and toxic tribalism, do we transcend these divisions, or at least back away from them? And I think everyone here has the sense that if there is a viable center, if there is something that unites us more than divides us, it's located in the commitment to democratic, republican self-government. And it's located in a creedal version of American national identity, where to be an American is to participate in this open, free, democratic society and to subscribe to the principles that have animated American life — not a blood-and-soil vision of American national identity.

Brink Lindsey: For my own part, I've just written an article that's coming out in the next issue of *National Affairs* — a copy of it is outside with other reading materials — called "Republicanism for Republicans." In it, I argue that there is a desperate need to resist this divisive ethno-nationalist populism within the right — not just for opposition to come from outside, from the left, but there is a critical need for internal resistance in the name of a decent, constructive center-right. And I argue that a real, clean break from the increasingly degraded populist version of conservatism is needed, and that the language of republicanism can provide a kind of organizing principle for a morally and intellectually revived center-right.

Brink Lindsey: Each of the folks here is coming from or moving in a somewhat similar direction. Mindy Finn is with Stand Up Republic, which is a grassroots organization to urge people to defend liberal democracy, and it is seeking to find defenders regardless of whether they stand to the left or the right of center. So it's looking for a center that is based in commitment to democracy. Jonathan Rauch is involved with this very interesting organization Better Angels which is attempting, at the grassroots level, to bring people together across the chasm of red versus blue and to find, again, this common American identity in which we see people who disagree with us not as enemies but as fellow citizens. And Pete Peterson is a co-director of The American Project: On the Future of the Conservative Movement, where the sort of evolution of the project is moving towards something called a "conservatism of connection." The idea is to

move away from conservatism based on dividing, based on us versus them, but rather toward a conservatism that is focused on what unites us and what connects us to our fellow Americans.

Brink Lindsey: So having given that sort of general overview and my reasons for having invited all of you to this panel, let me... Let's do a little show-and-tell about the organizations and projects that you're involved with. First off, Mindy, tell us about Stand Up Republic. Tell us how it came to be, what your goals are, and what the status of achieving those goals is as of late 2018.

Mindy Finn: Sure, thanks Brink. I don't think the mic's on. Can you hear me?

Brink Lindsey: Yeah.

Mindy Finn: As some people may or may not know, in the last few months of 2016, I joined Evan McMullin to run on what was branded an "independent conservative" ticket in the presidential election. It was late in the game and we were only on a dozen ballots, although we were write-ins on 20-plus more. But first and foremost, the goal was to stand up for critical democratic ideals, norms, and institutions that we worried were at risk of fading away, or that people (certainly on the right) were deciding were not as important or that they didn't need to embrace, or maybe that the Republican Party didn't stand for these things anymore. These were things like equality, embracing immigrants to our shores, free speech and freedom of the press, and self-rule, the idea of the separation of powers, the idea that Congress serves as a check and provides oversight for the executive branch. These are the things that with Trump's candidacy were at risk of fading away and failing to be the core to the Republican Party.

Mindy Finn: So we stood up. And there was (or seemed to be) a pretty strong movement for that across the country. Not enough for electoral success, but we assumed, like many people, that on election night Donald Trump would not be the winner and would not be our next president. And a lot of people think that even he thought he would not be our next president. And as the election approached, we started to talk about this movement that we had built. This is a powerful movement. What is its highest value, what is its best use? We thought it would be potentially reinvigorating to the center-right and would be part of discussions, like there were post-2012, about the direction of the right and the conservative movement and the Republican Party.

Mindy Finn: Well, as we know, Donald Trump won, and it appeared he became the de facto leader of the Republican Party and took it in an ethno-nationalist, populist direction. And so instead, we stepped back and said, "Okay, well, really, what is the highest value now for this movement and using it as a building block to expand and scale?" And it was to unite people from the left and the right around the defense of, or the advancement of, democratic ideals, norms, and institutions. And it was based on a fear that if we don't build a passionate coalition and a movement to stand up and uphold these ideals in our culture, in our government, then they could cease to exist. And we cannot allow them to become a partisan cause.

Mindy Finn: And that has been... I think we've had some very good success with that. It is a challenge, because it's in Republicans' best interests now, as a party, to say that those who are standing up for democracy are really just about attacking the president because they don't like the president. And they claim it's a partisan cause, and that those who defend democracy are saying it's analogous with the Democratic Party. And it has been our goal to make clear that we are a republic, and that the values that should unite us are the ones that are enshrined in our Constitution. They are our creed. This is a system of self-rule, with separation of powers, standing for a free press, for liberty, the ability to protest, and all of the things that I think

probably everyone in this room cherishes. We now have chapters in dozens of states across the country. We are growing.

Mindy Finn: And the other thing that we have found, and that we're now building on, is that when people get together around the defense of fundamental American ideals and they start talking, they recognize that maybe they're not so far apart on some of the policy issues. People often feel these are intractable problems — problems related to solving our immigration challenges and the issues at our border, related to guns, related to the environment, to healthcare, to education. But when people get together they recognize that there's more that unites us than divides us. It sounds cheesy and corny, but that's who we are in America. And now there's opportunity to build bridges on a lot of these policy issues, even outside the core democratic issues.

Brink Lindsey: So, Jonathan, you've spent your whole career in Washington as a committed centrist. If a hell on earth could have been invented personally for you, the tribal brand of politics that we're embroiled in today would have been made to order. So I know that your spirit has been in complete opposition to this all along, and some of us who have been sort of more partisan one way or another, and now look at how our partisanship may have contributed to this toxic stew, have some moral accounting to do. But Johnathan, you're in the clear. [chuckle]

Jonathan Rauch: I'm blaming you, Brink. [chuckle]

Brink Lindsey: Tell us about Better Angels. This is an organization that is aimed explicitly at bridging this divide. It can sound hokey and hopeless, but you're a hard-bitten Washington hand and you got interested enough to get involved, so tell us about the service that you do.

Jonathan Rauch: I am not all the way to optimism, but I am all the way to hope, and Better Angels is part of the reason why. I'm surprised to be here talking about it, because it's... You're about to hear. I was a skeptic on this project. It took a while to win me over. So here's what happened... After the 2016 election, a man named David Blankenhorn and a few other people decided to organize a kind of encounter group in southern Ohio between blues and reds. And they discovered real chemistry in the room when people who thought they hated each other learned that they could make a conversation happen. The key here is, it's a very structured conversation designed by a nationally renowned marriage and family therapist. So people don't just say stuff to each other. In the first half of the workshop, they don't even talk directly to each other, they have to listen. But the surprising result of this was that some of the people there were transformed and, in fact, formed these friendships way across the blue-red divide. And the other surprise was that this began to catch on. Lots of people said, "We want to do that." So Better Angels — www.better-angels.org, for those of you who are more interested — very quickly took off as a national, grassroots, depolarizing movement.

Jonathan Rauch: And remember, this is a new group and it's totally volunteer. There's virtually no one paid. We're working on a shoestring. It's hard to fund, because it's in the middle. We have 6,000 members — 130 new ones coming in per week — and 250 workshops so far in 30 states. We have almost 300 moderators trained, and those people go out and train other moderators, so that's how the thing can spread organically. We've begun to raise a significant amount of money in small donations online. We're also beginning to pilot and spread Better Angels debates on college campuses, which are student-led, truth-seeking debates. And those are also going off like a firecracker with students who, it turns out, want a place where they can have a discussion of issues in a frank and candid way.

Jonathan Rauch: So that's what Better Angels is doing. I was a carryover from the board of its parent organization, the Institute for American Values, which was doing other kinds of things. And I was a skeptic because I thought, well... I said to David Blankenhorn, who started this initiative, "It's really sweet. 'Isn't that special!' as Church Lady used to say on SNL. But it'll never scale. I mean, you've got small groups of people in particular towns in these small rooms. You just can't organize that against the onslaught of deliberately and commercially divisive big media, divisive social media, social atomization, and the collapse of the mainstream religious movements, all of which are fueling what you are up against. So God bless you, have fun." My attitude changed for a few reasons. First, the thing went viral much faster than I expected. Hands went up all across the country saying, "How can I be involved?" We're about to have our second national convention. People, all volunteers, come in from all over the country. And the grassroots have taken ownership of this, which is really important.

Jonathan Rauch: Second, what I hadn't understood going in was that what does scale is the narrative. There is a deep hunger out there on a part of the public to take some control back from the forces which are in many cases deliberately dividing us. And what they've discovered is, "Right here in my community I can do something to change the story and break through. These forces of polarization don't have to control us. They are not necessarily our destiny." And that change in the narrative does scale, and it scales big time with lots of media impact in all the major outlets all over the country: *60 Minutes*, the front page of *USA Today*, you name it. There's a real hunger for this change of narrative.

Jonathan Rauch: The third thing that turns out to be very important is what Better Angels is part of, which is an upwelling of groups around the country with names like Bridge the Divide, Living Room Conversations, and of course Mindy's group, Stand Up Republic. But there are many, many others doing their own take on similar things. And what I think we're seeing happen is a grassroots rebuilding of civil society where it counts the most. If you look at the country from the top down, things look really bad. If you look at the country from the bottom up, if you look at individual communities and initiatives, things look much, much better. Jim and Deb Fallows just wrote a book about this. And Better Angels has a part in restoring some of those civic connections on the local level.

Jonathan Rauch: I deeply believe that what Mona Charen said at the very end of the last panel is true. Thank you for that, Mona, if you're still here. What she said is that if you want to see a fundamental cause for this deep polarization, and the extremism and nihilism that has taken over, the most fundamental cause is the breakdown of the civic institutions, the mediators: the unions, the Boy Scouts, the Rotaries, the old-fashioned participatory political parties... All the ways people made face-to-face contact to solve problems and get a sense of efficacy as individuals. To the extent we're seeing groups like Better Angels begin to rebuild those small platoons, it's because of Americans' genius for organizing into civic groups. And that, I think, offers real promise for getting to the cause of the problem and not just the symptoms.

Brink Lindsey: Both Jon and Mindy are involved in organizations that are explicitly oriented towards the center and transcending left-right differences. Pete, your initiative is focused specifically on the right, but it seems to be animated by some similar concerns and by an agreement on the appropriate direction, which is moving back toward the center, moving back toward connection with the rest of the country. So tell us a little bit about how this initiative got up and running, who's involved, and what's gestating.

Pete Peterson: Thanks, Brink, and thanks to Niskanen for the invitation to participate. I'm just piggybacking with Jonathan... Mona's last remarks really are a point of departure for us as well, although it didn't start out that way. The American Project for the Future of Conservatism is based at Pepperdine's School of Public Policy in lovely Malibu, California, which has weather nothing like DC's. It was founded by the late James Q. Wilson and Jack Kemp as a policy school that was focused on things you can't always measure. And when we launched The American Project in 2016, me and my co-director — Rich Tafel, who helped found an organization called the Log Cabin Republicans — had the idea that Hillary Clinton was going to be the president in November and the Republican/conservative movement was going to be in a shambles. We got one of those things. [chuckle]

Pete Peterson: This project began with discussions between Rich and myself about how we could organize a group of people on the right, using the institution of a graduate policy school that has some connections in history, to further this conversation. So we brought together a group of academics and activists. I think that's something that sets us apart a little bit, in that we're bringing together people who are very involved politically across the conservative spectrum, but also academics who are teaching and researching in these issues. And we planned our first gathering on our campus in Malibu in June of 2017. It was the hardest thing I've ever done professionally, because although I hope I'm a good facilitator of conversations, I didn't really know where this was going. In this group of about 30, we had people that were very pro-Trump and people who were very anti-Trump. We had neocons, paleo-cons, and representatives from about six different think tanks here in D.C. and out West.

Pete Peterson: And what began with some arguments about where the future of the Republican Party was going — and which I thought, frankly, after the first day was going to degenerate into just a pro-Trump/anti-Trump argument — resolved at the end of a long weekend with a unanimous agreement that our problems were not political, they were sociological. And our problems specifically were around issues of loneliness and alienation. We concluded that what we had witnessed in November 2016 was really a result of sociological and to a degree economic factors, not so much prompting or furthering them. And so, if the conservative movement was going to mean anything in the future, it was going to have to respond to that.

Pete Peterson: After that gathering and for the next three months, I edited (along with the group of people who had joined us in Malibu) a principles document called “The Way Forward.” It's a four-page document that defines a concept we're calling “a conservatism of connection.” We're making an argument that there has always been a communitarian strain in conservatism that needs to be appealed to, not only rhetorically but also from a policy standpoint. And so that four-page document created in the fall of 2017 has prompted a series of conversations here in D.C., a major conference we hosted back on our Malibu campus last June, and subsequent conversations.

Pete Peterson: Essentially we're making an argument in this document, and really in The American Project more broadly, that unless we're able to find these points of connection, affiliation, and belonging, our politics will continue to degenerate, not only on the right but also on the left. I don't know if anybody saw the Macron speech last night, but really what he's responding to is a left-wing populism that also has recessive genes here in the Democratic Party in the United States. Don't let anybody tell you anything different. I wouldn't call it our project centrist so much as really appealing more on the conservative side to this communitarianism and taking a more sociological approach. The problem with conservatism right now is there are only

three conservative sociologists in America. Maybe the most prominent one today, Charles Murray, in 2012 wrote *Coming Apart*, a book that really was met with a deep appreciation, a lot of popularity, but I don't think the Republican Party or conservatism more broadly have ever really wrestled with it.

Pete Peterson: And here we are today. There's a very important book coming out by Tim Carney at AEI called *Alienated America*, which is going to be looking at some of these issues that Charles raised but overlaying that information over the 2016 election. I think the future of the conservative movement is a communitarian one that is reawakening a set of conversations that happened in the '90s and early 2000s, looking at policies around the building of social capital, and doing it in a way that relates to a country that is much more diverse than it was even 20 years ago. And — I can say this is as one of the five remaining California Republicans [chuckle] — what we witnessed in the 2018 elections in California has been called “the canary in the coal mine” by the outgoing head of the California Republican Party. We're going to be looking at ways that we can build not only on this communitarian understanding, but also on policies that come up out of that.

Pete Peterson: When I speak on these issues, sometimes I catch quite a bit of flack on both the left and right. I believe that if we don't have a nationalism rightly understood, we will have a nationalism wrongly understood. I'm all about fighting a nationalism that's based on blood and soil, but it cannot be a bloodless nationalism. And I think sometimes where we get ourselves into problems in the conservative movement, especially in the center, is that there's a certain amount of talk of principles without a talk of identity. And unless we're going to take on these issues of identity from a political perspective, that is not something that's going to succeed politically.

Brink Lindsey: Let me pick up on something that was mentioned a couple of times, this issue of getting all the way back to sociology, getting back to personal interconnections. I think it's fascinating and actually deeply hopeful that the founder of Better Angels comes from a background in marriage counseling. Because I have to say, even before Trump appeared on the scene, the red-versus-blue trench warfare struck me a bad marriage. No doubt that's because of my personal experiences — I'm on my second marriage now — but the partisanship struck me as two sides that had given up on getting along with each other and were just delighting in making each other miserable. And the rhetoric of these new political initiatives is like what you learn when you're learning how to fight fairly and fight constructively, which is an indispensable part of a solid, workable, happy marriage. And one thing you never do is you never start a sentence with “You” — “You did this. You made me feel this way.” Because you're judging your partner and you're saying that you know better than them what's going on in their own head. And when you start denouncing someone else, their obvious and natural reaction is a defensive crouch and fighting back. So you're supposed to talk about “What I feel” and how what your partner did made you feel. Anyway, just extrapolating from that, how much of this marriage counseling background actually makes it into the structure of the dynamics of Better Angels' work?

Jonathan Rauch: A fair amount. I'm getting vigorous nods from some of our actual Better Angels volunteers here. A lot of it gets in. The designer of the protocol, Bill Doherty of the University of Minnesota, has set it up so there are a few elements of marriage counseling, and counseling generally, in the secret sauce. One is, no “you.” For at least the first half of the meeting, people can't direct comments toward the other group, which means they have to listen. No eye-rolling! And moderators are quite aggressive about stamping out efforts to make political speeches. Also very important, in my view, is the motto is, “Come as you are, leave as you are.”

It's made very clear that the point of this is not to change people's minds on ideology or politics. You're not expected to be convinced of anything. You're just expected to try to hear the other side. But it turns out that when you lower the stakes that way, that makes it much easier and that in turn builds good will.

Brink Lindsey: Mindy, you're trying to stitch together people who started out on the right, started out on the left, but are alarmed at the crisis of American politics today. I assume, though, that sometimes there are frictions between them. So what kinds of frictions have you encountered? How do you get over them? How do you actually, in 2018 of all times, construct an organization that's pulling from both sides of the spectrum?

Mindy Finn: There is a lot happening in current events that I think are defining events, that will require people to line up on one side or the other. Right now a profound one is standing up for the rule of law and the independence of federal law enforcement. Clearly that is an issue that is in the news that gets a lot of press and is on the forefront of people's minds who are civically engaged. So can we support this idea that the president is above the law? Most of the people that we are organizing fall on one side of an issue like that. For example, they fall on one side of an issue around whether it's appropriate to call out "fake news" constantly, or to say the press is the enemy of the people. Most the people we're organizing line up on one side of that. Where there are divisions are where you would expect, across your typical party lines. There are divisions that you would expect among cosmopolitan versus more rural populations. And when it comes to that, I think one of the central divisions that we wrestle with, and that a lot of our constituency wrestles with, is where they see the future of the parties — if they see a future in the parties at all.

Mindy Finn: You have a big portion of the constituency that stands for all the things that I've just mentioned, and may even have some kind of negative views on this president, say, if they're in the Republican Party, for those reasons. But they're all in with their Republican identity, their GOP identity; they see their future in the GOP. Same thing on the Democratic side. And then you have a fair amount of the constituency who thinks that the duopoly is not the future, and that it can't sustain a country that is deeply polarized along party lines due to changing demographics, economics, media fragmentation, income inequality, and leaders who aren't servant-based, who are in it for themselves. And they also believe that those factors end up making us vulnerable to foreign interference, to adversaries who want to exploit those divisions for their own gain. So some people look at these problems and say, "This is a destabilized America and this polarization will only be solved with a third party or something else that can represent the 117 million Americans who are not affiliated with either party." And frankly that number of independents is growing.

Mindy Finn: But some people say the real need is to fix the Republican Party. I find that that is one of the deepest divisions and challenges — not so much around party lines, because I think the people we are uniting do feel that they are in common cause, and in defense of credal America, and in defense of democracy and the ideals that are the cornerstones of democracy. But the division is more around, do they still want to wear that red shirt or that blue shirt for the rest of their lives, or do they think there's something else? And I'll just note that on that point, where I come down, and where we've come down as an organization as we've studied these issues over the last couple years, is that we believe that while there is a great demand and desire for another party, or for something else, the systemic challenges are such that that's very difficult right now

and could be very difficult for a long time. And the answer probably is, in the shortish term, a stronger Republican Party and a stronger Democratic Party.

Mindy Finn: However, you can't just talk your way to that kind of reform. It's one piece of it. There are pressures you can put on Congress, and we all have a lot of influence. But a big piece of that is going to have to be bottom up. And there's a lot of hope in communities for people who are desiring that, who want to work toward it. And by stitching together a passionate constituency of people from center-left to center-right who are demanding political renewal, then all of a sudden that's a powerful force that's able to create the necessary competitive pressures to bring the right back toward the center and bring the left toward the center. And it's big enough that you wouldn't even need the full constituency wielding their power in order to drive that competition. The real challenge is — and I think Jon actually touched on this in something he said — that polarization is deeply ideological and there's a moral simplicity in identifying with a party. You're a red shirt or you're a blue shirt. Whatever the red team thinks, that's what you stand for, or whatever the blue team thinks, that's what you stand for. You know you're not for what the other side is.

Mindy Finn: So the division tends to be pro-immigration or anti-immigration. You believe in climate change or you don't believe in climate change. And there's not a lot of room for nuance. And it's hard in this nuanced space to derive the kind of passion that you find when you're using fear and negative incentives like the far right and the far left do in order to mobilize their coalitions. Part of a project that we're taking on is to, first of all, learn more about the constituency in the middle and what moves them. But we also need to identify how to tap that passion. How do you engage and mobilize people in the center to be active and to wield their political power in the same way and with the same passion as the far right and the far left?

Brink Lindsey: That raises, I think, a critical sort of ambivalence about this subject matter. On the one hand, the clear common denominator, if there is any center and if there is anything that can bring us together, is this love of country. It's the idea that there's more that unites us than divides us. It's the sentiment of country above party. It's the idea of patriotism rightly understood, or nationalism rightly understood. On the other hand, the purchase of those sentiments on American political life has now been revealed to be very, very fragile. We at the Niskanen Center have been organizers of Trump-skeptical Republicans and conservatives with our biweekly Meetings of the Concerned, and you can see the common denominator there. Especially in the early going, we would routinely hear people say something like, "Boy, I can't wait until we get back to the days when I would disagree with you about everything." [chuckle]

Brink Lindsey: But the thing that was bringing everybody together was this notion that the country was in trouble, and that was more important than any partisan priorities. The way I put it, there's the policy game on the field. You want your team to score a lot of points, and that's great. But when the stadium — the institutional context within which the game is even possible — is on fire, then you have to turn your attention to putting out the fire. But again, this sort of common agreement appears to be very fragile. For most people, their attachment to liberal democracy appears to be downstream from their partisan and policy commitments. When they're in conflict, people seem easily driven to choose party above country. And beyond that, I think someone else mentioned that the media dynamics which are tearing us apart are so powerful.

Brink Lindsey: And it all boils down to this issue of differential power of passion. Hate and anger are rocket fuel for political mobilization. What all of your organizations and initiatives are

offering is some kind of love: love of country, love of each other, connection. So it's a pretty stark battle here: Which is stronger? And it feels, these days, like the bright side is embattled. So how do you actually see grounds for real hope? Is it just that, even though hate and anger are incredibly powerful, they burn themselves out? Do you feel like there may be a point at which, even if it seems sort of weak and wimpy to be a centrist, that moment may be coming just because we've burnt through this sort of rocket fuel? Your thoughts on the correlation of forces here and the odds that are against us?

Jonathan Rauch: Assuming that's directed to me, the first thing I'd say is that our model, at least, is not that everyone needs to be more centrist or indeed that America is a country of centrists. It's not, it never has been. I would reference the campaign of John Adams versus Thomas Jefferson; you all know those stories. Our model is that, as psychologists have shown, if you want to reduce tribal animosities, what works is to get people together. Intermingle the tribe. But not just to say "hi" to each other, because it turns out that just putting people in the same room doesn't work. But getting them to cooperate on a common project, something that they can do together, does work. "I've got a nail, you've got a hammer. Look, we're building a roof!" That creates bonds. And it also turns out that the project around which you bring people together can in fact be the project of depolarization. We're humans, we can do some bootstrapping here.

Jonathan Rauch: You've got these top-down forces that I call polarization for profit, or polarization for power. That's the Trump model, it's the Fox News model and so forth. But the reason I get to hope is that we do see in these grassroots efforts a real thirst of actual individual human beings on the quite far right and quite far left to surmount that and to commit themselves personally to that project. I would be lying if I said that I'm standing here confidently saying that the little guys at the bottom of the food chain who are pushing back will win this battle. The constellation of forces against them is as bad as I've ever seen. But I'm not giving up, because this thing is catching on and other things are catching on.

Pete Peterson: I like the marriage counseling metaphor — not that I've ever been to counseling because my marriage is perfect! [laughter] But from what I hear, one of the things they talk about in marriage counseling is that sometimes the thing is not the thing. And this is another recommendation I would make to political leaders and those pundits in the conservative movement. When we're talking about immigration, sometimes it's not about immigration, it's about identity. Now, there are racial elements within this immigration debate, but there are two other factors. One is economic: people that are really suffering. I can point to examples, especially in California, that because we're not enforcing immigration policies, those in the lower classes and lower-middle classes are suffering economically because of the policies that are not being implemented. But secondly, I think there's also, in the discussion around immigration, a lack of discussion of what does make America great. If this conversation is going to be about, "You're a racist if you're pushing for the wall," for example, it's going to be very hard to find either a sustainable policy coalition or a political movement without allowing that for some in this discussion, it's not about that.

Pete Peterson: And I would say that on several different issue areas, some of this is being driven by that polarization-industrial complex, right? That is very much about keeping the conversation at the label level. But we won't find nuance if we're not going to allow that there might be a good-natured support for policies that are being described as racist and xenophobic. I think it behooves us to go back to that marriage counseling practice of being willing to think things

through. Maybe we're just thinking about things at the label level, and there could be some other reasons why people have latched on to a particular coalition.

Brink Lindsey: I'm going to open up for questions in about 10 minutes. Mindy, this passion gap, how do you deal with it?

Mindy Finn: First, I'll say I think my next career will be in marriage counseling. It seems like there's a lot of demand. [laughter] Look, the right and the left... There's a huge industry with a myriad of institutions that are devoted to keeping a tight hold on people within their coalition — within the conservative movement and the Republican coalition, and within the progressive movement and the Democratic coalition. In order to compete, you need commensurate infrastructure. And there can be some infrastructure — places like the Niskanen Center, for example, or Pete's project — that are focused more on the right, and people on the right who are looking for more productive politics, who are dedicated to political renewal, who don't want to remain stuck in ideological camps, who are open to reforms to our democratic system.

Mindy Finn: There can be those institutions that are focused on the right and focused on the left, and there are. And I think one of the areas of hope, post-2016, is... It's a crisis moment. In a crisis moment, there's a lot of danger. I don't think that we're necessarily out of the danger zone, and so we have to remain vigilant. But there's also a lot of opportunity. And where people are leaning into that opportunity is creating institutions — like Better Angels, like Stand Up Republic, like the work Niskanen Center has been doing such as this conference, like Pete's institute — to try to bring people together and create a more organic and loosely connected infrastructure that's commensurate with what you have on the far right and the far left.

Mindy Finn: That infrastructure is going to have to be bigger than any of us. You mentioned the media piece, which I touched on. The media business model is such right now, particularly in the digital era, that anger and fear and division drive more dollars. I worked at Twitter, actually, in the early days of when Twitter was starting to get more involved in politics. I helped build the Washington office. I'm not responsible for the president getting on Twitter, so I'm not going to take responsibility for that, but I am responsible for other elected officials getting on Twitter. What I saw in Twitter was an opportunity to create more connection between the people and their leaders, and between our representatives and those who they represent. And in a government by self-rule, it's important to have that communication. In an era when people are increasingly communicating digitally, I thought this would reduce that gap. What instead has happened — and I saw this working at the company early on, and now we've seen it in hyper-drive — is that the company made the most money at the times when there was the most gridlock and division in Washington. So if there was a budget shutdown, well then, people are talking more, and the more people are talking on the platform and engaging, the more money the platform makes.

Mindy Finn: That's just Twitter. The same thing, though, is the Facebook business model. And increasingly what you would consider your mainstream media, the more traditional media, more of their money is being made online and more of their money is being made from at least sensationalism if not division. We're going to have to break through that at a very basic level. We need more media that is speaking to the disaffected, for lack of a better term. I don't really like the word "center," either. I don't think people all have to be aligned around some kind of utopian centrist agenda. But we need a media that's dedicated to the truth, to evidence-based policy, to problem solving, to core democratic principles, and that's willing to tell it straight and

isn't kind of secretly working for the Republican Party or the Democratic Party. That's part of the infrastructure. Grassroots groups, candidate recruitment, leadership training, think tanks, more policy ideas... All of the pieces that go to fuel this business infrastructure on the right and the left, we need more of that to be devoted to bringing people together. Or at least we need more to be devoted to the constituencies on the center-right and the center-left who are open to talking to those from the other side and having the difficult conversations that we're all discussing here.

Brink Lindsey: Pete, you had mentioned that this conservatism of connection is going to bring in its train some changes in policy as well.

Pete Peterson: Right.

Brink Lindsey: And just to amplify that, I think we now see a conservatism that is focused on, and animated by, stoking people's fears and resentments. And so what can compete with that? Right now that's the culture-war theater. And that seems to be the main value proposition for most Trump voters and supporters: "This guy is fighting and he hates the people I hate. He hates the people who hate me and he gives them grief." But on the policy side, what is the Republican Party offering its base? Tax cuts for the very rich and reduced funding and access for health care. In other words, they're offering them absolutely nothing. And so it seems to me a codependence between the donor class dominance of policy and the kind of media-machine dominance of culture war. Those things go together because you can't win elections based on the Republican policy agenda.

Pete Peterson: Brink, you're absolutely right. The last panel of the conference that we hosted on campus in June was called "From Theory to Practice." We had a number of different think tank folks in there and some folks connected to the GOP. And one of the things that grew organically out of that conversation was this awareness that through the '90s and early 2000s there had been a real focus on how government policy connected to the other sectors that can be used to promote greater social capital. And we all on the panel began to wonder, "Well, what happened?" There were some people involved in the George W. Bush administration who were on that panel too. We came pretty quickly to this historical proposition: What if Osama Bin Laden killed the social capital movement in the United States? That when he brought down the towers and hit the Pentagon and drove down that plane in Pennsylvania, he wasn't just attacking institutions, he was attacking one of the more exciting movements in public policy discussions that we've had in the last 30 or 40 years?

Pete Peterson: That movement was coming out of welfare reform and some interesting work happening in the states in the early '90s, and into the beginnings of what many people thought was going to be much more. President George W. Bush said at the time, "I'm taking my experience from Texas, and we're going to be focusing on what states are doing and bringing these ideas together." And I was in New York on the day when those towers came down. I don't think we've taken a full accounting of what that did to a series of very important policy discussions. So what we're looking to do with The American Project is in some ways not just to blow the dust off of those white papers, but to understand that conditions have changed in the United States. *Coming Apart* is real. And we're in a different place demographically; certainly in the state of California, we see that first hand. But our focus needs to return to that set of principles and policies. To see what Senator Mike Lee has done with the Joint Economic Committee creating the Social Capital Project, I think, is at least a window into some of the movement that's happening there.

Pete Peterson: I think that's where our project is going to be transitioning into that policy, building on this communitarianism for the 21st century. But at the same time, we're not creating things out of whole cloth. I think some people in this room were involved in those conversations in the '90s and early oughts. Again, those ideas don't need the dust blown off them, but they do need a reawakening.

Jonathan Rauch: I just wanted to make a couple of points before we go to questions. One is about why I think the people in this room and folks like those in Niskanen Center are especially important in this project. There are problems on the left, but I am a believer that there is asymmetrical polarization. I think the Republican Party is more extreme, more radicalized, more nihilistic, and more dangerous than the Democratic Party right now. And at Better Angels, a problem that we have hit is that it is significantly harder to get reds into the room for these conversations than blues. In fact, blues line up around the block to get there because they're very comfortable with the sort of therapeutic model. Reds are very suspicious of it. They think they're going to be dragged into a situation where they're going to be hammered yet again by the usual people for being backward and racist, so they don't want to come. One of our challenges is to reach out to more of those people. They become evangelists after they're in the room. But groups like the Niskanen Center — the center-right, self-identified conservatives — are especially key to this project of bringing others on board.

Jonathan Rauch: I also want to do a shout-out to what I think, 30 years ago, is still the best statement I've ever seen of this kind of conservatism that Pete Peterson is talking about and that we're talking about today. Has anyone gone back recently and reread the famous "Thousand Points of Light" speech by the late lamented George H. W. Bush? It's beautiful, and it is a wonderful, succinct statement of precisely the ethos we're talking about in this room. The "Thousand Points of Light," as he said, are "the many civic and social groups in self-help organizations in communities across the country." And the point he makes in that speech is that if you don't get those right, if those aren't working, nothing else will work.

Brink Lindsey: Okay, we do have time for a couple of questions. Wait for the microphone to come to you. This gentleman right in front.

John Topping: Good morning. I'm John Topping. I'm the president and founder in 1986 of the Climate Institute, which is the first climate protection organization. And I'd like to provide a kind of centrist perspective. A number of the folks here are fellow members of the Ripon Society — Tom Petri, Lee Huebner, Mike Smith, myself. And this was chronicled, of course, by Geoff Kabaservice in his book, *Rule and Ruin*. This was an effort, largely in the '60s and '70s, that resulted in, among other things, promoting the opening to China under the Nixon administration, the abolition of the draft, the launching of the National Minority Enterprise program, the Earned Income Tax Credit... A number of other things came out of this. And...

Brink Lindsey: You have to hold it to your...

John Topping: I think many of us have found that the progressives and moderates have essentially been squeezed out of the Republican Party. And we've moved... All the people I mentioned have been very helpful to me in the climate protection, because we've sensed perhaps that saving the world is easier than saving the Republican Party. [chuckle] But it strikes me that a transformation of our politics, if it's going to happen, may not be driven by a lot of abstract principles of moderation. Maybe the driving issue will be climate change, which could be existential by the end of the century and we may find ourselves very imperiled.

John Topping: What we have found ourselves is an ability, here in the current environment, to promote eclectic, multi-generational projects. We've got about three dozen young people, grad students and undergraduates who worked on a project for a North American supergrid. Tom Petri was one of the members of the steering committee, and we also had a utility executive, a former university president, and others on the board. And we looked at extensive changes in the energy system that would essentially protect us against threats like EMP attacks and solar storms, but would also de-carbonize the atmosphere. And we've looked also at some things that are off the table with the general environmental movement, such as the possibility of geoengineering together with dramatic energy change. And I think climate change is going to be one of the driving issues — there may be others — that are going to summon people to action. And it was remarkable that we found a huge number of volunteer folks in their 20s matched with people who are up to 50 years older, who sense that we're leaving the world in a difficult position. And it may be that when we start looking at how we put these coalitions together, it's not going to be around center-right or center-left principles, it's going to be around these driving issues.

Brink Lindsey: So this harkens back to the point I made earlier, that people's attachment to liberal democracy is a downstream from their policy attachments. And so while awakening and reminding people of the value of these deep American principles is important and crucial, it may not be enough. What we need is a policy agenda that actually does motivate people and that then can pull them together rather than pulling them apart. I don't know if you want to expand on that, Mindy...

Mindy Finn: I think you make a good point. Even when I talk about a cross-party coalition for political renewal, part of it is uniting people around potential reforms to our democratic systems: things like ranked choice voting, or different voting systems in order to open up the political process and create more competition at the candidate level and on the electoral level. But the other is a united commitment to evidence-based policy-making and problem-solving, and taking on the modern challenges that we're facing. If you were just to rely on the current Congress and party makeup, it seems like in particular on the right, to John's point, they would be happy just to focus on their own personal gain and not really address these modern challenges.

Mindy Finn: Climate change is certainly one of those issues. You also touched on another point that we haven't really discussed here yet today, which is the generational shift and the behavior of different generations. I have in mind the millennial generation and even the generation behind the millennial generation, because I think a lot of people lose sight of the fact that millennials are almost 40 now. But those behind the millennial generation are deeply committed to addressing climate change. And the idea that anyone politically would not make that a priority or look at that as a problem is anathema to their view of the world and how they understand things. A coalition for political renewal will have to speak to the millennial generation and the generation behind them. I think that's, again, another potential crisis or opportunity. They are becoming disenchanted with democracy. Some of them have grown up in a time when they didn't really learn much about democracy and how important it is in America, or around the world, because of the lack of civic education.

Mindy Finn: But more importantly, they're devoted to reality and to solving problems. They are used to being able to do so much at the touch of their fingertips. They don't understand why our government can't do that. And when they wield their political power, combined with some older generations with more experience, on how to move forward these policy issues or policy solutions in a sound way, I think that could be quite powerful.

Brink Lindsey: We have time for one more question. I'm going to give it to someone who has spent his career battling against polarization and the race to the extremes, Bill Galston.

Bill Galston: Yes, you can imagine how efficacious I'm feeling right now. [laughter] Rather than pursuing that rabbit down yet another hole, I'd like to pose a genuine analytical question — I suppose principally to Pete, but perhaps others will be interested. The thesis that our politics is downstream from our culture or the state of our community — that our problems, as you put it, Pete, are sociological rather than political — raises a very interesting question. We're seeing variants of this same divisive, populist explosion throughout the democratic West. Is it your argument that we're seeing that in all these cases the problem is sociological?

Pete Peterson: On this panel and in others, when we have this conversation around communitarianism everybody brings up Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* as a reference. Not many people bring up a research report that Putnam did in 2006 called "E Pluribus Unum," which studied civic trust in 40 American cities. And what he found was rather inconvenient. What he found was that in cities with high levels of ethnic diversity there were low levels of civic trust. The thing that I think was most problematic for Putnam was that in cities with great levels of ethnic diversity — like my home, Los Angeles, or Minneapolis or Oakland — even trust within racial and ethnic groups was lower than elsewhere. And what he proposed, after looking at these 40 American cities, was: "America needs to find a new sense of we-ness." I think that is really the mission of how we understand a communitarianism for the 21st century.

Pete Peterson: To me, that's a sociological question. And to me, the challenges that are facing democracies across the western world are questions around greater levels of ethnic and racial diversity. How are governments and cultures going to be able to find that new sense of we-ness? I think you find it out of an identity that's unique to the United States, and that our story is best prepared to respond to. Because in other (especially European) countries, they've got real blood-and-soil problems. We don't really have blood-and-soil problems here. They can be found and they can be generated and spurred on. But the American story, which is the "E Pluribus Unum" story of America, is one that we have to find a way to respond to. And frankly, as was evidenced in the research, the left does not have a good answer for this either. The identity politics of the left — Mark Lilla wrote a great book on this — is not adequately prepared to respond to how we find our Unum out of our Pluribus. And so to me, it is a sociological problem that's spread across the West, but it's one that America is mostly uniquely prepared to respond to.