

Democracy in Danger S3E1 Red Pill Pt1 – The Terrible War

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is season three of Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] It's really good to be with you again, Will.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:14] Great to see you, Siva. And you know, when we started this podcast a year ago, we were pretty troubled not to say freaked out about the rise of authoritarianism at home and abroad. And look, Joe Biden's presidency has, for many rekindled hope in our democratic institutions. But there is still no shortage of stuff to be worried about.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:34] No doubt. I mean, look at what we've been gripped with over just the past month. I mean, we've had this tumultuous exit of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Americans and people around the world have watched in dismay as the Taliban has reclaimed control over that country after almost 20 years of war. This this forever war, as a lot of commentators have called it.

Newscast interview [00:00:54] The Americans betrayed us. President Ghani betrayed us too. You left us under the cannons and tanks. And we can't stop either side fighting. How much can they kill their brothers? How much can they kill their fellow Afghans? They have to stop fighting.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:08] And Forever War does seem like an apt name. So Brown University has run this program, the Cost of War Project. They've been tallying up the costs of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and elsewhere since 9/11. And they tally both in lives and in dollars and the numbers are staggering. Something like 930,000 people killed, eight trillion dollars spent by the United States on warfare and security all over the world. Millions of people have been displaced, thousands of refugees trying to flee these war torn zones. And we just keep coming back to this question, which is how did we let this happen?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:58] Yeah, how, how and why, right? And, you know, look, there's all these lives and all these dollars and then there's the cost that that you can't tally that don't come up on spreadsheets. You know, the dramatic upheaval in our political culture that was unleashed in the reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001. And, you know, and how the U.S. government and how the U.K. government and how other governments responded, you know, we've assembled this global surveillance state.

Newscast interview [00:02:29] This, to me, has been, especially since 9/11, a classic example of sacrificing liberty for safety and security.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:02:37] We have allowed for, fostered the militarization of domestic policing at a rate just unforeseeable just 10 years earlier than that. You know, we've had this paranoid collapse in faith and reason, we've had the spread of conspiratorial thinking.

Donald Trump [00:03:11] And we were getting ready for a big celebration. We were winning everything...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:03:17] And so that's why we have someone with us today who has knitted all this together and thought deeply about it.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:24] Absolutely. So Spencer Ackerman is a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative journalist and author of the new book *Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump*. We've invited Spencer to help us launch this third season and reflect with us a little bit on the domestic impact of the war that we've been in for so long. Spencer, welcome to *Democracy in Danger*.

Spencer Ackerman [00:03:49] Thank you, Will. Thank you, Siva, for having me.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:51] Spencer, let me just ask you to talk a little bit about your own experiences in covering the Forever Wars. You've been in the field, you've reported from Afghanistan and Iraq. Just give us and our listeners a little flavor of what you saw, what you have reported on, and in particular, you know, how much of this still stays with you? Do you still think about it late at night? What has been the impact of the Forever Wars and covering it on you?

Spencer Ackerman [00:04:14] That's a heavy question. I've seen dogs in packs walking through the streets of Baghdad in March of 2007, at the beginning of the surge and along the roads, either on the roads themselves or pulled to the medians or pulled to the sides of the roads are the burned out husks of cars that have exploded or cars that have burned up. And you see the dogs going from car to car sniffing to eat the corpses that remain on the streets. The only real incident of battlefield heroism that I have seen occur – and I write about this in the book – in eastern Afghanistan in 2008 when a American platoon sergeant stopped the Afghan police from looting the house of a bunch of middle aged to elderly women who would have been entirely defenseless. And stopping this theft meant that this platoon sergeant was functionally setting back his missions. But this person instead saw the war in that moment for what it was: an opportunity for theft, an opportunity for brutality, an opportunity for domination, and refused to be silent and acquiesce in that moment. And that was heroism. And on his next tour in Afghanistan, he was killed in action. So that, those are things that I take with me in the war on terror. I take with me also the look in the eyes of Guantanamo detainees seethed with the understandable contempt and hatred that anyone would feel to their jailer, let alone foreign jailer. And, you know, I've also seen the ways in which people placed in situations of unbelievable stress exhibit the most human of emotions, which is complete faith and solidarity in one another. And that is something that I think the war on terror was unable to kill.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:26] Yeah, but at the macro level, it all seems so futile. You know, we never had a justification to invade Iraq. And yet we have now rendered Iraq with, you know, an unstable, barely democratic government that seems to be in cahoots with Iran more than with the United States. And in Afghanistan, the Taliban were in charge before we invaded. They're in charge again. And yes, Osama bin Laden dead. And al-Qaida is basically scattered and demobilized. But that doesn't mean that similar threats don't still exist. And yet the cost has been so high. I'm really interested in the path of how we moved from being so sure of ourselves 20 years ago to being so shaken in our faith and trust, in our ability to actually execute anything good and grand, right? So you yourself went through a bit of a conversion. You wrote in your book that you had

swallowed that red pill after 9/11. And that, of course, is a reference to the movie The Matrix. And then it took you years before you recognized that you had, in fact, swallowed red pill and might not actually be reality. Can you talk about that conversion process, that awakening process?

Spencer Ackerman [00:07:42] Sure. I'm a native New Yorker. I attended Rutgers University. And so I spent 9/11 afraid every moment that my parents would be killed, that my cousin would be killed, that all of my friends would be killed, that everyone I knew was in danger of dying, and I could do nothing to stop it. And I couldn't even be there with them. And if you were in New York or around New York during that time, you remember National Guard vehicles on the street. You remember cordon's emanating from lower Manhattan. You remember...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:08:24] The smell, the smell.

Spencer Ackerman [00:08:25] The smell. Yes, especially the smell. The smell was – I really struggled to write that part of the book. You know, once you experience that, you kind of can't forget it. And all of that trauma, which also inspired some tremendous acts of solidarity. And I have a very stupid story about this. I did nothing of any significance. They were quickly telling people like, do you have military experience? No. Do you have medical experience? No. Do you have construction experience? No. So, like, I can't.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:08:55] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:08:58] You must be a history major!

Spencer Ackerman [00:08:59] Exactly, they're like take these pallets of water and walk them basically half a mile down to the next collection. I was like I can do that. You know, out of this despair, I was incandescently angry and I was looking for meaning out of all of this. And I have really no excuse for this. I wanted some kind of satisfaction. I wanted vengeance, and I didn't know how to apply it. What was very disturbing to me was how quickly in the name of vengeance for 9/11, the so called national unity that existed was very quickly predatory to New Yorkers who I lived near by. The way that immigration and federal authorities descended upon entire communities with roundups, with indefinite incommunicado detention, all of that. But I was still angry, blind and ahistorical enough not to see that this is the enterprise. This is not what I diagnosed it as, an unfortunate side effect that needs to be confronted and stopped. I didn't see that this was the whole thing, and it took me way too long in my estimation. I was also basically around an environment - shortly after I graduated college, I got a job at the New Republic and this was a time in which particularly all respectable opinion had lined up very quickly around, frankly, a propagandistic explanation of what 9/11 was, what led to it, and how valorous, the enterprise that becomes known as the war on terror was. There was in particular a sense that 9/11 had awakened America from the frivolities of a 1990s era escape from history. And now America was finally ready to put aside its childish behavior and return to the mantle that history had prescribed for it. And like this is real manifest destiny hours.

Will Hitchcock [00:11:06] Yeah, no it was back with a vengeance.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:11:09] It's like a call to masculinity. It's an appeal to a sense of maturity which is basically faked, right, instead of real. And the one thing that was missing was thought.

Spencer Ackerman [00:11:19] And, but in particular, this is the way that in particular, liberal societies love to justify violence, love to justify hegemony, love to justify the global policing, that this is fundamentally an act of liberation.

Siva Vaidyanathan [00:11:34] Right.

Spencer Ackerman [00:11:35] And I had just enough of that old theory to kind of sort of think like, oh, perhaps, maybe in fact, this was. By the time we get to the carnage in Iraq, which my job at the New Republic at that point was to document every day I experienced like a kind of moment of crisis where as I was looking at what the Iraq occupation actually was, not how it portrayed itself, not how magazines like the one I worked for portrayed it. It was unjustifiable. And, you know, I don't mean to imply that I have like this revelation all at once. The way I write in the book is that I didn't really see even after I noticed that I had swallowed the red pill finally and tried to spit it out, that this thing has lingering effects. It filtered the way I saw the world in ways that I hadn't really fully explored and would take me a long time, you know, particularly as a reporter, for me to understand and interpret what was going on and how constant it was with American exceptionalism and how rooted all of this is in American history.

Will Hitchcock [00:12:38] It's fascinating and I think a very honest account of your, the growth and development of all of us as we went from that period of trauma and and bewilderment to figuring out what are the consequences. Let me bring you to the book itself, because *Reign of Terror* is a is a powerful book. You accomplish a lot packing twenty years of politics and history into a short, powerful format. You know, your basic thesis is that the wars on terror, the forever wars, have gutted our democracy and delivered us into the hands of a sociopathic nihilist named Donald Trump. But and that's an, I'm persuaded but by the argument. But I want, in your words, to give us a couple of concrete examples of where you see democratic institutions really buckling under the pressures of this 20 years of of conflict. What are the what are the examples you think are the most salient?

Spencer Ackerman [00:13:29] All right, so real quickly, institutionally speaking, shortly after 9/11, the United States government institutes in a variety of different, for surveillance at a scale unheard of in American history, technologically impossible a generation before in such a way that government acquisition of your records and your effects can't work and does not work in a way that comports with any good faith reading of the Fourth Amendment. And that's done entirely in secret at the very beginning and for years after, only the chief justice of a secret surveillance court knows about it and only the political and intelligence leaders of Congress know about it, the so-called Gang of Eight. And that to the NSA, which had already achieved internal justification by its its cadre of lawyers. Surprise, surprise. They engage in something that transforms the relationship between the citizen and the state. They do it unilaterally, however much they will argue that that was robust judicial and legislative assent. Similarly, we see roundups of not just Muslims, but immigrants in general as immigration comes to be seen not as a mechanism to make more Americans, but a threat to Americans that are already here. The newly created Department of Homeland Security creates a data registry of Muslim non-citizens. Some, I think over 12,000, I believe, of them were deported. That registry, the first Muslim registry that remains, regardless of the controversy that Donald Trump would raise when he proposed such a thing. The Department of Homeland Security did this with ultimately the ascent of the political system because that part was done openly. The judicial authorities overwhelmingly over 20 years describe their role as an oversight to the executive on matters of national security as absolutely minimal. The courts, up to and including the

Supreme Court, typically assent to the hollowing out of all of these traditional understandings of constitutional rights that prevent indefinite detention, that prevent overbroad surveillance. Typically, they agree to these things and at times we'll trim them around the edges but leave the enterprise there. And that's combined with what I would consider a usurpation under Barack Obama of the judicial powers under Article three, where an internal process known as the disposition matrix, with justification from a quasi-judicial panel inside the Department of Justice known as the Office of Legal Counsel, throttles who lives and who dies. They establish the precedent that if the CIA – or I guess in other cases, it would be any law enforcement or intelligence authority – just promises with a pinky swear that it's simply too hard to catch an American citizen who they believe is dangerous. They can be executed with a drone strike. I would submit to you that as long as that architecture is there and that precedent set by a Democratic president, is there, that ain't going to be the last drone strike on American citizens. You know, all of this occurs under an atmosphere and a normalized culture of both conspiratorial thinking and very big lies, big lies told by the government. I'm not just talking about Iraq and WMD and Iraq and the phantom connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, which doesn't exist, which, you know, Donald Rumsfeld called bullet proof at one point. I'm talking more about how the CIA sets out an aggressive campaign of lies to conceal its torture. That involves not just outright lies about the operations of torture, but manipulations of language to form patterns of thought that excuse that behavior. It's not torture. It's enhanced interrogation. They're not assassinating people anonymously. This is targeted killing, things like that. And then the architects of these operations and these propagandistic manipulations of public opinion all in 2015 and 2016 are shocked when Donald Trump starts wielding these big lies. People like Michael Hayden, the former NSA and CIA director, whose lies from a single day of testimony a single day are an entire annex of the Senate torture report published in Twenty Fourteen. This man has the audacity when discussing Trump to talk about how dangerous a position we are in because our faith in truth as a public has been eroded to such a point. This is such a constitutional vandal that the final act of vandalism comes from denying that before Trump was their enemy, he was Trump's necessary precondition.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:30] Right, right. So your book is full of this sort of rules out item after item, and it's really bracing and it's bracing, having lived through it. It's bracing to read it, to remember it and then to have to think about it. And we have to think about it. But it's I mean, it's bracing on its own terms as an American thinking about American government and American democracy and how we are supposed to operate and the goals we put for each other. And, you know, you write in your book, *The Culture of 9/11* echoed the jihadism it sought to destroy. And that's a pretty provocative line. Are you drawing a basic equivalence between US behavior over 20 years and the ideology of an al-Qaeda or an ISIS? I mean, can you dig deeper into that?

Spencer Ackerman [00:19:19] Yeah. What I'm saying is America diagnosis patterns in its enemies that function as a kind of projection. Let's put it this way. How many times do you remember since 9/11 that cabinet members, presidents, people with stars on their shoulders have demanded angrily and for justifiable reason that say Pakistan needs to crack down on the ungoverned spaces in its midst that are being used by psychotic fanatics who are exporting violence and who are demonstrating the most noxious form of psychotic, often religiously justified, violence.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:05] Right, sounds familiar.

Spencer Ackerman [00:20:07] And I start off the book going to essentially a white caliphate in northeastern Oklahoma, where psychotic people train with weapons, inflict gender-based violence on their own, and talk about the legitimacy of killing, you know, however many Americans necessary to redress the mongrelized government that we currently have and restore America to a patriotism of its proper citizens.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:37] And we've seen that in Oklahoma City with the, what was before 9/11, the greatest terrorist attack, most deadly terrorist attack in U.S. history.

Spencer Ackerman [00:20:46] In American history.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:20:46] Yeah, and we've seen it time and time again since 9/11. We saw it here in Charlottesville in 2017. And that's growing, right?

Spencer Ackerman [00:20:55] And what I'm getting at is that one of the crucial things that America does after 1995, after Oklahoma City in 1995 is that it doesn't construct a war on terror against white people. It only constructs the war on terror against nonwhite people. And I think that is a real important point to understand. And we can trace what the war on terror really is by looking at that. And we can accordingly understand how America shelters its own very indigenous forms of terrorism and doesn't understand them to be terrorism. Think about how many times you've heard people like George W. Bush talk about evil doers and bad guys and so forth. The important point about that language is that it redefines badness and evil away from evil being something that you do to evil being something that you are. And that licenses a tremendous amount of violence and repression against this other and prevents a process of introspection from you. And one of the things that America has never allowed itself to do after 9/11, because of all of the currents that animate the war on terror, is ask itself what has been its role in creating conditions that would drive a demand for people to go blow themselves up? Because let's remember and understand in that way a billionaire told them that this kind of appetite for vengeance is religiously sanctioned.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:22:32] Yeah, it's I think one of the things that you're helping us do is, is bring the war home so there's a war out there. But then there's the way in which the war warps our political discourse, our language and indeed our policies. And the one policy area that I wanted you to reflect on a little bit is immigration. So we've done a number of interviews with authors on the history of immigration in the United States, it's a very sordid tale. But the last 20 years have been among the most sordid chapters. How do you articulate the relationship between the war on terror as an external phenomenon and what amounts to a kind of war on immigrants inside the United States during the last 20 years?

Spencer Ackerman [00:23:10] So the hijackers come to the United States legally. There isn't a violation of immigration law that happens. And an enormous chorus on the right acquiesced to by liberals holds this cognitively dissonant thing, which is that on the one hand, terrorists attacked our open society. Let's just stipulate for a second we're not going to argue with that because that's not actually what they attacked. But just for the sake of argument, let's just keep it out there, because that was a popular conception. And then on, you know, simultaneously that our open society is what allowed the terrorists to attack us.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:51] Right.

Spencer Ackerman [00:23:51] And this tension is all the way there throughout the war on terror, particularly urgently in its early days, within a month of the attacks, Bill O'Reilly is on TV talking about how we need to send troops to the border. What the fuck are they going to do against al-Qaeda at the border? And what this tells you is that this isn't a reaction to al-Qaeda. This, this, 9/11 is understood as a far more civilizational threat that allows opportunity for an extent politics of nativist repression to come storming through the gates and use the opportunities provided by 9/11 to transform government functions into an apparatus of immigration persecution. And that's what happens. That's when the roundups begin. And just to say one more thing about this to you, because you asked, like, how exactly did we get from 9/11 to Trump? The architect of all this at the Justice Department at the time is the immigration adviser to Attorney General John Ashcroft, a plucky young up and comer who will hear from more in the future named Kris Kobach.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:01] Yeah, yeah. Well, so let's bring us up to the present, because right now, the president of the United States is the most establishment figure we have ever had, maybe since George H.W. Bush, right? This is a man who has been in every room, in every meeting, has heard every argument from within the narrow cone of establishment foreign policy discussion. That's who we have right now. And there's a certain trustworthiness to that. There is a certain predictability to that. There's a reason that we might sleep better at night because he's not one of the crazies. But how much responsibility should we put on all of those senior smart people who worked for George W. Bush and then worked for Barack Obama, including Joe Biden and now who work for Joe Biden? Where do we go from here? How do we push at this very determined core of mainstream thought?

Spencer Ackerman [00:26:00] There has to be an honest reckoning with the war on terror. There has to be an honest reckoning with who did what. There has to be look, you know, Joe Biden is such an establishment figure and has been around for so long that I have interviewed him. Like this guy would talk to absolutely everybody. You know, we've seen lots of different aspects of of Joe Biden, someone who I think would be the first to acknowledge that his public career is filled with – perhaps he wouldn't use these terms – like really disastrous missteps from the Crime Bill, to the Iraq War, to the Patriot Act. Like, you know, I did a piece in the summer of 2020 when Biden appointed someone named to have Avril Haines as the head of his National Security Transition Committee. And Haines was a very fascinating figure to me because she was, within the Obama administration, the most consistent voice for restricting the drone strikes. So it's significant that she becomes, as she is now, director of national intelligence. At the same time, she is not an opponent of the drone strikes themselves. There are drone strikes she's fine with. So accordingly, she's fine with maintaining the architecture necessary to support drone strikes. And accordingly, that means in a system like the one Obama set up and quite possibly the one that Joe Biden will return to, the architecture of killing vastly more people than Avril Haines thinks ought to be killed is going to be there at times she's going to lose those battles. So it's important to go through people's records in their entirety. Joe Biden is one of the most important Democratic voices that lines up for the Iraq war. Biden acquiesces to this war because he's afraid of the politics after 9/11. And he remembers as well the politics that lined up against him and also against John Kerry when they voted against the 1991 Gulf War.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:05] Right. But I mean, let me just ask you this one question, because we're going to run out of time. Joe Biden has pulled the United States out of Afghanistan. What is the significance of that? Is that a big deal or do you see it as sort of,

you know, one evolution of the forever wars? How, are they going to continue or is this marking an endpoint?

Spencer Ackerman [00:28:23] I think this is the test. The test is that one, yes, it is a big deal that a figure like Joe Biden pulls the U.S. out of Afghanistan. Joe Biden is the one who, whatever brought him to that point, has the wherewithal and the courage to stand up to an atmosphere distinct within elite political circles like the ones that he has traveled in for 50 years that says America cannot accept losing a war. America would prefer the indefinite maintenance of a failed war to the conclusion of an apparatus of death and destruction and immiseration. And he's paying for that. However, this is really the test. Biden, in his public statements, treats the war on terror in the Afghanistan war as synonymous, suggesting that by ending the Afghanistan war, the war on terror is over. It's nowhere near over. The test is whether Biden and his allies in Congress are willing to entertain anything more than restriction of the war on terror in the margins. And the early indications are not promising because Biden, much like Obama did with withdrawing from Iraq and escalating in Afghanistan, is treating the war in Afghanistan as a problem because it was a liability from what he calls the contemporary counterterrorism threat picture. And that means the apparatus of the war on terror isn't getting dismantled, it's getting reoriented.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:55] Spencer Ackerman, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

Spencer Ackerman [00:30:00] Thank you, guys. I really appreciate it.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:11] That was Spencer Ackerman, an investigative journalist. He's written for The New Republic, Wired, The Guardian and The Daily Beast. His new book is Reign of Terror How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:27] Democracy in Danger is part of the democracy group podcast network visit democracy group dot org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends. Siva, Spencer Ackerman brought back a lot of emotional moments in our in our lives over the last 20 years, but I really found one of the things that was most helpful was his reminding us that the Democratic Party all along was a foot soldier in building and approving and funding the war on terror. And I just wanted to bring up to our listeners an image that kind of captures this, which is when John Kerry running for president accepted the Democratic nomination for president and he strode to the podium and this former anti Vietnam War resister, this young man who had thrown his medals, you know, at the Pentagon or at the Congress, he stood up and he saluted and he said, I'm John Kerry and I'm reporting for duty. And it's just a reminder, man, of the Democratic Party, they bought in and they essentially did not want any daylight between themselves and the Republicans on the question of the war on terror.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:32:16] You know, that said, there was strong and vocal opposition within the Democratic Party against specifically the invasion of Iraq, although not the invasion, occupation, and long term presence in Afghanistan, which seemed to have pretty broad support across both parties. Now, you know, still we're stuck with the political culture, a political culture in which in those 18 to 24 months after the attacks of 9/11, 2001, it was impossible to mount a sustained, systemic, reasonable, reasoned, informed argument that perhaps we shouldn't do everything we're capable of doing at this moment, that perhaps there are wiser paths and courses of action. To have that kind of discussion, was pretty much forbidden. I'm going to I'm going to take a moment to read

from a piece that Susan Sontag wrote in just a few days after the attacks on New York and on Washington in 2011. She was one of a number of New Yorker writers and contributors who were asked to weigh in on that moment. "The public is not being asked to bear much of the burden of reality. The unanimously applauded self-congratulatory bromides of a Soviet party Congress seemed contemptible. The unanimity of the sanctimonious reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy." And then later, "let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together." Reading Spencer Ackerman's book, it's pretty clear that we've had a real long run of being stupid together.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:15] No, I hear you. And I think these voices who are critics at the time, and there were many. There were people in the streets who opposed the Iraq war by the hundreds of thousands. They were shunted off as radicals and alarmists and unpatriotic. And boy, have we come full circle to realize that those voices are the ones we should have been heeding. And if there's one thing for me that still stands out as the acme, the epitome of the war on terror and what it did to us, it's the torture program.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:44] Yes.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:44] And yet we haven't really fundamentally done the work of asking ourselves what did that do to us?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:34:51] Yes,.

Will Hitchcock [00:34:51] Ackerman is saying, what it did to us is it opened the door for Donald Trump. And I think he's right about that. And I think the harm is even wider than that to our political culture, our sense of values and our ethics.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:35:02] Right, history is full of Donald Trump's, right? And when we faced our own, we had a barely articulate person who is incapable of single speak, let alone double speak, saying straight up he wants to maximize torture. Saying straight up he wants to stop Muslims from coming to the United States. And we were, as a political culture, unprepared to be appalled, to be fully appalled, to be so appalled that we could muster the political will to stop that early. The Republican Party had no muscle for it. The Republican Party had no filter for it. Because the Republican Party had deeply indulged in the same thought, cased in doublespeak.

Will Hitchcock [00:35:44] What Donald Trump knew in his bones as a as a gifted demagog, was that the American public had lost the ability to care about these things and we'd been hollowed out. Our moral sensibility over this long period of war and conflict had, in a sense, been anesthetized.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:36:01] Yeah. So where are we now? I mean, we're in a situation where we have a mainstream president who seems at the end of his career able to think a little bit more freely, able to think beyond the standard reactions of political calculation. But as Spencer Ackerman points out, there are so many different ways that this American orientation toward the world continues, the drone strikes will continue, the urge to intervene and remodel other nations will continue without deep thought, right?

Will Hitchcock [00:36:35] Look, I agree that there is going to be a lot of continuity. I don't think the forever wars are over. Right. But at the same time, we do have a break in the narrative. The end of the war in Afghanistan is a moment that invites us to reflect on the

harm that we have done to ourselves over the last 20 years. Let's not miss this chance. That's all for this episode, next time, we'll speak with a couple of scholars about a different sort of hard lesson from the Afghan war, the perils of state building.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:21] In the meantime, please remember that we're active on Twitter. Our handle is @dindpodcast, that's DinD podcast. And visit our Web site, DinDanger.org to find notes on all of our episodes and news about what we're working on this season.

Will Hitchcock [00:37:40] And keep helping us save democracy. Subscribe to the show on your favorite podcast app, share it on social media, and leave a review. It's the best way to boost our audience.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:37:50] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with lots of help from Jennifer Ludovici. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Franke, and Elie Bashkow.

Will Hitchcock [00:38:01] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We're distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:38:16] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.