

Three Jons and a Tommy: Pod Save America talks Media, Messaging, and Midterms

EP 207 Final Transcript

Jon Stewart (JS): Oh OK. Should I clap? [CLAP] You tell me when Zach.

[CLAP]

JS: Bam!

[INTRO MUSIC]

### **Interview with Pod Save America Begins**

JS: Hey! Welcome back. Uh, we're at the, this is the podcast. This is "The Problem." My name is Jon Stewart. Uh, we're back on Apple TV+ season two on October 7th. And we're excited today. We are joined by the SNL, uh, film troop, "Please Don't Destroy," [TOMMY LAUGHS] but in the future. This is them 15 years older from the set of a public access porn set. [LAUGHTER] What are we doing here?

Lovett: 15 years? 15 years older? Eat s\*\*\*.

[LAUGHTER]

JS: 20 years older. These are its- the founders of Crooked Media, the hosts of Pod Save America: Jon Favreau, Jon Lovett, Tommy Vietor. Jon and Jon were actually speech writers for Obama. Tommy was, he might have been, the commander of the US forces? No, it was, he was national security spokesperson, but still important. They were in the room where it happens. And, uh, we're gonna talk to them today about fixing America. Here's what I like about you guys. You're doing Pod Save America together, but then you have your solo projects.

Favreau: Mm-hmm. That's right.

JS: Uh, it's what keeps it fresh for you I would assume. [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

Tommy Vietor: Yeah, Lovett's our Beyonce.

Favreau: We still spend too much time together.

JS: Now how did you come together?

Favreau: So Tommy and I met in the Obama Senate office in 2005—

JS: Whoa.

Favreau: -and then uh, I hired Jon Lovett.

Jon Lovett: Yeah.

Favreau: To join the White House speech writing staff because—

Lovett: I really tricked him.

Favreau: -he had worked for Hillary Clinton in the, uh, 2008 campaign. And then after Obama won, uh, hired Lovett. That's how we all met.

Lovett: And you hired me despite the fact that, uh, a person who is still involved in politics at a high level, tried to ding me, tried to keep me from getting the job.

Tommy Vietor: Name names.

Lovett: Tried to queer the deal.

Tommy Vietor: Trying to make some news.

JS: Talk to me.

Lovett: I'm not gonna say.

Favreau: She just said Lovett was a lot, which was correct.

Lovett: I am a lot.

JS: You're talking about Hillary?

Lovett: I am, I'm talking about Hillary Clinton. [LAUGHTER] Hillary Clinton tried to ding me.

JS: Hillary Clinton said, uh, "Jon Lovett is a lot." Uh, I like, uh, the situation here, because right now it looks like Jon Favreau and Tommy Vietor are your chaperones.

Tommy Vietor: Yes.

Favreau: Yes, well that's—

JS: Because you appear to be, uh, listen a kid with maybe some attention issues.

Lovett: Mm-hmm.

JS: And you're sitting in between them on your way to camp.

Favreau: Nailed it.

JS: That's how I'm viewing the set up.

Favreau: Nailed it.

Lovett: Me sitting in between them started out as something I just would write in my diary.  
[TOMMY LAUGHS]

Favreau: God.

JS: You're a lot.

Lovett: I'm a lot. I like to make them uncomfortable.

JS: You and all of us, as a matter of fact. [LOVETT LAUGHS] Let me say this, job well done sir. [LAUGHTER] When you're coming from, this is somewhat interesting to me. In 2008, so you're coming from the Clinton campaign, the Obama campaign has defeated you.

Lovett: Mm-hmm.

JS: How quickly can you turn off the ill feelings? How quickly does that dissipate? And how did it manifest?

Tommy Victor: The bad blood between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama themselves was far less than the bad blood at the staff level. I hated the Clinton campaign more than I ever hated John McCain and Sarah Palin [FAVREAU LAUGHS] in the general election, mostly, because we won handily and the primary was so long.

Lovett: Yeah.

JS: So, what was the cause of the antipathy? Was it purely, "We want this so badly because we believe so much in the agenda we're gonna bring to the American public?" How much of it is sort of "Jets, Giants. We're on this team, you're on that team." And how much of it is, uh, "We're being outsmarted."

Favreau: I mean, I think from the Obama side.

JS: Yeah.

Favreau: I think it was, we very much believed our message that he represented change and she represented politics as usual and what was wrong with Washington. And so we got ourselves probably more spun up than we should have.

JS: Mm-hmm.

Favreau: Than the Clintons are, were sort of an era of politics that the Democratic Party in the country needed to move past.

Lovett: And then the reverse of that is.

JS: Mm-hmm.

Lovett: If we're so bad, why is our policy agenda basically indistinguishable? Like we're basically making the same case.

Favreau: Except for opposing the war in Iraq.

Lovett: Uh, well that was obviously [FAVREAU LAUGHS] something, uh, that left a real mark on people's at the time [FAVREAU LAUGHS] uh, we were, but we were for the healthcare mandate.

Favreau: Right. Yeah. That's true.

Lovett: So how about that? Do you think people remember that?

Tommy Vietor: We were just petty.

JS: Do you guys wanna announce the breakup of your show now? [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

Lovett: Oh, you can't, you can't tear this apart. You can't tear this apart. The things we fight about in private, you have no access to. [LAUGHTER] The real thing. The real s\*\*\*. You're nowhere near it. [FAVREAU LAUGHS] You can't get close to it.

JS: Let me tell you something. That brings up an unbelievably good point, Jon, and obviously you did it, uh, accidentally. [LAUGHTER] I want to bring this up because what I want people to understand is the conversations behind the scenes of political campaigns and in Washington are so profoundly different from the conversations that are had in public and the messaging that goes on in public. And I wanna ask you guys as people who are expert in crafting those messages and also, uh, individuals who are present in those rooms, whereas, uh, Jon just mentioned the s\*\*\* they talk about, you can't even believe. How do we close that gap? And why does that gap exist? Why are politicians so loathe to give public insight into the real conversation that's going on?

Favreau: I mean, one of the reasons we started this podcast is to close that distance and to sort of, kind of have the conversations out loud that people have, uh, on campaigns in private. And just because we don't care what people think of us as much anymore, now that we're outta politics.

JS: Mm-hmm.

Favreau: But I do think the, you ask the reason why people aren't sort of more honest, or just talk how like they do in private. I think the media environment is such that, like, if you, you get taken out of context, you say something that gets, you know, blown up on cable or on Twitter, and then suddenly you lose control of the message, right? A campaign, a political operation is designed to keep control of the message that you're trying to relay to the American people about why you should get elected. And if you lose control of that message, because you said something that got taken out of context, or, you know, caused a big thing on Twitter, then you're down and that's just tough.

Tommy Vietor: One example of this, Jon is like, I think candidates get in trouble when they talk about the electorate and the American people sort of as sociologists or they step back and, you know, talk about politics and in that kind of way, like, uh, when Barack Obama said, sometimes, you know, you have communities that have been hollowed out by NAFTA and trade deals, et cetera. And they cling to their guns and religion dot, dot dot. Right? And he was sort of just, like, stepping back and trying to assess why these communities feel the way they do. Honestly, in a way to try to empathize with them and sort of be in their shoes and understand where certain conservatives were coming from. You know, that's something that followed us around for another eight years.

JS: It seems like though, it'd be very hard and maybe this is campaign discipline, for candidates to create an environment where you couldn't be taken out of context. I mean, the environment of modern media is to launder information, to take things out of context, to weaponize it, but wouldn't it be better and easier for candidates to try not to outsmart something they have no control over?

Lovett: Yeah. I think that's true. And I think a lot of candidates, especially candidates that don't feel comfortable with the message they're driving, they don't trust what their instincts tell them to say or what their actual views are, so they feel like they have to be very, very careful. Their first thought is not, "What do I think?" But, "What should I say? How should I sound right?"

JS: Right.

Lovett: They become boring. They become rote. But at the same time, the other side of that coin is, uh, a lot of what a candidate does is travel around saying the same thing over and over and over again. And I think a lot of times, especially those of us that pay attention really closely, we kind of have like a contradictory demand, which is we want them to be authentic, we want them to be honest.

JS: Mm-hmm.

Lovett: But we want them to do that while repeating themselves over and over and over again. [JS LAUGHS] We're kind of demanding, we're demanding a performance of authenticity from these candidates.

JS: Right.

Lovett: Even as we also understand their job is to say a lot of the same thing to new audiences every single day.

Favreau: I do think you're right though, that the candidates and politicians who are most appealing, who end up being most appealing and inspiring and exciting to people are the ones who just sort of say what's on their mind. It's always a spectrum, right? Like no one—

Tommy Vietor: Look at Trump. He wasn't honest, but he said what was on his mind.

Favreau: Like Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, right? Like there's-

Tommy Vietor: Beto O'Rourke in 2018 especially in the campaign.

Favreau: Beto O'Rourke. But then of course it didn't work for him in 2020, because he was too on his mind. Um but like, yeah so I think it's a spectrum, obviously, but I think, in the midterms right now, Jon Federman, right, is a candidate who a lot of voters find appealing and the reason they find him appealing, and I was talking to some voters in Pittsburgh about this, they're like, "Look, he makes mistakes. He's weird sometimes, but I trust him. I don't know why I just trust him because he's just saying what he believes. And I like that." And I was like, "Yeah, more politicians should do that."

Lovett: Politically, probably a mistake to have a stroke.

JS: Jon's a lot. Jon Lovett is a lot.

Lovett: You know what?

Favreau: Pluck that one for social.

[LAUGHTER]

JS: Yes. I'll give you guys an example, at the end of every "Daily Show" season, right? We would invite all the press people. Those who ran the press offices of Congress people, whether they be reps or senators, to come and sit and have a conversation with myself and our booker. And the conversation was always on their end, "How can my boss, Congressman, Congresswoman, Senator have a successful Daily Show appearance?" Because they all look to media appearances as kind of a gold standard of setting a message and maybe creating a little hype. And I would say, "OK, so here's what I would do. Uh, they could come on the show and say what they think. And then what I'll do is I'll say what I think [FAVREAU LAUGHS] about what they said. And then we'll kind of go from there." And the press people would all sit back and go, "So, so the strategy is authenticity?" And I'd go, "No, it's not a strategy. It's leadership and what you believe. Say what you believe." And so often we'd have people on the show who would write books like "Liberals skull f\*\*\* nuns." [TOMMY LAUGHS] And then they would come on.

Favreau: I read that.

JS: And I would say, you know, "I read your book and here you say, 'Liberals skull f\*\*\* nuns.'" And they would go, "We're not that far apart [FAVREAU LAUGHS] as a nation." And you were part of that sort of consultant media, industrial complex. Has that so overtaken, uh, the way that people get elected, that we've kind of ignored governance.

Favreau: It certainly has overtaken everything else in the context of a campaign, I think when governing, uh, at least—

JS: But does the campaign ever end I guess is my point and—

Favreau: No. [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

JS: -so within that—

Favreau: No, the campaign never ends.

JS: That's my- that's kind of my—

Favreau: I mean when we look, when we were in the White House with Obama, at least, he was a president who tried to make sure that he was governing, doing the right things, making the right decisions. That's not to say that political considerations never entered his mind. Of course they did. He ran for re-election. You know, politics is always there. But I think when he faced a conundrum of like, "Should I do the political thing or should I just sit here and govern." Like when the Affordable Care Act almost failed, uh, and his advisors were like, "You should not try to pass it. You should pull the bill because otherwise you're not gonna get re-elected." And he's like, "I don't care if I get re-elected. I came here to do hard things. I'm gonna pass the Affordable Care Act. If I'm unpopular because of it, so be it." Right? So I think like that was a- but look, the press also covers politics only through the political lens and not through—

JS: Right.

Favreau: -the governing lens at all at this point, which is tough.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah. I mean, look, there are gonna be some politicians who are authentically boring and the process of governing can be authentically boring at times. Right? So it's hard to make it exciting and get it covered. But I do think it is a problem that we live in a political dynamic, and it's not just the United States, it's everywhere. Where, um, you know, the price of entry is potentially getting destroyed. Having your entire background looked into and just, you know—

JS: Right.

Tommy Vietor: -having your family turned upside down. I mean look at the Prime Minister of Finland, Sanna Marin, this young woman.

JS: Right.

Tommy Vietor: She's like 35. She was dancing with her friends and having a couple drinks, like doing nothing wrong, not doing drugs, not doing anything and the press destroyed her.

JS: Now let me push back on that. An expression of joy from a Scandinavian country?  
[LAUGHTER] No, no, no my friend.

Tommy Vietor: Question that.

JS: Not during übernacht.

[LAUGHTER]

JS: No.

[LAUGHTER]

JS: There will be no Scandinavian joy.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

JS: That is a rule we all must follow.

Tommy Vietor: I mean but you hear about people who run office who spend their, like, who in college are like, “Can you please take down that photo of me on Facebook?” And s\*\*\* like that because it's sort of seen as the only way to survive the process.

Favreau: Yeah. And if that's the system, then those are the boring politicians we're gonna get from that system. The people who are like so careful throughout their whole lives that—  
[FAVREAU LAUGHS]

Tommy Vietor: Or Trump.

Favreau: - they're not worried about what might happen to them.

JS: So Tommy though brings up a good point, because he said, “Or Trump.” Now that guy hasn't scrubbed his social media like he'd have to do it every 11 minutes. You know, he's a guy who goes out there and says, I mean, he's an antibiotic resistant candidate and maybe that's what you need. I mean he had sex with an adult movie star while his wife was pregnant, paid her \$130,000 dollars as hush money. And still married. And his lawyer is the one who ends up going to jail, you know. Is there— Chappelle used to have a very funny bit where he'd be like, “Democrats, man. It's like Republicans can do whatever they want. Democrats can't even sniff hair.”

[LAUGHTER]

JS: Like, is there, are Democrats in some respects, policing their own in a manner that's presumptive, like, look at what happened to Al Franken. You know, you have a situation where in the midst of this movement, Al Franken has to be removed from the Senate for something that there's people in the Senate right now that have done far worse, that's known about. And there are no repercussions from voters or anyone else.

Lovett: I think you can sort of step back from, I think the pattern there is a bigger one and it's we talk about it so much. It's hard to always go back to it as the answer, but we have two different media environments. One of the questions we get all the time from people it's like, "Why are Republicans so good at messaging? And why are Democrats so good at messaging? Why do Democrats come after their own and Republicans don't? How do Democrats get tagged with, defund the police and Republicans don't? How can Trump do all these different things? And, these Democrats can't get away with anything."

JS: Mm-hmm.

Lovett: And you step back and it's like, it's not because Republicans are brilliant. It's not because they have better. They're so sophisticated about messaging compared to us. They have a giant propaganda apparatus that A. Covers Democrats in a way that pulls up the things that are the most divisive that are the worst for Democrats politically. And B. Inoculates Republicans against some of their worst excesses. Look, you have Lindsay Graham going out there proposing a national abortion ban. Incredibly politically stupid. Even Mitch McConnell, trying to get out of talking about it. Doesn't get the hype on Fox News that you would expect for something that would be really popular with their base. Why? They recognize that it's not advantageous for them. So not only do they tar Democrats over and over again, in a way that spills over into the mainstream political punditry, they also kind of provide a big bubble for their right wing crowd. That's much more insulated from the stories that would hurt their own side or make them skeptical of the right.

Favreau: But I would go one step further here because I think Donald Trump's superpower is shamelessness. Like he doesn't feel shame and I think that's now what the whole Republican party has realized as well. Is that like, if you can't publicly shame them, then you can't hurt them. And they, and also they've sort of let go of all their principles as well. So like Democrats have all these principles that they're trying to uphold. And so then when they fall short of those principles, then people call them out for hypocrisy or say that you have to step down or whatever. Right? Republicans don't have those in the first place. They just did away with them so therefore like you can't, if you call them out for something they're like, "Yeah, well I don't care. I'm not gonna be shamed. I do have this propaganda apparatus that's gonna protect me. But also you can say whatever you want about me and it's fine. It's not gonna bug me. I'm not gonna step down. I'm not gonna apologize."

Lovett: Once the political consequences fell away in part, because of the machine that they've built the next bit, the next guardrail was supposed to be shame.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

Lovett: And they realized that they could blow right through that one too.

JS: But shame has always been an artifice in politics. Everybody always points to the moment when, uh, in McCarthy hearings, the under secretary of defense said, “At last sir, have you no decency? No shame?” And everybody's like, “A watershed moment.” As though like, McCarthy just disappeared into a cloud at that moment and floated away on the vapors of shame. You know, we've always been a country that overestimates the power of the conscience and mythologized it. And it's not real. And don't the Republicans win because they understand what currency their base operates under. They all operate on the same monetary standard. Whereas Democrats are a, by necessity, stitch together coalition of a variety of interests. And that's always gonna be harder to clearly message and wrangle. It's not like the Democrats don't have any press. I mean, how many times can you hear the words, “The big lie,” before you just want to like, tear your hair out?

[LAUGHTER]

JS: It's not like they're helpless. A. The Republicans, their media works towards a goal. Here's a great example. Sean Hannity, was talking about Jen Psaki her, uh ascendants to, and I don't know even know what network she's working on now. CNN or MSNBC.

Favreau: MSNBC. Yeah.

JS: This is evidence of the incredible incestuous relationship between Democrats and the media machine. Sean Hannity was with Donald Trump talking strategy. He's in all the text messages. Like they have created a set of rules that everyone else feels they have to abide that they know that their own audience won't hold them to. I remember I visited Obama's White House twice in eight years. He called me down to yell at me twice.

Tommy Vietor: What'd you do?

JS: We'll get into that later.

Tommy Vietor: OK, good.

JS: Uh, but it was on the log line. The right wing media went crazy, attacking it as, uh, secret meetings showing the incestuous relationship between the left wing media and left wing policy. But what the right has done is they've built parallel institutions. What they've said is, “The college system doesn't work for our politics. The think tank system doesn't work for our politics and the media system doesn't work for our politics. So we are going to build identical parallel institutes that purely feed a very specific goal.” The left has just a hodgepodge of all of those things, but they are not all pulling in the same direction or rowing in the same direction.

Favreau: No, you're right because just to use the Jen example. When Jen, uh, when word leaked that Jen was leaving the White House for NBC, the freak out among journalists and liberals online too. Were like, “Oh she shouldn't— is this bad? Should she do this? This isn't right.” Blah, blah, blah. Like that never happens on the right. [FAVREAU LAUGHS] That s\*\*\* never

happens because you're right. They've made up their own rules in their own institutions and we don't— you're right. We don't have that on the left.

Lovett: Yeah. The right has behaved for 40 years, like a government in exile. That they're exiled from these institutions, so they build their own. They're exiled from the media, so they build their own. They're exiled from the court system, so they built their own. That made them hungry. That made them unified. And now all of a sudden they're not really an exile, are they? They have a huge influence over what we talk about in the media. They control the courts. They won the White House. This sort of right wing, you know, uh, semi-fascistic movement has all this power. And they're kind of like the dog that caught the car a little bit, right? Because they still want to behave like they— their whole movement is built on grievance. About losing. About not having power. About the way they're being manipulated. About the way they're being mistreated. And they've kind of kept that up even as they're kind of gained more and more of a foothold in all these different, uh, uh, areas of life.

JS: So when people talk about the left, I never see it as unified and I never see it as equivalent to what the right has. Like when the right will say, “NPR. The left wing.” And if you listen to NPR, it's steeped in maybe a liberal ethos, but it doesn't seem particularly activist. If you turn on AM radio, it is disciplined, relentless and brutal. In a very different way.

Tommy Vietor: I think that's exactly right. I mean, look, this has been a concerted strategy since really, I think Nixon where I'm sure at an earlier point in time—

JS: Mm-hmm

Tommy Vietor: - the liberal was pretty overwhelmingly liberal as a bunch of men from Harvard and Yale covering the White House and sort of leading all these institutions. And they probably had a beef at one point. I think that beef went out the window a long time ago, but, um, they have trained many generations of journalists to be scared of one thing above all else, which is to be called liberal. And so it's very easy to get in their heads, even the best ones by accusing the mainstream media of liberal bias. But I totally agree with you. The New York Times editorial page is incredibly liberal. The New York Times reporters who I've worked with are all over the map politically and will kick the s\*\*\* out of everyone. And I just find it fundamentally a wrong—an inaccurate comparison. That said, like, if you look at the institutions on the right, whether it's Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, Breitbart, all these other sort of modern media entities that have been created by billionaires who fund them to be political weapons in service of their tax cuts usually.

JS: That's right and it's a far different position. And you see it now as certain things then get defined as liberal, certain things get defined as conservative. Ukraine is liberal. Russia is conservative. And you're like, “I don't understand how any of this gets, uh, defined in that manner.”

Lovett: Look, if you're trying to have balance and the way you're gonna have balance is you're gonna have one person all the way on one side of the seesaw. Just one. One Rush Limbaugh, may he rest in peace, all the way over to one side, and then you have four people sitting about a foot to the right, right?

JS: Right.

Lovett: They'll balance out, but there's no one representing the progressive point of view. That's there's no one actually advocating from the left.

Favreau: Yeah.

JS: That's exactly right. And we're such a, if you look at the generally the most industrialized world, we govern in an incredibly right wing manner. We don't have, uh, the types of healthcare or educational systems that they would tar as socialism, but you would just view as a democracy with a robust social safety net. It's not the state owning industry. It's just making sure that, uh, people have healthcare childcare and education. But if you are to propose that in this country, "You're The Squad."

Tommy Vietor: Right

JS: "You're to the left of Bernie Sanders. You're a mad man." Look what happened when they tried to forgive \$10,000 worth of student loans. I mean, people were just like, "OK, Hugo Chavez." Like when you look at conservatives, in other countries, in this country, they'd be considered like gay, Nader supporters. [LAUGHTER] And the media's fecklessness in being able to fight back on, it stands out to me.

Favreau: Yeah well they're, they're also just part of an industry right now that is having some, uh, you know, business model challenges. And they're trying to get an audience and they -

JS: Are you- are you referring to anyone in particular? [LAUGHTER]

Favreau: - and they think that to get a broad audience, you need to present yourself as fair and balanced and all, you know, and it's just -

JS: But, what is that? Why doesn't anybody do news about governance? Why is all the news based in this idea that there's a right and a left and not a corruption or integrity or a clarity and a noise? Why are they using the polarities that are defined politically and not the polarities that are defined in efficacy?

Tommy Vietor: I mean, I think, look, when I worked in the White House press office for four years, I mean there were really brilliant journalists who would cover whatever wonky policy thing we were doing that day in great depth. And I think did amazing coverage that was substantive and thoughtful. Right? I think what happens though, is the s\*\*\* that we get on cable news and the stuff that we're all addicted to, because we're political junkies, is more the

campaign trail, horse racey politico-ization of the media. Whereas, you know, the education reporter that's been on the beat for 30 years, that's digging into, you know, whatever initiative that department of education is doing is probably just not getting booked on daytime cable.

Favreau: Yeah. It is an audience issue in that our brains have been broken by the internet as well. First they were broken by cable, then they were broken by the internet. And so they -

JS: But, why are journalistic professionals just allowing the audience to dictate, like polling is a part of that, that drives me f\*\*\*ing crazy.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

JS: Here was a great one that I saw, it was the Afghanistan pullout, you know, "Chaos with Afghanistan Pull Out and How it Will Affect the Midterms." And you're like, "There's guys jumping off of f\*\*\*ing wheel wells on a, C-1 as it's flying out of Kabul. And you're wondering about what it's gonna do to a gerrymander district in Illinois." Like, are you that insane and that removed from humanity and have we lost our minds?

Lovett: Yeah, you have to go like, even one step further from starting from sort of left versus right. It's more, uh, who are we and who are we speaking to? Right. Who are we? We're observers of this system but who are we talking to? And I think, in part, because I think a lot of the like core audience, whatever the medium for political journalism are, are junkies, people who keep up with a lot of it. And in part, because I think it's just, over decades, it's become a kind of way of speaking a language of political coverage, which is, it's experts describing things to observers who aren't necessarily voters or participants, but are experts in all knowledgeable themselves.

JS: Mm-hmm.

Lovett: And so rather than telling people what's going on in the world to inform a person watching or reading or listening as if what they're trying to do is inform a potential voter who may not have all the information. It is presumed that the person they're speaking to already has perfect information and actually just needs to know what the dummies are gonna think like the, like "I'm sitting at home, I know everything. I have my binoculars, I'm watching the American political system like it's a cheetah, on the prairie. And I just need to know what the animals out there, the people that aren't in the know are gonna do."

JS: Right.

Lovett: And I think when it treats people like that, like kind of observers as opposed to participants that, that feeds on itself. Because then the viewers view themselves as observers and not participants. They start to be as cynical as what they're watching and then wanting that back and it becomes a kind of feedback loop.

JS: Right.

Lovett: And I think we're kind of dealing with that because I think one reason these networks or these, this is what rates, this is what people want. They want polling. They want somebody at the board telling 'em how it's gonna play. They don't want the hard stuff, the policy stuff, right? Like there's an audience demand issue.

JS: Isn't-isn't though the question that they view it as, and I've heard people talk about this. "One is dessert and one is spinach and nobody wants spinach." You're like, it's not that it's f\*\*\*ing spinach. It's that one matters. And one doesn't. Here's what struck me and I'll use this as an example and maybe you guys can help me break it down. We just had a fight for what was called the PACT Act, which was a burn pit legislation for veterans, right?

Favreau: Mhmm mhmm.

JS: So I was fortunate enough to have been so steeped in the knowledge of how that bill got made, how it got changed, how it got pushed and how it got passed. That when I had to go on a media blitz, when we were about to lose it, I got to experience firsthand the disconnect between the media machine and its mechanics. And the reality of what something was on the ground. And it was stunningly disassociated, not very interested. It didn't view where the information that it was getting was coming from. It didn't view what people's points of view were. It didn't push back. It was passive, boilerplate and oftentimes wrong. And surprisingly, it was like an information laundering machine. Yahoo News, UK would print something that was wrong. And then everyone else that wrote an article about it would just use that piece of information uncited. So, uh, falsehood became cannon in the span of like a four hour cycle.

Tommy Vietor: Mm-hmm

JS: And how do we get the media to recognize its own blindness?

Tommy Vietor: Yeah, I think part of it is we are talking about the media as if it's like one institution and not this incredibly splintered. There's like a million different sources now, and now there's the internet. And now there's just people tweeting about s\*\*\*. But like, look, we covered that fight that you were involved in and to get to your level of knowledge, it was so difficult to sort through it all because everyone who covered that, all they wanted to do was just say, "OK, well here's Pat Toomey's explanation and here's Jon Stewart's explanation." And it didn't matter that Pat Toomey was f\*\*\*ing lying. [FAVREAU LAUGHS] Like some of them might have fact checked it, but they still felt the need to present. "OK. Here's an issue. And the most important thing that I need to do with this issue is to present both sides in both arguments. I might even fact check one argument, but I at least have to present the wrong argument. Even if, I know that it's incorrect because that's the other side of the debate." And I'm here to present the political debate and not talk about the issue.

JS: But this one was, you couldn't have something that was more objectively clear.

Tommy Vietor: I know.

JS: You had the two bills that you could hold up next to each other and do it. But I have to say nobody did it. And I would say on there, "Don't take my liberal piece of s\*\*\* word for it. Look on the two websites. Check it for yourselves." And none of them did it and I thought that was stunning.

Tommy Vietor: It also listen, this is an instructive example, I think because there was a very clear cut and dry moral element to what you were talking about. We sent these guys to war. We put them in a situation where they inhaled fumes that will kill them. We should pay for their f\*\*\*ing healthcare and benefits. Like any human being can see that moral element and can see the right and wrong there. But we've created a journalistic construct where you're kind of not allowed to opine on that and weigh in on that. You end up having to do what Jon said earlier, which is lead with whatever Ted Cruz said at the airport, because that's the freshest piece of sound on the topic. And I think stepping back, like every journalist I knew and worked with, they are good people who wake up in the morning and they're like, you know, trying to do their job as best they can that day, but they all get sometimes trapped in a system that is just idiotic.

Favreau: Um, well it's because of what you said earlier, it's if you're involved and the Democrats are involved now and so if you're a journalist and you're reporting on the story and you, uh, you know, point out that Pat Toomey is lying and just completely making it up, then, you know, you're in bed with Jon Stewart and the Democrats. So you're, uh-

Lovett: Right.

Favreau: -maybe you're not as, you know, maybe you're not a fair reporter, maybe you're too liberal.

Tommy Vietor: Think about the campaign when Mitt Romney was debating Barack Obama and Mitt Romney said, uh, "You did not call Benghazi an act of terror on that day," and Candy Crowley, the moderator of the debate said, "Actually, governor you're wrong, he did." That was seen as—

Favreau: That was the end.

Tommy Vietor: That was like the end of her career. She was treated like she had broken like every rule that exists in DC, every unwritten rule.

JS: But that's a failure of, so isn't the lesson of Roger Ailes and Fox News that if you are, you know, as you guys said trapped in a system, you're a good person with good, uh, moral compass, trying to do good journalism. If you are trapped in a system that is corrupting that instinct, isn't the lesson, not to allow yourself to be subservient to that, but to fix it. But to take it, I mean,

Roger Ailes basically said, "I'm gonna create something so that whatever happened to Richard Nixon can never happen again." And he built that. And aren't we suffering because there's a lack of courage, not from journalists, but from, uh, the higher up at these news networks to create something that can, you know, misinformation must be battled, relentlessly, and, you know, it's like, I keep seeing with the big lie, everybody keeps saying, "Trump and his big lie," but what I haven't seen is a real dissection, a relentless one of what the lie even is. What is he lying about?

Lovett: Yeah

JS: Like they'll just say, "It's a lie." As he says, "The falsely stolen." OK. But what is he talking about? And if you listen to that phone call that he had with Raffensperger. Raffensperger does a better job debunking the lies of this election than I've seen from almost any media outlet.

Lovett: I think one of the cha, I think, there's a couple challenges in there.

JS: Yeah.

Lovett: One of them is, if- even if you have a mainstream political press that is doing a better job of debunking, what's coming out of the right. You're still following.

JS: Not just, not just out of the right.

Lovett: Of course.

JS: I just want to make that clear.

Lovett: Yeah. Or wherever they may come from.

JS: That's right.

Lovett: Even if you have that, it doesn't change the underlying problem, which is you have this right wing megaphone with its satellite institutions that's kind of shaping the political debate in inoculating Republican candidates and you don't have the equivalent on the left. I would say when I'm, it's to me less about what do we do as viewers or watchers or listeners or readers to kind of put pressure on the mainstream institutions because I think the working the refs, I'm glad people are doing it. They're going into the Twitter minds every day and tweeting at journalists that they don't like the headlines. Keep doing it. [JON LAUGHS] I don't hate it. You know, you get put on your hard hat, punch in tweet at Maggie Haberman, whatever you f\*\*\*ing want. I don't care. Great. Have a good time. We need to stop waiting for them to be the solution. They're never gonna be the answer right. There needs to be—

Favreau: We used to be those people.

Lovett: Yeah.

Favreau: We were online, we're still those people.

Lovett: This morning, I'll tweet the AP about them calling them election skeptics.

Favreau: But I've just given up now because I'm like, they are not, they are not gonna do the job we want them to do. And you're right. Yes. It should come from the top and we are suffering because of it, and it's not coming from the top, but the people at the top of these organizations are trying to build an audience and trying to maintain a profitable business. And they're not seeing this as a public good, even though, even if they're telling themselves they see as a public good.

JS: Isn't there an opportunity to have both?

Favreau: Yeah. I think so.

JS: First of all, news, should—I do think there's a sense of public good that has to come from it. But second of all, don't you think there is financial opportunity? The one thing that I saw in that sort of five to six day period between when our bill got shot down. And when it got back up again, was that there is a battle plan that you can employ against misinformation that is relentless, effective, and surprising to those that are purveying, that misinformation you can defeat it, but it is, it's a tall task.

Lovett: I do think there's gonna be learned there too, because yes. You know, there are ways in which things are misreported. Yes. There are ways in which, uh, misleading answers are elevated just to show both sides. But the story of what happened with the burn pits bill is the story of despite all those headwinds, despite all those issues, Republicans felt the pressure.

JS: Correct.

Lovett: They knew they had f\*\*\*ed up.

JS: Correct.

Lovett: And they still felt like there are ways in which our system is completely broken. Right? But there are moments where you see, “Wait, hold on a second. Ordinary politics still works.” Right? That was, as, that was just politics, right? There was an issue. They realized they were on the losing side. They couldn't talk their way out of it. They had to reverse course and the right side won and a good bill passed. Right? That happened despite all of the concerns you have with how the press reporting on the story.

Favreau: But I also think that fortunately, the veterans had a spokesperson in you who like you, you showed plenty of outrage during that period, but you're funny. You also employed mockery. You like made fun of the Republicans like that kind of s\*\*\* breaks through as well. And I don't think our side does that nearly enough.

Lovett: We said we weren't gonna suck up to him.

Favreau: Well, I'm saying like, I'll go back to us. We try to not take ourselves too seriously here, because I think if you do you wanna get an audience, right? And one way to get an audience is to entertain them.

JS: Right.

Favreau: The news now is entertaining them in a very bad, destructive sort of way, but I think you can be less self serious, funny, bring people in with more entertainment. And I do think that's a strategy that we don't employ enough on the left, I think.

JS: Right. But I think Tommy brought something up that I thought was really interesting. What he said was, you know, that was, "That bill was a moral good," but there are so many moral goods. You know, one of the reasons that I get involved with some of these things is it feels like the lowest rung on the ladder that healthcare should be for. No one should go bankrupt when they get cancer, everybody's working too f\*\*\*ing hard in this country. To have something that they have no control over derailed, not just their dreams, but their family's dreams and maybe generations of their family's dreams. It's all a moral good. But what we don't see enough from the media in my mind is that sense of mission, that sense of that editorial authority, that Upton Sinclair muckrake the f\*\*\* out of this, that old Ida B Wells, like that idea that we exist to break the system, including ours. Our media industrial complex to create a better system that, that more serves. And as we watch this midterms thing, like, I don't know about you guys, but you must be going, you must be pulling your hair out at the nonsense that's just pervasive in the coverage of these polls and these candidates and what it means. And let's bring on our cadre of pundits to spout the boiler plate thing. And let's just rinse and repeat this entire cycle. And if we don't break out of that, like, like even the idea of, you know, I was watching, somebody said, uh, "The public polling says this, but the internal polling..." Like the idea, even that a campaign has information, like we poll it and it's internal, but we don't share that. And the public poll you're like, how the f\*\*\* does, it's just a methodology? How do you have an internal one? And then one that's shared with the public? How, what does that even mean?

Tommy Vietor: I mean, the internal one is just kind of like something you're spending a lot of money on to help guide strategy decisions. And that can be, you know, big picture. Like, "Should we be in favor of this issue?" Yes or no, but it can also be like, "Are we doing well in the downstate Illinois Peoria media market? No. OK. Let's increase our ad by there." I mean, look to your broader point. Like, I don't wanna bum anyone out here [JON LAUGHS] but I think the three of us, you, we're f\*\*\*ing space aliens in this country. Right? We are four people who are obsessed with politics. We read the news constantly. We're on Twitter, right? Like we are not representative of the vast majority of voters in this country. Those voters don't have an opinion on Jake Tapper criticizing MSNBC lawyers or whatever stupid issue was like getting thought about that day. They're like maybe see something on Facebook or they maybe see something on TikTok and Instagram. And I think to the— there's some great journalists doing great work, but I do think that all these business models and structures are kind of getting broken apart on their

own because people are getting information on their phones. It's all getting to you a different way. And I think—

JS: Mm-hmm

Tommy Vietor: -that's the thing we're actually a little bit excited about. Is the opportunity to fundamentally rethink like, “OK, how do you reach this younger, progressive audience that feels like the mainstream media is letting them down fairly or unfairly.” Right. That could be because Trump demagogue them for years. And the Republican party did for a long time.

JS: Mm-hmm

Tommy Vietor: And because of high profile mistakes, I mean the Iraq war was a bit of an oopsie daisy, right. That I think everyone is recovering for.

JS: Mm-hmm

Tommy Vietor: But, um, you know, that's the thing we're thinking about. It's like, OK, how do we reach people where we, where they are with information they actually want in a way that's digestible, that gets in the things they kind of, they need to know that isn't just horse race bulls\*\*\*. Do we nail that every day? Absolutely not, but that's the goal.

JS: Right and that sounds like, you know, the people who are obsessed with this should be the ones who develop that. And maybe the only question I would ask you is, what would you think of removing out of that what they want or what you think would appeal to certain demographics? Because that always puts me in the head of, I remember and maybe it was 20/20. They were like, “20/20 is doing 20/20 downtown and 20/20 downtown was gonna relate to the young people.” And it was basically just John Quiñones rather than being in the studio, like stood outside in a leather jacket as though it was like that one debate on CNN I saw with all the democratic candidates when they all wore turtlenecks. Where everybody's like “The young MTV people wanna see the turtlenecks!”

Lovett: 20/20 for me is Barbara Walters and Hugh Downs on Friday nights when I was in high school, because I had exactly zero friends that weren't Barbara Walters and Hugh Downs.

[LAUGHTER]

Favreau: Yeah.

JS: Nerd! Nerd!

Lovett: God. Now I just feel terrible.

JS: Don't feel terrible

Favreau: But I think the question is, how do you reach different audiences, different demographics? Where are they getting their news and information from currently? But then the content that you deliver just has to be you, right? Like you can't be like trying to shape it based on what you think they want. You just have to figure out where they are and how they're receiving their information on news, which is, you know, a lot of dif- many different places now.

Tommy Vietor: I get a note from my in-laws once a month being like, "Why do you say f\*\*\* so much on the podcast? Our friends listen to that. We find that embarrassing." And they're right. It is embarrassing. I'm a 42 year old man I shouldn't say f\*\*\*,

JS: Tommy, can I ask you a question? How do they pass you that note is that like when, when they see you, do they just tuck a little something into the shirt pocket?

Tommy Vietor: It's a letter in the mail I'm half joking. They've done like three times,

JS: "Dearest Tommy,"

Tommy Vietor: "Please stop saying the F word." Uh, her, my wife's grandmother listened, but I mean, we try to create a look. We were talking about the early aughts, uh, today and how, like the only things we had to look forward to were "The Daily Show," and Dave Chappelle, because everything else was pretty bleak in the world. And I think what made that show work was you were funny and you were yourself. And so we tried to create a show where it is not stilted talking points, news caster language, and accents, right? It's like people talking as they would talk. We try to, to the greatest extent possible, completely shrink the space, uh, between how we talk about politics when we're just hanging out and how we do it in front of a microphone. And like that I think is what we think is the path forward is not fake balance. It's overt bias. Yeah.

JS: How—, because everything is biased because that's the whole point of. Anytime you say, "Our top story tonight," you're displaying bias, however, you want to portray it.

Tommy Vietor: Absolutely.

JS: But how do you maintain, you know, there were a lot of times on "The Daily Show," where I felt like, "OK, it's Wednesday. And I don't really care that deeply about anything today, but I still have to fill this time and I probably should do it in a similarly, uh, energetic manner as to convince people that I care about this show as much as I cared about yesterday's show." And that discrepancy wore on me to some extent, because you felt at some point, I don't wanna manufacture outrage because then I'm selling them a falsehood and you wanna have people feel the reality of your emotions. And have you guys been able to maintain that, or is there difficulty sometimes that you feel like, "Boy, we're just, I understand today, we're gonna do a politics-like material that we're putting out that doesn't have the same fire." How do you, uh, in some ways temper that?

Favreau: I think that, um, like I'm a liberal, so I believe deeply in all the issues that we talk about and I'm outraged just as much as anyone else, but I don't think, look, this is going to be a very, very long fight to save democracy here. 2016 didn't end it. 2020, 2018 didn't end it. And I think that you can't sustain a movement based on moral outrage and righteous anger alone. Like there has to be some joy and some fun and some entertainment. You have to not take it seriously. So sometimes when there are big, important issues or, you know, devastating news or politics is driving us crazy. Like, we'll talk about why it's what's right and what's wrong and what we believe. But then we'll joke around a bunch because you just can't, you can't live like that all the time and you can't keep it- you can't take everything to an 11 all the time.

JS: Look what it did to me. [LAUGHTER] Look what it did to me. Look at you guys. You're- we're the same age. Look at me! [LAUGHTER] This is terrible.

Lovett: I think you look great. I think you've shat on yourself a couple times and I gotta tell you something. If you're not gonna fight for you, who's gonna fight for you. Alright.

JS: Jon, let me tell you something. I'm friends with Barbara Walters and Hugh Downs.

Favreau: Whoa.

Lovett: Wow.

JS: And they do nothing but speak highly of you.

Favreau: That's cool.

Lovett: That's nice. That's nice. We kind of lost touch since one or both of them died.

[LAUGHTER]

JS: I'm still in touch. They send me a note at that and they tell me the same thing. "Stop saying, f\*\*\*." It's the same thing that they're saying to Tommy there. How did democracy end up being a liberal ideal and not a part of the fight? You know, we live in a country where the conservatives for the longest time were, as you remember either fighting communism or spreading democracy, and now they take great pains in trying to explain A. we're actually not a democracy and B. that the election we just had, wasn't real. So how did we find ourselves in that moment?

Lovett: I do think, you know, we talked about everything the press does in some way, biased, you come to a story. How you think about it, what you think is important as a bias.

JS: Right.

Lovett: I do think this idea of refs has been a really important kind of internal notion as to how people think about what they're talking about with politics, that they're refereeing a game between Republicans and Democrats, but then something happened, which is, look, there's

always been cheating in this game, right? There's only people that break the rules, protect, you know, push a little too hard. Maybe part of the game is being as honest, but some people are dishonest, whatever the rules are. There's always people that bending the rules.

JS: Right.

Lovett: But more and more, the Republicans on the field have been breaking the rules and they discovered that they could get away with it, that there wasn't any shame. And there actually weren't a lot of political consequences because of the way they were running their team. Like when bell check was cheating, right.

Tommy Vietor: Shut the f\*\*\* up.

JS: That's not, that's not

Lovett: It's the same joke. I know one sports thing. I know one sports thing.

JS: I throw unnecessary roughness!

Lovett: But the point I'm making, the point I'm making is—

Tommy Vietor: You lost to Miami.

Lovett: The point I'm making is at some point a referee, uh, roughing, a game between one team that's cheating all the time. And one team that's not has to decide. “Am I just, am I just calling a game or am I now having to be an advocate for the game itself? Do I have to become, even though I'm not a partisan between these two teams, do I have to become a partisan for the rules? Do I have to become a partisan for democracy for the basic way in which we're supposed to conduct, uh, our politics.” And I think for a lot of people who cover politics, that's the most terrifying thing. The most terrifying thing is realizing that “Actually I'm no longer, uh, refereeing, a contest between two sides. I'm on the inside of a democracy and there's people coming for it from without.”

Favreau: But I think like if you're wondering why there is a constituency in an audience for politicians who do not believe in democracy and wanna break the rules and just wanna hold power, I think it's because like faith in institutions has, has declined to a point where so many people in this country so deeply believe that politics in the political system, isn't working for them and improving their lives. That since they can't seem to elect anyone, who's going to fix those institutions and make them work. They are willing to take a chance on demagogues who are just willing to tear them down.

Tommy Vietor: I just wanna—

Favreau: And that's a pretty scary, scary scenario that we're in.

Tommy Vietor: Look, I just think I'm gonna challenge the premise of the question, which is that they, they were for democracy because I think if you look at the anti-Communist agenda, the fifties, it was about preserving American hegemony. By installing right wing death squads in Latin American countries. Right?

JS: Sure. Overthrowing, uh, democratically elected leaders in Iran

Tommy Vietor: In the 2000s, the freedom agenda was invading Iraq.

JS: The Democrats had their hand, though, in a lot of undemocratic actions.

Tommy Vietor: We've fucked up bit time in a lot of those. Absolutely. But then, if you look at the Republican sort of thought leaders now. Like the Claremont Institute and those others. They're the people who like to reply to you on Twitter and say, "Actually we're a Republic, not a democracy." They are more about a rule by the elites to keep the, uh, you know, the unwashed masses like ourselves from taking control or majoritarian rule. And I think that is the kind of strain in this group of Republicans with like, you know, this Leo Straussian and right there, this deep roots in this stuff that is unnerving, um, and is kind of authoritarian.

Favreau: And appealing to a lot of people unfortunately.

Tommy Vietor: And they view Donald Trump as a vessel, an imperfect vessel for this.

JS: How many times have you heard Democrats want more executive action as well? Like everybody seems to be OK with an authoritarian that they believe they trust and can go in that way, but maybe to middle Jon's point. And I'm gonna go to middle Jon.

[LAUGHTER]

Lovett: Wow.

JS: That maybe though in terms of turning it back around to the media, the flawed assumption from the beginning is that they were referees in any game and that by participating in it as though it were that. That's what set them on the wrong path, that the media never should have been a referee. They should have been an immune system. That was focused more on not refereeing Democrats and Republicans, but representing the people's needs in terms of better governance. And if that were the focus, maybe we would find ourselves in a different moment.

Favreau: Middle Jon?

Lovett: Look—

Favreau: I'm side Jon.

Lovett: You're side Jon? Yeah look I—

JS: You've always been our side Jon.

[LAUGHTER]

Tommy Vietor: He's my side Jon.

JS: You're my side Jon.

Lovett: I've gotten lost in my own analogy because it [LAUGHTER] was sports related. So I don't know if the- do you want the—

JS: Understood.

Lovett: -you don't want the press in the stands.

JS: You can—

Lovett: Some kind of a box, maybe a box with a little hot dog. Sometimes—

JS: We can get out of the sports analogy, but—

Lovett: But I do think—

JS: But that the idea that—

Lovett: Yes.

JS: Yeah.

Lovett: I mean, I think they should be. I think that like, you know, there's an ideal of them being antagonistic. I think that thinking of them, that us thinking of reporters as refs sort of implies that there are these two sides that are fighting each other and actually it's one, you know, there are people in power and there are people without power and they should be holding power to account. I think that's all true. I do, you know, I think Donald Trump accelerated a process and, and you know, there's all these like historians and they look into this and it actually turns out. That there's a lot of power that political leaders have in signaling to the people who follow them or vote for them, what's important and what's not. And there was a process that was happening kind of all around us all the time, uh, where, uh, democracy itself was just not being held up as an important value. Right? That was happening more and more and more. Donald Trump, uh, obviously put that, you know, to 88 miles an hour, and now it has taken hold. And so was this sort of vicious circle, right? Like why does the Republican base no longer value democracy? Well, that's what they're hearing, uh, from the people they're voting for. Why are the people they're voting for saying that? Well, they're following the base and it is this vicious circle.

JS: I would say though that it's not that they don't value democracy. Is that Donald Trump has redefined democracy. So the definition of democracy is now any vote that Donald Trump wins

and authoritarianism look at the way that he's twisted it now that the FBI is a secret police working on behalf of a fascist government. It's not that they are not promoting democratic values. Is that they've redefined the entire premise to be, an unjust persecution is one that occurs against Donald Trump. A democratic vote is one that goes for Donald Trump. They're just redefining it.

Lovett: I think that like, you know, it's always this sort of fine line between are the people that are kind of embracing this or they're being cynical or they're being naive. And I think the answer is both, right? When they hear Donald Trump say this stuff, there's on some level of understanding that I know what he's saying is, "Only we can win elections." Right? I know that. I understand that that's what he's saying, but I'm part. I'm on the team.

JS: Oh I don't know about that.

Lovett: I'm on the team.

JS: I think there's a sincere belief and it — every time you listen to them, it's this. "We the people." They are steeping themselves in the spirit of 1776. They believe they are the true defenders of American democracy. And I don't think they're cynical at all. I think they, I think they just deserve better than someone like Donald f\*\*\*ing Trump.

Favreau: I agree with that. I think they have so bought into his critique of the political system-

JS: Right.

Favreau: -the establishment-

JS: Boom.

Favreau: -the media, everything else is corrupt. Everything is corrupt. And then every new development only, you know, makes them realize how corrupt it is.

JS: That's right.

Favreau: "So the FBI is just as corrupt as we thought it was because now they're going, after Donald Trump." And Donald Trump is the only man who can stand to thwart all of these corrupt, uh, institutions and actually fight for them.

Lovett: I think you can't tell the difference. I think at this point it is no longer possible to tell the difference between someone who believes that. And there are plenty of people who do and people understand that it's in their interest to take that position. I think there's plenty of both

Tommy Vietor: I mean, the problem is Trump and a lot of Republicans are selling all of us or all of their listeners on an apocalyptic vision, uh, where if they don't win, Democrats are gonna destroy America. They're gonna make your kid be transgender. They're gonna teach them that

white people are all evil, et cetera, et cetera. And you get to a very scary place where the means justified the ends of basically every action, whether it's a coup-

JS: But they're certainly not though the only party that's in this-

Tommy Vietor: Oh. Listen.

JS: - apocalyptic vision. I mean, the Democrats are basically saying, "If they win, we are fascist country."

Tommy Vietor: And I'm worried about that because I am genuinely in my heart concerned about the future of our democracy-

JS: Sure.

Tommy Vietor: -if we get Donald Trump in office again. But I also don't want to get the sort of two poles as far as possible, where we end up with some sort of violent clash again, like we saw in January 6th. It's something that scares the s\*\*\* out of me.

Lovett: It's hard not to sound. Here's the problem. When one party does head in this sort of fascistic direction, which it absolutely is—

JS: Right.

Lovett: -you can't help, but sound uh, hyperbolic when you describe it, because you know, there was this moment, right? When Biden said, oh, he thinks the MAGA movement is semi-fascistic, he or semi-fascist, he faced all this blow back, all that. How could you say that? How can you see that? When's the right time to call something fascist when it's gained so much power, you can't stop it?

Favreau: Well, Biden—

Lovett: When's the point, which you're allowed to use the word?

Favreau: The next day after Biden said that "Trump truths, um, I should be reinstated as president immediately." Like what the f\*\*\* do you think that is? [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

JS: But do you know my favorite moment of all of that was, uh, everybody got so flustered he said "Semi-fascistic." And he was standing in front of two Marines. And you know, "Twitter is undefeated," not 20 minutes later. A clip comes out of Donald Trump, standing in front of two Marines going, "The Democrats are fascists," and you're just like nothing matters.

Favreau: I know.

JS: It just doesn't f\*\*\*ing matter.

Favreau: But that also helps Trump and that brand of politics, they don't want, he doesn't necessarily need you to believe what he's saying. He just needs you to think that everyone's bulls\*\*\*. That everyone's lying because then if you're cynical about politics in general and not just about Trump, but the other side as well, and you don't participate, he can hold power. Right? And so like the whole, like “ LOL. Nothing matters. Everything's bulls\*\*\*. Everyone's lying to you. I'm lying to you, but so are they.” That just like feeds into the authoritarian impulse because Donald Trump knows that's gonna disengage people.

JS: Now as guys that have been in Washington for so long. Do you know folks who worked within that orbit that, that real Trump orbit, and I'm not necessarily talking about like the Dan Scavinos or guys like that, but do you know people who, again, the difference between public polling and internal polling who pull you aside and go, “Yeah, here's the s\*\*\* that's going down.” And it's—here's the real cut. Here's it is cynical or it is actually evil or there is a plan afoot or the QAnon stuff really is now the fuel of this. You know, is what do you hear from those who are employed in that orbit?

Lovett: I'll say I used to have a really good in, uh, but Lindsay Graham and I lost touch after we broke up.

Favreau: Jesus Christ

JS: Understood.

Tommy Victor: I'll be honest. I don't know anyone that works—

JS: Jon. Jon's a lot. Jon's a lot.

Lovett: I cannot believe you planted “a lot”—

JS: Middle Jon is a lot.

Lovett: You planted “a lot.” [JON LAUGHS] You incepted him with this “A lot,” thing.

JS: You said it!

Lovett: I didn't say it.

JS: You said it!

Lovett: He said it.

Tommy Victor: Are you done?

Lovett: Uh, how long are we gonna go?

[LAUGHTER]

Tommy Vietor: I don't know anyone. I don't know if, do you guys know anyone who worked for Trump or in the MAGA orbit? I don't.

Favreau: No.

Tommy Vietor: I had some friends who worked for John McCain on that campaign. Literally someone who like had my job on that side, who was trying to destroy me every day. Completely great human being like could talk to him, you know, but no one I know, went into MAGA world.

Favreau: No. Yeah, me neither. And I was just thinking about Tim Miller, our a friend of ours who, uh, is a former Republican, who just wrote a book, "Why We Did It." About all the different categories of Trump people and people who went to work for Trump. because he said there's different motivations for a lot of different types of people. So some are true believers. Some are complete cynics.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

Favreau: Some are just trying to hang on to their jobs. Some just wanted to make money—

Tommy Vietor: You would like this book.

Favreau: Yeah.

Tommy Vietor: It's a good book.

Favreau: He's great. It's a great book. But um, so there's, I think there's different motivations for a lot of these people unfortunately.

JS: Do you wanna know why Obama called me down?

Favreau: Yes.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

Lovett: Yeah tell us. What happened?

JS: So, uh, Kathleen Sibelius, it was right in the beginning of the Obamacare and uh—

Tommy Vietor: Oh boy.

JS: -we had Kathleen Sibelius, who was the secretary of, I believe health human services at that time. And uh, the Obamacare website had just been put out —

Favreau: Flawless

JS: —and uh, we had Kathleen Sibelius on and. So, what I did at the very top of the show is, uh, with her at the top of the interviews. I had my computer with me and I said, "Alright, here's your

computer? Here's my computer. Um, I'm gonna download every movie that's ever been made in the history of mankind on Limewire. And you're gonna try and log us into the Obamacare website and, and let's see who gets there first.”

Lovett: Oh, that's tough. That's tough. Because the website was a mess. I mean, it didn't work at all. It was actually, and it was shocking. They really didn't test it at all. It was a horrible blunder.

Tommy Vietor: Just to give you, I'm sure you heard an earful of this, but the reason that website rollout pissed him off so much—

JS: Yes.

Tommy Vietor: -was because he was like, “Hey guys, we're running up against decades of Reaganism, where people are told government is the problem. You gotta shrink it to the size. You can fit it in a bathtub and drown it because government is evil. We're trying to sell people on government, being competent in being able to help people in their lives.” And then we f\*\*\* up a website, but you know what like was in hindsight was the coverage. It was a massive f\*\*\* up. It should have been covered. We should have gotten destroyed for it. Is it good to say something good about our media and our politics that one of the only things people remember about the ACA was the website not working for a few months given now that like 20 million people have healthcare? No. I mean, you know what I mean? So it's, that's the problem. People like Democrats have.

JS: Well that's—wow.

Tommy Vietor: Look, I'm not saying we shouldn't have f\*\*\*ed with it. You guys shouldn't have destroyed us for it, but you know, when you try to do good things, you try to help people. Um, you get shot at.

JS: Don't. Don't. Please. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. That's that's. Boy that, you know, “Oh look, is it all we tried to do was get people healthcare. Was the website not good—”

Tommy Vietor: No, it was a disaster! It was a disaster. I'm not defending it. I'm not defending it.

JS: It was a disaster. But beyond that was the idea that not only was it maybe a disaster, but the whole, the premise of the program was let's just do a fire hose of customers to private insurance companies. Like there was a lot that was there to be talked about philosophically and otherwise, but the point you just made about competence, like that's not a minor point.

Tommy Vietor: It's a huge point. I know, but it was a rollout that eventually was fixed.

JS: I don't wanna suggest that when you put out your signature, uh, policy and it's there to help a lot of people, and it's trying to convince them that the government can be more involved in

something about their life and it doesn't work. That isn't actually a, "Hey, come on, guys, cut it out." Like that's a—

Tommy Vietor: No, no, I'm saying the opposite. I'm saying the opposite.

JS: We invaded Iraq. And then we got on a boat and said, "Mission accomplished." And it wasn't. And then you can say like, well, you know, "Was it not really? But didn't we liberate millions of people?" Like that's seminal to what that was and he ripped the s\*\*\* outta me in his office, uh, a few weeks later.

Tommy Vietor: Oh.

JS: For like five minutes. And then we got to have this conversation that you guys and I are having in that little room where we ate the most delicious salad I've ever eaten in my life. And then Libyans caught Muammar Gaddafi and like executed him on live TV.

Favreau: Yeah, that was awful. Yeah.

JS: Before we get to dessert, and I just remember, and we kept talking and I remember thinking, "You know, if you have to go..."

Favreau: Did you get dessert?

Lovett: Did you have dessert during lunch? I'm not into- dessert during lunch is tough. You gotta nap after.

JS: Not when you're sitting in that room.

Lovett: Right.

JS: And you're sitting in that room and he's telling you about the Navy chefs, you want that lemon pound cake.

Lovett: OK.

Favreau: Especially after he yelled at you about healthcare dot gov.

Lovett: Well, it was the second thing he did wrong.

JS: What he said was he didn't want me to make people cynical. And I said, "Cynicism is the last thing that's in my mind when I'm doing this show." And then we got into, I think, a pretty robust discussion about the very things that, that we've all been talking about, uh, here today.

Lovett: Nice.

JS: It, actually—

Favreau: He has a lot of thoughts on them. Yeah. [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

JS: Yeah. He did. Do you miss those days in the White House?

Favreau: Oh, its—

Tommy Vietor: I mean the good ones.

Favreau: Yeah.

Tommy Vietor: You know what I mean?

Favreau: Like. I don't miss the, like, there, as you can tell, like, there's still, there's a foxhole mentality you have when you're there where it's just like, you're just shoveling s\*\*\* every single day. And you know that you're gonna work trying your f\*\*\*ing hardest to like, do well and to like help people. And you're f\*\*\*ing up, you're making mistakes. You're not you've healthcare dot gov happens. And so you do become more defensive. You become tired, you're exhausted, you're angry, you know, it's tough wears on you after a while. It really does.

Lovett: You know, uh, BP poked a hole in the bottom of the ocean.

JS: I remember.

Lovett: Yeah as if unleashing hell itself from beneath the ground. And it's like, “Why hasn't Barack Obama plugged the deepest hole yet?” [FAVREAU LAUGHS]

Tommy Vietor: I know.

Lovett: “He's the president, God damnit. And there's a hole in the ocean.”

Tommy Vietor: That's the thing that I think you learn. It's incredibly humbling is the most powerful man in the world is in charge of a lot less than you thought he might be. And every day you're dealing with something—

JS: Boy is that, that right there, I think is a really profound and important statement that I do think we mythologize the office.

Favreau: Yeah.

JS: And in some ways our own country and maybe that's from the Marshall Plan or whatever we thought we were doing in, in other areas. But I do think we've mythologized our ability to control, uh, all these different contingencies around us. And it is humbling and I appreciate it, but you know, what's so interesting to me is like, it's still, I could feel it on you guys. Like it still hurts.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

JS: Like you still, you still feel that feeling of like being in a Foxhole and under attack by the forces of unfairness. And I feel like you guys still really feel that.

Favreau: Well, I was gonna ask you, because now that you've been involved in this legislative battle, like how did that change sort of your view of politics and activism and government now that you like- that's probably like the furthest involved you've been in, in government.

JS: Uh, so what it taught me was this country is held together by, uh, a thin line of hundreds of legislative aids. Who are brilliant, incredibly tenacious and hardworking. And they are part of a system that seeks to chew them up and spit them out. They oftentimes work for, uh, politicians who don't have the faintest understanding of the intricacies of what they do. Uh, but they are by and large non-ideological. And they are there first and they leave last and they are paid the least, and they hold this country together with a competence that, uh, cannot be overstated. Uh, the second thing that I learned is shame doesn't work unless they feel that it will be unrelenting and they can't escape its glare. Generally the place is designed to deflect. If you wanna get something done, it's gotta be hurricane preparedness and you have to seal up every window and every vent and every door it's you're fighting zombies. And if there's any way that they get in the house you lose. And so it really is a it's a wildly unrelenting game. And that, uh, if to do the moral thing requires that every cause have a celebrity spokesperson, we're f\*\*\*ed.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah, big time.

JS: But boy, you don't come out of there feeling like this system has any connection to the needs of the people that it purports to serve. That's for sure.

Tommy Vietor: Yeah.

Favreau: Yeah. Yeah. That's about right. [JON LAUGHS]

Tommy Vietor: That's yeah. That sucks.

Favreau: I mean, you got it. [JON LAUGHS]

JS: Alright! Coming up next!

Lovett: They also have Taco Tuesday [LAUGHTER] at the cafe. If you go the Capital down in the Capitol's Taco Tuesday—

JS: Yes!

Lovett: So that's a boon. That's a nice part. The Taco Tuesday of it all.

JS: Alright. We'll end on this. What was your favorite place to go during your time in Washington?

Favreau: Millie and Al's.

Lovett: I literally think I've been gone from DC so long. My favorite gay bar has been canceled.

Tommy Vietor: Oh, no.

[LAUGHTER]

Lovett: I actually believe that that's true.

Favreau: That did happen?

Lovett: Yeah. Yeah. So I can't even say that place.

JS: I'm sorry to hear that. Boy, what an interesting conversation. I thank you guys so much for taking the time. Jon, Jon, Tommy, uh, Crooked Media. Pod Save America, their solo projects. They're gonna be touring with Dave Matthews, apparently like—

Lovett: Wait, we gotta, we gotta tell people. People have to sign up as we head into the midterms for Vote Save America. If you've heard this and you wanna know what you can do, you should go to Vote Save America dot com and sign up to be a volunteer.

JS: Well done. Uh, guys, thanks so much.

Favreau: Thanks Jon.

### **Interview with Pod Saves America Ends**

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

JS: Alright guys, that's our show. Check out uh, "The Problem with Jon Stewart," is gonna be on Apple TV+ starting on October 7th. That is our premier day for season two, and the podcast is back week to week. Uh, so all those things much content for your dining and dancing pleasure. Thanks guys very much for joining us and we will see you all next week.

[OUTRO MUSIC]

JS: "The Problem with Jon Stewart Podcast" is an Apple TV+ podcast and a joint Busboy Production.