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BROOKINGS CAFETERIA PODCAST

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

This is the annual year-in-review episode of this podcast. When I introduced the 2020 edition, I noted that it had been an extraordinary year, with a presidential impeachment, demands for racial justice, and the novel coronavirus pandemic turning our lives upside down. Well, 2021 came along and again: a presidential impeachment; a continued and often contested movement for racial equity; coronavirus variants; and, to start the year, an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

And still, so much more.

In my interviews on the Brookings Cafeteria podcast, I've been able to ask experts the questions that I expect you have also had about these and so many other important issues, in an attempt to learn and find answers to these tough problems. And now, in this end-of-year episode, I'm pleased to share just a sample of some of the illuminating conversations I have had this year.

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And now, on with the show.

[Music, news clips]

DEWS: On January 6, 2021, in Washington, D.C., thousands of supporters of President Trump breached the US Capitol building in an attempt to stop the ceremonial certification of Joe Biden's electoral victory. The violence was shocking, but in a way not surprising given the rhetoric leading up to that day. In my conversation with Darrell West, vice president and director

of Governance Studies at Brookings, he addressed a series of ideas to tackle the extreme polarization that has riven American politics, and what political, social, and economic reforms could help us move forward as a more united nation, while also reflecting on his own family's story of political polarization.

WEST: Well, I write a lot about political divisions and polarization, and a coup attempt is the ultimate in polarization. It literally is polarization on steroids and polarization pushed to an incredible degree. So it's obvious the country is highly polarized. There's been a dramatic increase in extremism and radicalization in the United States. I mean, some of the social media chatter that we now have learned since the events of last week are quite shocking. There was a premeditated plan on the part of some to do exactly what they did, which was to go down to the Capitol, to storm the Capitol, and to try and find the leaders. And there were some people who had open discussions about killing Speaker Pelosi and Vice President Pence.

And for me, I've been thinking a lot about this topic over a period of years. You recall a year ago I wrote a book entitled *Divided Politics*, which basically talked about the historical roots of divided America, how we got to this point and what it means. But the book also was a family memoir because I grew up in this conservative rural community in Ohio. My two sisters still live there. They still love Trump. They think the election actually was stolen from him. My brother is a liberal and disagrees 100 percent with that, as do I. And so this whole thing has both this weird kind of professional element of someone who studies American politics, but then this personal experience within my own family. And I've had high school friends on Facebook over the last few days who basically have spread misinformation where they think antifa actually were the people down there engaging in the violence—it was progressive activists that did the violence, not Trump supporters, even though based on what we know now, all the people who've

been arrested seem to be part of far-right organizations and clearly supportive of President Trump.

So, all of this kind of reveals a lot of different problems about American politics, just in terms of where we are right now, the role of technology in fomenting extremism and radicalization, how quickly misinformation spreads. On our Tech Tank blog I have a new post about the role of misinformation in Trump's insurrection. So clearly, we need to think about how to deal with that aspect of it. And then, as you mentioned in your introduction, just all the problems in American politics, how we need to address these issues, what kind of reforms we need to undertake. I mean, I think all of us need to do a lot of soul-searching about how we reached this point and how we possibly may be able to get out of it.

DEWS: In June, just over a year after protests for racial justice erupted in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, and others, and with the country tentatively starting to recover somewhat from the COVID-19 pandemic, but before the Delta variant of the pandemic emerged later in the summer, I interviewed Makada Henry-Nickie, the Robert and Virginia Hartley Fellow in Governance Studies, and I asked her, when she looked at America, what issues she thought deserve critical attention, especially as we focused on issues of racial inequity, injustice, and income inequality.

HENRY-NICKIE: The last year and a half was raw. I mean, there's no other way to sort of put it. Right? 2020, I think, for me was a year of disruption and a lot of ways it was a year of wokeness. And then we saw these transformative movements. You know, you've got these violent policing acts from Breonna Taylor's execution to George Floyd's murder, as you mentioned, colliding in a very public way with the pandemic that has been especially brutal to

communities of color. And I think that's finally forcing this public reckoning on issues of racial injustice, inequality, and income inequality.

But it feels like, Fred, that with each news cycle, you know, it's like we're adding new, more urgent items to the policy agenda. So there's a lot to focus on. But I think there are a few that really deserve our undivided attention here. I'll go ahead and sort of say, foremost, I think, is the current assault on voting rights that's unfortunately spreading like wildfire through these mostly southern states. Between New Year's Day this year and Memorial Day alone, 14 states have enacted 22 new laws restricting voting rights. And President Biden said it aptly, right, this war, GOP-led war, against voting rights is playing out across the states like a boldfaced return to Jim Crow. So, we really need to, I think, prioritize thinking about how to protect voting rights for communities of color as we move further into the legislative agenda where we're getting nervous about who's going to control the balance of power come with the midterm elections.

And so, relatedly, I think, you know, I can't stress enough, I need the Democrat controlled Congress to figure out how to pass President Biden's ambitious six trillion-dollar budget, which I think has key programmatic investments that are critical to addressing the racial wealth gap and reinvesting in minority and indigenous communities. So, we have really important investments like 3 billion dollars to reduce and end race-based disparities in maternal mortality, 15 billion dollars in this new highways-to-neighborhoods program. Neighborhoods like my own would benefit tremendously from those kinds of investments where we've been since the highway construction, our neighborhoods are cleaved in half. You know, on the one side, there's opportunity that's been booming for decades and on the other, just disinvestment and decay. And even seeing 900 hundred million dollars flowing to tribes to expand their efforts to

boost affordable housing. All of those initiatives are going to be sort of really critical to really making this an inclusive economy, recovery, excuse me, and expanding racial equity.

And again, I just want to just say, I'm not suggesting that these are the only issues we should focus on. Right. You've got the Justice in Policing Act. That's certainly important to addressing decades of mass incarceration for Black men. But without protecting the rights of people of color in this country to elect their leaders, to represent their interests, and also to allocate substantial federal investments to fund racial and income inequality mandates, I think we're not going to get too far beyond just bare conversations. So it's important for me to sort of focus on those two buckets.

DEWS: The COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd were two monumental events that originated in 2020, with broad-ranging effects reaching into 2021, and surely beyond. The economic disruptions of the pandemic were acutely felt by women and workers of color, and by workers in certain industries like hospitality and retail. I asked Kristen Broady, a fellow in Brookings Metro, to talk about the intersection of race, gender, and age in the labor market.

BROADY: So, we know that Black and Latino workers are overrepresented in jobs at high risk of being automated. And I want to clarify so that my colleagues don't come with dissent that I generally hear, is that just because a job has a high risk of being automated doesn't mean that it necessarily will be. It just means that a computer or machine can do a certain portion of the job. Of course, it's up to the company whether or not they are going to actually purchase that machinery and start using it or computer systems software. So, I'll start with that.

But Black people are overrepresented in 11 of the jobs that employ the most people in the U.S., the 30 jobs that employ the most people that are at high risk of being automated. Hispanic

people are overrepresented in those jobs in addition to two more. So, what does that have to do with COVID and customer facing jobs? Well, these jobs that are at high risk of being automated are also customer-facing jobs that in the beginning, say, grocery store workers or cashiers, before those restaurants closed down those people were more likely to get COVID than someone who didn't interact with customers or who did a job that involves research, a computer, whatever. And grocery stores stayed open, they never did close. They may have done some social distancing, but for the most part, they didn't close. And so Black and Hispanic workers and also younger workers are overrepresented in those jobs that are at high risk of automation and also put them at risk of getting COVID.

And so, during the pandemic, we saw many grocery stores and other places where you have cashiers increasing their use of automatic checkout machines. I think about the Wal-Mart in my parents' neighborhood. At the beginning of the pandemic, there may have been 10 registers open at any time. And now my mom complains that it's almost all automatic checkout. Same thing at the CVS that I go to, and a lot of the grocery stores and drugstores we now see more automatic checkout machines than we did cashiers before the pandemic. And again, who was doing those jobs? Generally, the cashier was a Black woman at the places that I would shop at across the country. I'm not saying that they're only Black women, but at the places that I went to, they were mostly younger Black women and now the places that I go to, I'm seeing more and more machines.

DEWS: Broady added that while the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated unemployment among Black workers as it has for so many, the Black unemployment rate has been the highest of all groups of workers since the government started tracking unemployment by race, long before COVID-19.

This question of jobs was central to my interview with Marcela Escobari, a senior fellow with the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings (which just launched a new podcast, “17 Rooms,” that you can find on the Brookings website). Escobari co-authored a report, with Ian Seyal and Carlos Daboin Contreras, on how to promote workers’ upward mobility. And so I asked her, what is mobility, and why focus on mobility to begin with?

ESCOBARI: Having jobs available is absolutely necessary, but what we find not sufficient in this story, and which is, I think, relevant to the recovery that we’re seeing in the U.S. right now. So, the question is, how do you make sure that jobs translate to upward mobility? And what we find is there are frictions that stop workers from seizing some opportunities even when they are available. Workers are experiencing dramatic changes in the labor force and are having trouble transitioning upwards. We have a labor market that is acutely bifurcated with a growing set of high wage jobs with mobility and benefits, and on the other side, low-wage jobs where folks tend to churn without mobility, stability, and often dignity. And the jobs that were steppingstones between these two extremes are increasingly rare.

DEWS: Is this a new phenomenon, is this something that we’re seeing only in the in the COVID-19 era? How long is this kind of thing been going on?

ESCOBARI: Well, the trends affecting the labor force have been half a century in the making. We have been seeing a slow erosion in the labor participation. We’re at some of the lowest labor participation rates in history, particularly for men. One out of five men without a high school degree are outside of the workforce, and the pandemic has actually taken another 2 percent to that low number. So, we’ve gone from 63 to 61 percent of working-age adults working.

And I think in part it is because people are giving up and dropping out. We have seen wage stagnation at the lower end. And while we've had the forces behind these trends, like automation, digitization, and the rise of contract work continue to be at play—and in many cases they've accelerated in this crisis—through the same period we have seen our investments in helping people upgrade their skills or transition to better jobs dwindled in the same period. We actually spent one fourth of what we spent in the 1970s and a fraction of what the OECD countries spend in training.

So, low-wage work has become both precarious and pervasive. And mobility is also at risk. Only 9 percent of Americans in the top quintile today were born to parents in the bottom quintile, compared to OECD average, which is 17 percent. Actually being born in Canada rather than the U.S. nearly doubles a child's chance of moving from bottom to top quintile.

So, we're seeing a rebound from COVID, but not everyone is rebounding with the same speed or conditions. Low-wage workers are lagging, certain cities are lagging, certain industries are lagging. So, we wanted to understand who is being impacted and why, because specificity is important, because otherwise all this growth, all this infrastructure spending, will just reproduce existing inequities if we don't understand where are the bottlenecks and for whom.

DEWS: I'm proud to note that my interview with Escobari was the *four-hundredth* episode of the Brookings Cafeteria podcast! And, in December, Escobari was confirmed by the U.S. Senate to be assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The twin phenomena of COVID-19 and racial inequity coursed through so much of Brookings research over the past two years, and so also informed many Brookings Cafeteria podcast episodes this year. Lauren Bauer, a fellow in Economic Studies and with the Hamilton

Project at Brookings, co-authored “Ten economic facts on how mothers spend their time,” as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to take a toll on mothers in the labor market. I asked Bauer how mothers’ involvement in childcare looked before the pandemic, and how the pandemic changed this.

BAUER: So, we'll talk about little kids and then we'll talk about school age kids. So prior to the pandemic, about half of three-year-olds and 2/3 of four-year-olds were in some sort of center-based care, meaning that they were in childcare or preschool. And then starting in school age there are some exceptions, but for the most part, one, we should think about education is childcare for the purposes of this question, but also that basically all the kids are in it, right? You know, we certainly have some issues with older kids and truancy and some other reasons that kids aren't in school, but for the most part all kids starting in kindergarten are in childcare for a chunk of the day.

And certainly, prior to the pandemic, there were mothers who weren't in the labor force because they were taking care of their kids, and that was either their choice or something that they had to do. But, prior to the pandemic, labor force participation rates, meaning that you're working or actively seeking work, had converged around 80% for all mothers except for married mothers with kids under 13 at home. Forty years ago, about 50% of married mothers with young kids were in the labor force, and in 2019 it had reached 70%. So I think mother's involvement in childcare was that childcare was both developmentally positive for their children, but it was a labor support, a work support. And many children and families availed themselves of center-based care in order to enable mom to work outside the home.

DEWS: Are those changes different based on mothers’ racial or ethnic background? I mean, does the experience of Black and Hispanic mothers differ from white mothers?

BAUER: Here's a stark way to think about the differences between how Black mothers, Hispanic mothers, and white mothers have experienced the pandemic. So, prior to the pandemic, Black mothers had the highest labor force participation rates of any mothers. They were the most likely of mothers with children under 13 to be employed. As of February 2021, white mothers have overtaken that. And why is that? Because Black mothers and Hispanic mothers were more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic and are right now more likely to be unemployed or out of the labor force than white mothers.

And so all of the things that we've been talking about in terms of the she-cession in terms of the industries that were affected and all these women losing their jobs is true, but white women seem to be able to be getting back into the labor force with more success than Black woman and Hispanic woman.

DEWS: You can find this and other links to the research discussed in this episode in the show notes on [brookings.edu](https://www.brookings.edu).

Although COVID-19 and racial equity themes appeared in a majority of episodes of the Brookings Cafeteria this year, some of my favorite episodes featured scholars thinking through other important public policy issues.

In “Reversing the War on Drugs: A five-point plan,” Governance Studies Senior Fellow John Hudak lays out a five-point plan that the Biden administration itself can implement around cannabis reform, stopping short of full federal legislation. Point one is a national apology for the war on drugs, so I asked Hudak why a national apology is important and what form would that take.

HUDAK: So, to start, the five-point plan I put forward is certainly not the most reform minded plan that's out there. It's more pragmatic, given the realities of the Biden administration.

There will be activists who will read this paper and be angry that it doesn't go far enough. And while I think that there should be steps further than what my paper argues, the reality is that we know the president is not on board with full-scale legalization. And we know that Democrats don't have 60 votes in the Senate to pass legalization, full scale legalization. They probably don't even have 50 votes in the Senate right now to pass full scale legalization. So, in the short term, we know that full scale legalization is not a reality.

So, in the interim, I argue there are steps that we can take. And the first step in that five-point plan is a national apology. That is for the president of the United States to issue a proclamation apologizing for the war on drugs, apologizing for the devastation it has wrought in communities across the United States, particularly in communities of color, and to acknowledge that racism is the root of our nation's drug laws and that reforms are necessary to reverse that type of institutionalized systemic racism that drug laws are one part of in terms of systemic racism and the policies that reflect them in this country.

I think it's also even more powerful for that apology to come from someone like President Biden, someone who helped write many of our nation's drug laws while he was in the United States Senate, while he was chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, someone who has really taken a hardline approach against not just drug traffickers, not just drug sellers, but even drug users. And so, for an apology like that to come from someone like Bernie Sanders or Cory Booker or other liberals who have really spent a long period of their career pushing back against these types of laws could be effective. But for it to come from the source of the nation's laws is not just a national apology, but in many ways a personal apology for crafting those laws could be meaningful. It's not sufficient in itself, but it's a very important first step.

DEWS: At the end of 2020 and moving into 2021, Brookings published Blueprints for American Renewal & Prosperity, a series of innovative, implementable federal policy ideas for the incoming Biden administration and new Congress. In a co-authored proposal, Joseph Kane, fellow in Brookings Metro, called for a Climate Planning Unit to be established in the White House as one tool to address climate change, including by focusing on the built environment. And so I asked Kane, what is the built environment and how does it relate to climate change mitigation strategies from the federal government.

KANE: The reality is we are in a transition, right? And it's not even just a transition of choice. I would argue it's we're already in it, whether we like to admit it or not. We've had trillions of dollars in costs that are hitting us from extreme storms, but also chronic climate issues. And it's not just a national and an international issue, but it goes all the way down to individual cities, individual neighborhoods, individual households, where the risks, the impacts, the cost of all of this are highly uneven. And that's why I think, to give the Biden administration some credit, why there has been such an emphasis on not just climate action, but on climate justice. Right? And ensuring that in this transition to hopefully a cleaner, more resilient economy, we are also internalizing and better understanding what are the effects that are happening to people all over the place.

So, when we're talking about the built environment, all legislative action matters. But federal leaders also need to seize short term wins in the next two to four years that show measurable progress, build support for larger scale, longer term investments. We think of our infrastructure in particular, which has been a big talking point in Washington over the last few weeks, will be a big talking point in certainly the months to come. The built environment is part of that. It is not just the transition to cleaner energy systems—and when we think of generation

transmission, distribution and manufacturing and so on. But it's also the fact of our transportation systems, that how we get around transportation is now the leading GHG emissions source, according to EPA, nationally. And so how we actually consider air pollution, fossil fuel consumption, unsustainable roadway design, that has to be part of our built environment.

Second is our real estate and our buildings that we are continuing to devour land sprawling ever outward—that certainly has a climate dimension to it. Impervious surface cover certainly leads to the challenges that we saw in Houston with Hurricane Harvey a few years ago, that water had nowhere to go to penetrate, which led to flood concerns, additional energy and water consumption. And then a lot of our invisible infrastructure systems, particularly water systems, when we think of runoff, water scarcity concerns, especially out West with drought issues. And so the built environment is, as I like to say, infrastructure policy is climate policy. They're not separated from each other. And so as we talk about our transportation needs, our water needs and our broader land use needs, we are talking about climate needs as well.

DEWS: You can find this proposal and more at [brookings.edu/Blueprints](https://www.brookings.edu/blueprints).

One of the most important foreign policy stories of the year—of the last two decades, even—was the complete withdrawal of U.S. and allied forces from Afghanistan, a process started under former President Trump's agreement with the Taliban and brought to completion in August by President Biden. In late August, just after the Taliban finalized their takeover of Afghanistan, I spoke with Foreign Policy Senior Fellow Vanda Felbab-Brown, who also directs the initiative on nonstate armed actors, about the developing situation there, and I asked her to talk about her concerns when it comes to the rights of women and girls and the gains they have made over the years.

FELBAB-BROWN: The Taliban coming to power will mean significant reductions in the freedom of opportunities for Afghan girls and women, and that's very painful. I believe I said that the luckiest outcomes that we were looking at is an Iran-like regime. I'll elaborate on that. And many of the changes that will take place will be both changes in how women in Afghanistan have practiced experience that they've made to their lives, as well as in the broader legal frameworks that exist in the Afghan constitution that have guaranteed seats for women, there was strong pressure to include women in government.

Many of these dimensions were often not executed in practice, and you spoke about the fact that a generation of Afghan women now live in very different conditions. Well, that's true for women in some areas. The Taliban has been ruling parts of the country for years and years. And even in areas where the Taliban has not ruled the country, in many rural areas, local social mores often prevailed. So, it would often be local men, not just Pashtun, who would be selling their daughters as wives, even as young as five or six. This was not Taliban behavior. This could have been driven by the males in the family. For many Afghan women over the past 20 years, life really depended on how the male relatives would treat them, whether their husbands, brothers, or fathers would allow them access to the education that the new system enabled, whether it would allow them access to hospitals. Domestic violence is very, very present throughout the country and it was regardless of whether the area was under Taliban rule or not.

DEWS: I recall you wrote about that with Brookings's President John Allen in an essay last year published on our 19A, 19th Amendment, series. I'll post a link to that in the show notes.

FELBAB-BROWN: Absolutely. Now, nonetheless, a segment of women could experience a life that was full of opportunities and unprecedented economic and political freedoms and to some extent, even personal choice freedoms. For many of them, the order that's

coming is absolutely horrible and terrifying. And we have seen instances, for example, of the Taliban forcing women to marry Taliban soldiers. It's very hard to judge the pervasiveness of this. It's clearly one of the issues that many Afghan women fear the most. I hear stories of the fathers looking for the husbands for their daughters very rapidly, that there is a frenzy to marry off daughters before the Taliban come knocking. Even just that fear obviously is terrible.

In some parts of the country in the west, where the Taliban have taken over in recent weeks, they issued edicts that women cannot leave the house without male guardians. That's one of the most debilitating rules and one that the international community should strongly push against because that really limits access to health care, food, schooling. That's a very debilitating situation.

So much of how the doctrines and mores are both determined and executed on the local level varies. And one of the things that will be, I think, a very important dimension of the Taliban regime is that there will be great variation in local execution of various rules, not simply regarding women. And depending how much the community has strength and capacity to negotiate with the Taliban, there might be loosening. Several years ago, for example, in some places like Ghazni, the Taliban shut down girls' schools and the community was very upset, mobilized and negotiated with the Taliban to reopen the schools. The Taliban did so but placed their supervisors in the classroom and would choose what education is appropriate for both girls and boys, and particularly girls.

So, there are limits to how much a local community can push to loosen some of the restraints and some dogmas that the Taliban will be imposing, and it cannot be just the local community. You spoke about the essay with President John Allen. We speak in the essay about the leverage that the international community can use to try to shape the Taliban's behavior. This

leverage includes access to international aid, financial flows, providing visas to Taliban government officials or denying them, recognizing the Taliban government or not, allowing the Taliban access to international fora, international conferences, international organizations or prohibiting them. None of this is leverage that's enormously powerful. None of this leverage has the capacity to make the Taliban into women's rights and democracy supporting actors.

And the leverage is weakened by many things. It's weakened by the speed with which the Taliban took over. It's weakened by the fact that the utter collapse of both the Afghan security forces and militias means that the Taliban is hyped up on victory, flush with adrenaline and ambition, but also has ground reality constraints in what kind of rules they will issue and how they share power. And it's also weakened by the fact that issues like women's rights and human rights are of limited focus and interest to countries like China, Russia, and Iran. And so there will be a big division in the international community, clearly, in how those issues are linked to incentives, punitive punishments, and carrots—positive inducements. But nonetheless, even though the leverage is limited, the United States, Europe, Australia, and its Western allies, and as much as countries like China could be mobilized, should be using the leverage to try to shape the Taliban.

Again, I think that if you set as our hope an objective that women will have all the rights as they will have up to now, then people will be disappointed that that's the reality I don't think is available. I think we should be pressing for things like allowing women access to universities. Just the statement today should be immediately pushed back, and the Taliban should be said, you won't get the money that the U.S. just froze or even a portion of the money if you don't change that. Yes, it will have to be single-sex schools. Women will have to wear hijab, maybe even burqa. But that should be one of the issues we bargain with, demanding that women have access

outside of the household to health care, to food, to at least some sort of jobs without the male guardian, another really important red line to bargain about.

But again, I think that unfortunately, if we end up with an Iran-like the regime in terms of domestic political and social dispensation, in terms of also political arrangement with the Taliban Supreme Council, but perhaps some power changing underneath in the best scenario through elections of the executive and a parliament—if they even have a parliament—those are some of the best outcomes that we are looking at. But I want to emphasize that staying another two, three years, three years, or five years, would not get us to a better outcome.

DEWS: Brookings scholars write and publish a lot of books, and this year saw a bevy of great ones. Among these is Foreign Policy Senior Fellow Fiona Hill’s extraordinary memoir, *There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century*, which offers an urgent warning that America is on the brink of socioeconomic collapse and an authoritarian swing that could rival modern Russia’s. In my interview with Hill, which also included Russia expert Angela Stent—of Georgetown University—I asked her to talk about a vivid metaphor she used for America’s current condition, that “Russia is America’s Ghost of Christmas future.”

HILL: Well, that’s more about the contemporary period, but that through line from the 1980s and seeing the developments there, I see a continuum as I outline in the book. Because for decades nothing happened in many of these post-industrial landscapes and many of the cities and towns that got left behind as the new economy emerged, the knowledge economy—automation and modernization, financial and service sectors growing up. Boston moved on, although one could argue there’s parts of Massachusetts and some of the suburbs around Boston are still in some degrees of difficulty. Not everybody was able to take advantage of the new economic developments and all the educational opportunities.

But, you know, there's large swaths of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union that get left behind as well. And what's interesting about the bases—the political base of Vladimir Putin and of Donald Trump—they're very similar. Putin's base is really in the old industrial heartland of Russia, although the heartland is huge, it spreads across Siberia, the Urals, you know, and elsewhere. It's not in the cities, it's not in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It's in the Soviet-era industrial cities, the Russian Rust Belt. Same as it is in the United States. Because people kind of feel that they need the state to intervene, or they need someone to intervene to turn things around for them.

And it's that worry about where Russia headed—and Angela can chime in on this—over the course of the 1990s and 2000s that I put out there as the kind of the specter of the Ghost of Christmas future. And when I use that image of the Ghost of Christmas future—obviously being a Brit, I grew up on Charles Dickens. But the important thing about Scrooge is he gets the message. It's a spectral vision. It's his own nightmare. It's his own dream. It isn't something that comes into reality, but it's a kind of a warning to him of things that could happen, that haven't quite taken shape at this point. And that's what I mean about looking at Russia as a lesson for the United States and also for the United Kingdom, frankly.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in the 1990s, Russia went through an incredibly wrenching period of socioeconomic dislocation and political dislocation. There was the opening and the flourishing that Gorbachev set underway in the political sphere, more pluralism, emergence of political parties. But in many respects, the Russians thought democratic experimentation, democratization, didn't turn out as they'd hoped. There wasn't a transformation of their material lives overnight. In fact, many of them were in much harder straits, much more dire straits than they had been in the '70s, when Angela was there. They felt that they'd lost

everything, and they lost their identity. The whole story of the 1990s is one of loss, not just of opportunity.

And Putin comes in in the end of the 1990s, December 1999, and basically says I'm going to fix it all. And over the next 21 years that he's been in power, he's also fixed himself in the Kremlin, rolled back a lot of the pluralism, rolled back a lot of the democratic gains, and put Russia on a very different trajectory. It's a more authoritarian state than it was before. He's busted through term limits. I mean, he could essentially be President Putin in perpetuity. And there's an awful lot more in Russia's future that has darker tones than there certainly would have been when Angela and I and others were first there, when we saw all of this change and the openness, that the country's closing back down again. And unfortunately, I see a lot of parallels with what's happening right now here in the United States.

DEWS: Fiona Hill's warning about the parallels among the UK, Russia, and the United States, and how economic decline can accompany the rise of authoritarian government, is a central concern of this next and final highlight from the Brookings Cafeteria podcast in 2021. Norm Eisen, a senior fellow in Governance Studies and long-time champion of transparency in government, anti-corruption, and democratic institutions, has recently co-authored *Democracy Playbook 2021: 10 commitments for advancing democracy*. I spoke with him and one of his co-authors—Susan Corke from the Southern Poverty Law Center—about the Playbook and its evidence-based democracy best practices that are fit for our time. With democratic backsliding in countries like Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and even the United States, I asked Eisen what, if anything, gives him hope that the project of liberal democracy will prevail over the rising tide of illiberalism.

EISEN: The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, and it also bends towards democracy, to quote the 19th century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. It's a condensed quote, as so often with these famous quotations, his actual words are a little different. Favorite saying of Dr. Martin Luther King's and has passed into the broader culture of optimism.

The power of democracy and its ultimate attractiveness is compelling, and nobody can predict when we will get there. There are many ups and downs along the way. We're going through them together with our allies. We've had a vivid reminder of them. But if there's one lesson from coauthoring with Susan and our other wonderful coauthors the Democracy Playbook 2021 edition from the Democracy Summit, it's intended to inform, and from all the decades of experience that we started out discussing on the podcast, Fred, that Susan and I bring to this work, if there is one lesson, it is the power of democracy to overcome those struggles and push forward decade after decade. Yes, there are steps forward and steps back, but democracy ever marches on, and I'm confident that will continue to be the case.

DEWS: I have a lot of people to thank here at the end of another extraordinary year for the Brookings Cafeteria podcast. First, I want to thank you, the listeners, I hope you've learned something about our policy challenges and solutions that matter to you.

My sincere thanks to all of the scholars and guest hosts who made the Brookings Cafeteria possible this year. I've learned so much from talking and listening to you all.

My deepest thanks to my colleagues in the Office of Communications who make the Brookings Cafeteria podcast happen every week, and sometimes more than once a week. Gaston Reboredo is our audio engineer, and even though we are *still* not in our professional grade studio in downtown Washington DC, he continues to make me and our guests sound better. My thanks also to our audio interns this year, David Greenberg and Nicolette Kelly, both students at the

excellent audio program at American University. Nicolette also produced this episode. My thanks also to Colin Cruikshank, who filled in for Gaston from time to time. Also, thank you to other colleagues in the Brookings Communications department whose collaboration makes podcasting happen, including Ian McAllister, Chris McKenna, Adrianna Pita, Marie Wilkin, and Brookings Press Director Bill Finan, who does the book interviews. Thanks to Camilo Ramirez who led our podcast team for the first half of 2021, before leaving for new horizons. And finally, my thanks to Andrea Risotto and Soren Messner-Zidell for their continued support of podcasts at Brookings.

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Happy New Year. I hope you have the best 2022 available to you.

I'm Fred Dews.