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SAUL ROOM

ON THE FRONT PORCH WITH TONY PIPA AND BRENT ORRELL: A CONVERSATION WITH  
STEVEN CONN ABOUT 'THE LIES OF THE LAND'

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INTRODUCTION AND MODERATOR:

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**PIPA:** All right. You let us know when we're. We're on. Okay. Sorry. All right, well, welcome to the front porch, everyone. I'm Tony Pipa. I'm senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution. Welcome here today on this beautiful Friday. And welcome to this fifth in our series of Front Porch Conversations. These are co-sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, where we engage in conversation with authors of recent research on rural America and explore its implications for public policy as well as the well-being of our country. Generally, I do this with a co-host, Brent Orrell, who unfortunately got caught trying to return to Washington, D.C. from Mississippi and is going to be unable to join in to join us today. Brent's flying from Mississippi, so I'm going to be flying solo. Here. There we go.

But, my guest today is Steve Conn, who is the author of 'The Lies of the land Seeing: Rural America for What It Is and What It Isn't.' So before we kick off the conversation, just a few housekeeping notes. As I mentioned, this is the fifth in the series, of On the Front Porch. You can find links to the other recordings of our other conversations on the website of the Reimagining Rural Policy Initiative that I lead here at the Brookings Institution. Brett and I are also in conversations with authors, that will touch on the opioid crisis and also a historical perspective on place based federal policy. Both of those conversations look like they're going to be happening in July. So just, stay tuned and look out for those. We're working out dates now.

And, and we also have others in mind that we're in conversation with. And really, like I said, this series is really geared to try to give us a chance to examine the demographic, the economic, the technological and the social factors that have influenced rural America and also to keep the conversation on policy. We are probably going to hear a lot about rural politics over the next, over this course of this year. And so given all that attention on the politics, we want to continue to understand what the implications are for policy. So I'm delighted to be joined by my guest, Steve Conn. He's the W.E. Smith professor of history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He was at Ohio, Ohio State University for about 20 years before that. And he's the author of several books as well as monographs. You can find all of those, just go to his, go to his bio on his website. And I have a sense that we might refer back to one of your other books today, "Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the 20th Century."

But we're here today to talk about, *Lies of the Land*. If you've been with us on the front porch before, you know, we conduct these as an informal, well informed conversation. We're going to have a discussion amongst ourselves to get us started. And then I'm going to invite those of you in the audience here in person, as well as online, to join the conversation. If you're online, you'll be able to pose a question to [events@brookings.edu](mailto:events@brookings.edu) or on X, the social media formerly known as Twitter at Brookings Global using the hashtag #onthefrontporch.

So, Steve, we often, Brent and I, when we when we start these conversations, I think our first question often is why this book? What motivated you to take on this book? What interested you? And then just give us a sense, if you will, some of the key thematic parts of the book, and that will give us a chance then, to dive more deeply into each of the sections.

**CONN:** Sure. Well, first of all, let me thank you for this invitation. Let me thank Zoe and Steve for making this event happen. It's a real treat for me to be here. This is a ton of fun. There's nothing better for an academic than talking about your own work. It's really sort of the apotheosis of what we do. So you alluded a moment ago to a book I did about ten years ago, in which I explored what I saw as an anti-urban tradition in American life, and I looked at the ways in which these anti-urban ideas then also translated into kinds of policies, but also the way they shaped places as well. And it's not a bad book, *Americans Against the City*. I think I can recommend it. I think there's a handsome paperback edition of it that was in 2014. About 18 months later, this book kind of got discovered by, journalists and, and other people.

I found myself, being interviewed all the time about the urban rural divide. That's what this book seemed to have, touched on. And, and that in the campaign of, you know, 2015, 2016, that was the issue of the moment. And all of a sudden, at one point, I think I was on Al Jazeera television talking about the urban rural divide. And the thing that was awkward about this was that I didn't actually know anything about rural America. And so I did my best. And I answered the questions as I could, and I promised myself that at some point I would actually maybe do a study of rural America so that I wouldn't feel like quite so much of a fraud when I would have these conversations. That is, in some ways the origins of this book.

I think another piece of it is that I live in a very small town, in a very rural corner of southwest Ohio, and I teach in a very small town in a very rural corner of southwest Ohio. So this is the landscape that I see all the time. And I decided I needed to understand this a little bit more than I did. And so it was that that prompted me to write a book about rural America, though I consider myself an urban historian.

**PIPA:** So talk a little bit about so. So let's start into with one of the, the main themes that you start with actually was, which is this distinction between rural places and rural spaces. I mean, you opened the book, by describing Bye, a little bit of a conversation about what does it mean to be rural or what do we even mean by rural and, and even talk about, someone from China, talking about it as the big empty.

**CONN:** Big empty, right.

**PIPA:** So tell us a little bit about that. Tell us a little bit about that distinction about place and space. Yeah.

**CONN:** So there are a couple levels, I think, to the answer to that question. One of the first things I discovered that continues to surprise me is that we don't really have a hard definition of what we mean by rural at all. The Census Department has been really good about counting urban areas. And then in the mid-20th century, we moved to metropolitan statistical areas. And there's some precision about how they define all of this. And basically what gets counted as at as rural, at least by the census folks, is everything that's left over. And scholars have spent a long time in many conferences and in many books trying to actually define what rural means. And nobody has really come up with an answer.

So as a, as a historian and as a person interested in kind of American thought in American culture, rural all of a sudden struck me as a blank screen onto which we project a set of our own images or desires or yearnings or whatever you want to call them. And I think the distinction that I, that I was trying to draw in the book is that when we do that projecting, we have certain ideas about what a rural

place ought to be. It's over the river and through the woods. To grandmother's house we go. It's the home on the range where the skies are not cloudy all day. We project this on to that rural blank slate. But what we really, I think, have created in this country is not so much places with all of the, sentimental meanings that that that word has.

We've created spaces that are rural, that are, that are not very much not very, densely inhabited. And space has a very different connotation. It's empty. It's sort of devoid of meanings. It's we talk about, you know, space cadets and, empty space and all of those other things. And I think it's that friction between the realities of urban space and the desires that we have for rural places that causes, a lot of the frictions and maybe anger or grievance resentments that you see in certain pockets of rural America today. I really think that what we've created is rural spaces and not really rural places, with all the meaning that we that we freight that word place with.

**PIPA:** Well, I think, you know, so let's just stay on this a little bit before we even get to the, the larger drivers and, and how you identify rural. I mean, you mentioned, for example, where you teach, which is Miami University. It's in Oxford, Ohio, but Oxford is actually in Butler County, and Butler is actually part of the MSA for Cincinnati. Right. So is that rural or not? You know, becomes like, like and even some of the examples in the book where, where you talk about a place and I'm familiar with North Carolina because I spent a lot of time there, a place like Fayetteville, which has a sort of a small town feel, but frankly, it's a small city that's a couple hundred thousand people, right? And so we tend to group all these places together, but some of them aren't rural at all.

**CONN:** One of the things that I say at the very outset of the book is that the idea of rural America singular is silly, because rural America really needs to be thought of as plural. And I think the, the, the image that first pops to mind when you say rural is essentially an Iowa farm field. It's not an Appalachian coalfield. It's not, timberlands in northern Maine or things like this, but at some level, all of those places share low density, small, you know, low population and so forth. So I think at one level, right, we're talking about a lot of different things using the same word. And that's part of the imprecision that I was really struck by when I started to do the research, that we haven't really sorted this out in a in a useful way.

Native American Indian reservations are rural by any measure, but they're certainly not the same, experience as Teton County, Wyoming, which is the wealthiest county per capita in the country. Right. So you've got lots of different things going on here. So that's a fair point. I think that, what I, what I, what I. Fell back on, just as a way of trying to, move the book along. Is that when you when you are in a place that big, empty, you feel like you're in a rural place, you sort of know it when you see it and you're not necessarily aware that you're part of a metro. You're standing in part of a metropolitan statistical area because there's nobody around you, and it's all soybean fields or whatever it happens to be, and it feels empty. And that, I think, for many Americans, is what rural is really all about. There's a combine over there. There's maybe a little pond over here, and that's what rural is. It's more an effective definition than a really, data oriented definition.

**PIPA:** Well, well, let's move into some of the, the big, segments of the book. And really, these are ways, in which I think you try to describe, what's shaped kind of rural America throughout history. It's kind of a historical. Yeah. It's a, it's a historical analysis of, of, some of the major forces that have really affected rural America, economically, socially, even demographically, and those, you know, militarization, industrialization, corporatization and suburbanization. Talk to us a little bit when you say militarization, what's the what's the relationship there between the US as a military power and, and that military being connected to some of its economic prowess actually, and its standing in the world, and rural America.

**CONN:** So. Let me take two steps back, if I might. When I sat down to do this book, I, I was reading about rural America in all the same places that you were reading about rural America. And the word that kept coming up over and over again is crisis or some variation of that. And this is the 2016 campaign and all of that. And I thought, okay, I'm going to do I'm going to do a historical deep dive on where does this rural crisis come from? And then when I began to, to do that work, what I, what I realized is that it doesn't really have an origin point, because almost every decade that you look at from really the 1850s to the present day, this is the way people are talking about rural places. They're in decline, they're in crisis, etc., etc.. And so I thought, this is not the right way, therefore, to look at all of this. So what's really going on here?

And I thought, well, let's, let's look at these four big forces of American modernity and see how, what their relationship is to rural areas. So the first section of the book is about the military, because I think it's a fair argument to make. It's what I say in the book that before you can even have some, an area that you call rural in this country, what you have is military intervention. It's what turns what Americans, white Americans saw as wilderness into, with, with it's with its wild, untamed connotations into what we think of as rural, with its pastoral and agricultural land and small community, sense of the word. And what we're talking about is that between 1790 and 1890, the U.S. military fought by anybody's best count, over 1600 military battles with native people to clear that space.

That's what the army was for in the 19th century, that the, you know, the age of Indian wars is over in 1890. And then the American military becomes, a different kind of operation. But that's what it's there to do. And right behind the army clearing out this space comes the Army Corps of Engineers. And I was fascinated. I didn't know a thing about the Army Corps of Engineers before I started this book. And at one point, I actually thought that I could do a whole book on the Army Corps, except that it is. So it's like an octopus. I mean, I probably don't have to explain that to people from this town. If I would call various units of them looking for kind of arc, and they would say, oh no, no, that's not here, that's over there. And then I would call over there. So no, no we don't.

And I could never actually pin this thing down. But I, you know, by my own back of the envelope, I don't think there's a major watershed in the continental United States that hasn't been reshaped by an Army Corps of Engineers project and most likely several Army Corps of Engineers projects. And so this makes possible the, you know, the irrigation, the transportation of all of that agricultural goods. So in the 19th century, at any rate, creating rural America, creating the space for homestead pioneers is a military proposition, for starters. And I think that's worth remembering. In the 20th century, what you get are is the expansion of the military footprint across, rural America to the point where, again, by anybody's best count, military bases, installations and, and the various different words that the DoD uses, account for an area the size of the state of Kentucky. And this is everything from, you know, a missile silo in South Dakota to the White Sands Testing Range in New Mexico, which is like 3.5 million acres large.

So that that that has also reshaped the landscapes to a profound extent. And then, of course, those bases become the economic engines of a lot of these communities. And one of the things I did in the book was a compare contrast, a little exercise between, Fort Hood, Texas, which is probably the largest U.S. Army base in the country, starts during the Second World War. And, Fort Sawyer in on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which was an Air Force base, that starts in the 1950s, Strategic Air Command outpost. And, Fort Hood is still there. And so it is no longer what you might think of as a rural place. Right? It's filled with used car lots and strip clubs and bars and so on and so forth.

When Fort Sawyer, Fort Sawyer, the Sawyer base was closed in 95 as part of the base realignment process. And when that. So it was the economic engine for about 40 years. And then when the plug gets pulled. That whole region, Marquette County, Upper Peninsula, just implodes and they start closing schools and they actually closed power plants because there's no longer any need to run electricity. So the dependency of these rural communities on, on, on military spending, you know, I wanted to look at it cutting both ways. Here's what happens when the oil contracts keep coming in. And here's what happens when they stop.

**PIPA:** And also, what about service in the military? Given that there's disproportionate like when you look at relative proportions, yep. Disproportionately our armed services actually come from.

**CONN:** That's right. If rural population, you know, again, depending on how you count it, is like 15 to 20% of the country. Rural people in the military, it's a disproportionate number. And I think this has, a lot to do with that proximity, that these are the places when you grow up next to a base. And your cousin enlisted when he graduated from high school, you're going to enlist as well. And so nobody, statistically speaking, enlists in the Army from Manhattan. But they sure do enlist from Oxford, Ohio. Or from, Dayton, where there's a big, Air Force base there. People then seem to come back as well. So you enlist, you do your service, and then we're noticing that, military people are retiring back to these places where they did spend some time during their service at one of these bases. So they're now these communities of retired military. So it's all like an it's almost like a life cycle, right?

**PIPA:** The veterans are disproportionately right as well.

**CONN:** And I think we noticed this during the, the Iraq, Afghanistan, wars that the, that, that this is when we noticed that the military had become disproportionately rural if Vietnam was a working class war. I think Iran and Iraq was a was a small town or

**PIPA:** So, so just to summarize on the military side, it's really a military proposition to clear the space to create rural through. As we move west, with active harm to, to native tribes. Right. To make that happen. And then the ongoing military involvement said the US then say, see both bases and outposts for the military actually setting up shop because you need space for some of that training. And then we've also got service, disproportionately rural in the present day as well.

**CONN:** That's right.

**PIPA:** So.

**CONN:** I going to share one amazing, anecdote. So when, when this happens, of course, when the military arrives to set up a big base and let's, you know, first World War, second World War, this happens a lot, Fort Hood. They seize property through eminent domain. So there are about 400 farm families that get cleared off the land in that east central Texas area. They were then invited by the U.S. Army to watch tanks and artillery use their own houses for target practice. Which was a very I when I found that in the archive, I just that sort of made my head explode. Yeah.

**PIPA:** Was, you know, the power dynamic.

**CONN:** That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

**PIPA:** And a couple of things that you were just saying at the end of, that trajectory that we see as big themes of, in a sense, military for some of those places is the mono economy. Yeah. No economy leaves the place itself is not very resilient to being able to survive.

**CONN:** Yeah. Yeah, I think that's exactly right. Because everything that has grown up caters to that base. Whether it's the contractors or the caterers or all that stuff. And when there is no base there anymore, there isn't. Yeah, there isn't a lot of resiliency is not much of a foundation to build anything else on.

**PIPA:** Yeah. Well, let's move to, the second trend, that you talk about, which is, I guess industrialization. And, the role of rural places as the US itself becomes an industrial power and, and the dynamics there as well, with a lot of capital coming in from the outside. And, and I know and we've had this conversation even with, some of the previous authors we've had, that it also sets up the dynamics, many times I've been extractive economy where you're taking resources from a place. Right. And, and that is benefiting, you know, other places, other people who might not even be rural. But a lot of the times that value is not left behind as well.

**CONN:** Yeah. There's a couple of things that, that, that I think are going on when I, when I teach my survey course of American history and we get to industrialization, I tell it as the story of America's big cities, Chicago and Detroit and Pittsburgh and whatnot. As I was doing the research for this book, one of the things I that that sort of smacked me in the face is that agriculture in this country is industrializing in exactly the same period, at exactly the same speed. And the little factoid, a little pub trivia that I would throw out about this is that in 1865, right after the Civil War, it takes 61 hours of labor to produce an acre of wheat. By 1890, it takes three hours to produce an acre of wheat. And that's all because of industrial technologies that are all being made in Chicago and then being shipped out to Iowa or Kansas or wherever.

So I want us to consider that agriculture is now, and for at least 100 odd years, has been an industrial operation. It's not. Again, it's not the antithesis of Henry Ford's factory. It's just a different version. Economies of scale, increasing automation, yada, yada. And you all know that story which accelerates after the Second World War with the advent of, petrochemicals and all of that stuff as well. But I also was struck by the fact that as so as that's happening, there's a surplus labor market in a lot of these, especially in the midsection of the country, right, where you don't need all these kids to work on the farm anymore, because you've got a big combine that's going to do it all for you.

So where are those people going while they're moving to Chicago? And so you start to see population loss in rural counties as early as 1910. Certainly after the, First World War. So the solution to that problem and it starts, people start talking about this in the 1920s and then it becomes policy in the 1930s is let's move the manufacturing out into the rural. Areas and we can keep those kids down on the farm. And so this is when the Roosevelt administration and the New Deal begin to think about how do we decentralize American industry out of Cleveland and Detroit and move it into rural areas where there are no jobs and where the farm economy no longer needs that much labor? So fits and starts. And I would argue that the Tennessee Valley Authority was created primarily to provide cheap electricity to entice factories to move into that region. Flood control? Yes. Residential electricity. Yes.

But I think what its real selling point was now you can have cheap electricity if you want to open up your factory. But this this happened. This accelerates after the, after the Second World War with Eisenhower and then through the Kennedy Johnson administrations, a variety of programs to stimulate, to entice, to incentivize factories to move out of the urban cores into farm fields. And there there's, you know, a whole set of reasons why this, is attractive. But. Right. We want to industrialize the countryside in order to provide jobs that are otherwise not there. So again, during the, well, I guess it was 2018 or 2019. The Lordstown General Motors plant was in the news because GM announced it was closing it.

And here was yet another sign of rural decline. GM was going to abandon this, this factory in the northeast corner of Ohio, in fact, Lordstown, when I was digging into this, is among the very first of those automobile plants built in a cornfield. It starts in the late 1950s, as GM is decentralizing itself and moving into these, into these rural areas. And the automobile industry, I think is the best example of the rural-ization, the rural-ization of American manufacturing.

**PIPA:** Well it's interesting. So before I touch on the manufacturing, because I want to talk a little bit about then what's happened since, but let's just go back to the industrialization of agriculture. Because you tell the story of rural bouts and get bigger, get out and how policy actually sort of drove to not only not only industrialization and the large productivity gains in agriculture, but then also the corporatization in some way and creating the large agribusinesses.

And it's interesting because you talk about Stuttgart, Arkansas, the rice capital of the world. I was actually there for the podcast Reimagined Rural. You can find it on Spotify, Google, wherever you get your podcast, visit towns across the U.S.. Shameless promotion. Now back to regular programing. And I was there I was in DeWitt, which is right near Stuttgart. And it's interesting because, as I was talking to folks in the town, and they, you know, they call Stuttgart, as you say, the rice capital of the world. And there is a very large, wealthy company that that does very well off of all the rice that's produced there. But the farmers themselves are having to go off farm for additional income because they're not making ends meet. What are like what are they doing? Aren't they the dynamics there. Right.

**CONN:** Yeah. So if the trajectory of American agriculture since the late 19th century is basically a straight line towards larger and larger efficiencies, which create larger and larger surpluses and so on and so forth, it has left individual farmers, sort of caught in the middle of a lot of different economic dynamics. The New Deal is the first federal recognition that this is a problem, and we have to deal with surplus production and at least try to guarantee farmers some kind of a price stability. And we sort of tinker with a lot of this. Well, really up to the present day, the, the imperatives to get big, are, are driven, I think, by some of the way farm policy has been shaped. If we had shaped foreign policies in other ways, we might have had a different food production system. I think I think, after Michael Pollan and others, we are all there's a there's a fairly large shared consensus that our food production system is way out of joint, and doesn't really do farmers any good.

It doesn't do our waistlines any good, it doesn't do the environment any good. And it does seem to me. And I was talking I was mentioning to you earlier, I did another, talk with a with another, organization here in town about the farm bill. And it does seem to me that there ought to be an opportunity to rethink the way we do our farming, to get outcomes that we'd be happier with. I think we'd be happier if more people could earn a living income as farmers. I think we'd be happier if food production systems were less reliant on petrochemicals and herbicides. And, the company formerly known as Monsanto, et cetera, etc.. But somehow getting everybody to sit down and undo what we've done for the last 50 years, that's above my pay grade.

**PIPA:** Yeah. But it is interesting that I was in, I was part of a, a group that visited the Basque region of Spain last year, and their policy was the opposite. They actually protected their small farmers, and they continued to have pretty vibrant small farms. But to your point, like. Re unwinding the policies that we've had, which has driven us to kind of this, this larger and larger. Is fairly entrenched right now.

**CONN:** Yeah. And I would say that at least and now that, you know, the percentage of Americans who are actually farming for a living is, I think, now below two. So it's a tiny, percentage of people. But for those people and I was in some conversations, I did a radio show in northern Wisconsin a few months ago and got on the line with, with a very angry dairy farmer in northern Wisconsin who, who's whose anger is at the federal government for creating, corporate welfare for his neighbors, who are these large scale producers? And he went on and on about how you can how you can tell who these guys are because they drive around in these enormous Ford pickup trucks with the mag wheels and, and on and on and on, because they're all cashing these enormous subsidy checks, and a guy like him who's got a small herd and is just trying to make it get squeezed. And so I think this also generates the foreign policy itself may be the source of anger at the federal government in certain pockets of, of the country.

**PIPA:** Well, to go back to your point about manufacturing, and decentralizing manufacturing, what also strikes me, and in fact, a lot of the headwinds that some small places are facing today, we decentralized manufacturing that became kind of the economy of different small towns. But then we engaged in other policy decisions, like around trade agreements or even antitrust enforcement, that provided the opportunity for those manufacturing to move out. And we didn't have much of a policy response for that to.

**CONN:** What was going to.

**PIPA:** Happen to what was going to happen. I was in North Carolina when we lost in real time our furniture manufacturing, our textile mills. Right. And corporatization, broadleaf tobacco. And kind of

the policy response was retraining money. And I. Right. I was kind of like, well, what are we training for? Like, we're not creating incentives for something to replace that. Yeah. As an economy is that.

**CONN:** So when I was thinking about all of this, it seemed to me that that right there is a, an almost a rock and a hard place. There's a, there are two outcomes when the factory comes to the small town. The first outcome is that it works for a little while. It employs some people, they do well. And then the factory picks up and move someplace else, where you're going to get even cheaper land or cheaper labor or better tax breaks from the local, the state, government. So boom and bust. That's one outcome. The second outcome, is that the factory shows up and actually it does really well. And what I'm thinking about here is the, Honda's first, manufacturing plant in Marysville, Ohio, which was a tiny town in the middle of the state and is now a sprawling suburb, on the far edges of Columbus, because that factory has boomed.

And what you discover are people who say, well, it's not rural anymore, right? It's a sense of loss, almost of what used to be here, but has been displaced now by all of these people, by all of, the huge plants that have that have been built and so on and so forth. So, yeah, it's almost you can't win with this at some level. I think that the. I guess as a historian, I would say that even at the time observer, some observers were critical of this move, this push to, to move industry into the country for exactly this reason. It's not going to last. And then you're going to leave these communities just as cratered and maybe worse than they were beforehand.

This is not the right way to go about rural economic development. Simply moving a factory from point A to point B, I'm thinking about, Arthur Morgan, who wrote a lot about small communities, was very critical of this in the 50s. So it's not as if we didn't see this, I think, or at least some people didn't see this as a as an eventual outcome. But I don't know, it's I think it was for too many people, just too attractive to not pursue.

**PIPA:** So I guess that's one of the other themes. So I talked about the theme of like a mono economy or a lower diversification of economies, and that leaves rural hanging, whether it's the military base leaving or the manufacturing plant leaving. I think another recurring theme that we hear a lot in these

conversations that we're doing around rural is. You know, it's not like there's perfect alternatives or really great alternatives. And so if an opportunity comes to town. It's hard not to take advantage of that opportunity because.

**CONN:** Because the town next door will if you don't.

**PIPA:** So there's

**CONN:** That's right. But I but I also do think that it does this particular system that we've created, and maybe the, you know, the, the most, baroque, pompous example of this was when Amazon went shopping for its headquarters. Right. And every city in America had had to bow down, before Amazon. It pits these communities in competition with each other and pretty and then states in competition with each other in ways which are zero sum. And, or at least that's the way it often plays out and not particularly conducive to, to more sustainable building of communities. Yeah, that's my sense.

**PIPA:** Well, let's move to corporatization. Because you also talk a little bit about, you know, a little bit of the mythology of the mom and pop store. And there.

**CONN:** Is a lot of Main Street.

**PIPA:** Main Street and, and the to be fair, there is still, you know, a lot of locally owned businesses in, in rural places. But there's also a corporate, right. Especially even in the retail market, a history of corporate involvement, in those main streets in rural America. Talk to us a little bit about those trends.

**CONN:** Yeah. I was, intrigued to discover that the original chain retail operation that our grandparents grew up with, the Woolworth's store, was the creation of rural economies that, I, you know, my first Woolworth was in downtown Philadelphia, but that was those were very late opening, mostly Woolworth made its millions opening in farm towns, first in, New York and Pennsylvania, and then it spread nationwide in the 19th century. So. So what does this mean for these farm families who come in on a Saturday to do their shopping at Woolworth's in the middle of Iowa?

It means that they are participating in, in a national economy, a corporation buying products being manufactured not just all over the country, but in the case of Woolworth. Woolworth would import a lot of stuff from Europe as well. So you work you were out there on your farm, but you were connected in all kinds of ways to the national and international, consumer markets, through Woolworth's. And I also spent some time with JC Penney, which starts out west, in very small towns and kind of then creeps east. I will, part of the reason I wrote this chapter was because as I was working on this book, my wife said to me repeatedly as we would drive around, you have to write about Dollar General. You have to find out what's going on with Dollar General. So I did it because I, you know, I'm not stupid. I was going that's what she asked me to do. Well, that's what I'm going to do.

And Dollar General in some ways has filled the void that Woolworths, which has kind of a shadow of its former self, and Penney's, which is also a shadow of its former self, has left, Dollar General, is really it starts in the 1930s. Its first iterations, starts in a tiny little town in Kentucky, and it makes all of its money in these small towns and pockets of rural America. You all know the story of Walmart. There are about 3500 Walmart stores in the country today. There are roughly \$17,000 General stores, across the country. And it's almost a, Heisenberg uncertainty principle problem because they open and close so fast that by the time you finished counting, that number is already wrong. Because, and they're very proud of this. They can open or close a store in 24 hours and they and that's and so it's a very different kind of experience than the old Woolworth, which was a mainstay of a community.

It's where you went to have at the lunch counter and so on and so forth. Dollar general is, I'm trying to be polite here. It's like, it is like a tick on these, rural and impoverished communities. And I tried as best I could to get into whatever corporate archive there might be. With Dollar General, I never I never made it. But that's even the stuff that's just out there published, is incredibly revealing. If you put a map of Dollar General stores on the wall that is more or less as accurate a map as you're going to get of rural poverty. In the United States, because that's what it feeds on. Customers who can't afford Walmart. That's our base. And they're quite proud of the fact that when the when the economy is good, we do well. And when the economy is bad, we do better.

They root for economic downturns because that's when more and more customers are driven to Dollar General. It's kind of appalling. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that in a lot of these places, it's the only game in town. And so if you're going to have retail at all in many of these communities, it's Dollar General or nothing, but it really it's an evil place.

**PIPA:** Well, so the history is that rural places have always participated in the national economy, even. Well. I do think even in your own comments right there, you're pointing out the differences between, say, a Woolworth's and Dollar General. Woolworth's was a community institution. In some ways, it was a third space. Yep. You know, people, it was a gathering space. Told them, I really don't know the economics. I don't know how well they paid their people or whatever. But it does seem as if it were an if, if as if they were seen as, you know, a positive anchor institution in, in downtowns, whereas. Some of the ways in which Dollar General or maybe even other chains operate today, it's not. Enabling the economic activity. It's kind of sucking economic activity away.

**CONN:** Yeah, I think I think you're absolutely right. Frank Woolworth, when he was running the show at Woolworth's, was insistent that the people he hired become active members of that community. And so they weren't sponsoring Little League teams in the 1890s, but that they were doing similar kinds of things. There's no little league teams sponsored by a Dollar General anywhere, because that's not what they're. That's not their business model. So I do really think it reflects a shift in, in both the, the economies of these rural places, and the impoverishment of a lot of areas, but also in the way we think about capitalism and, and the kind of social obligation, social responsibilities that retailers like Penney's and Woolworth used to feel and which they clearly do not feel anymore.

**PIPA:** Yeah. So let's, let's touch on the, the that final trend of suburbanization and the effects that, it's had on shaping rural. And then we're going to, I'm going to start with a question that we've already gotten online and then and open up to questions from the audience. So suburbanization. Yeah.

**CONN:** So one of the things that, that you notice, driving around where I drive around, you notice that I think you have to go further and further out now in Virginia to notice it, as the sprawl continues. But. Bluntly speaking, every suburban development in the United States is built on agricultural. What was

agricultural land? Okay, it's not 100% true, but by and large. And the model here is Levittown, which the first of those is built on potato farms, the second of which is built on, spinach and broccoli farms. Agricultural land is easy to build on. And so what I wanted to explore was the extent to which suburbanization, which most scholars. I think you should correct me here, but most scholars still think of as a kind of, center periphery phenomenon. Right. It's from the city outward white flight, that that the city is growing this way. I wanted to sort of look at it from the other direction.

What does suburban growth look like if you're in these rural areas that are now being gobbled up by real estate developments? And I think that there are a couple of interesting implications, that that I came across, the first of which is that when we look at postwar suburban development, especially, say, 5060s, 70s, the growth of these places, these regions is not simply being driven by outward migration from urban course. The numbers just don't add up. They're far more people moving into these suburbs than are leaving Chicago or Atlanta or what have you. So who are these people who are moving in while many of them are moving from even further out rural counties, that, where there aren't any economic opportunities, once upon a time, they might have moved into Chicago, but now they move into a suburb of Chicago looking for economic opportunities. So that's one thing I think we need to understand. I think the second.

**PIPA:** So from remote to near right versus from the center out.

**CONN:** Correct. I think both of those things are going on. Then I think, what you, what you get are, interesting political clashes where, the expectations of suburbanites that are coming from the city meet the political culture of, of the rural areas they are now moving into. And I think this plays out in the, at least I found on a number of occasions. It plays out in that most prosaic, boring but essential business of zoning and land use. I've read zoning codes. I've helped write a zoning code. It made me fall asleep. But if ever the devil were in any details, it's zoning. And so what you get are fights over, over land use, over whether or not you can maintain the agricultural uses in nearby areas. Now that this is a suburban development, and I think in there somewhere is, is a mixing of, political cultures, which we haven't really understood and which I think may still shape some of the political discourses that are happening, especially on the kind of suburban or exurban fringes even today.

**PIPA:** All right, well, let me start. So if you have got a question. Let us know. Raise your hand. I'm going to start with a question, from the audience that came over online. And it's about opioids. Actually, this person lives in the heart of Appalachia, Tennessee, North Carolina border and experience, even economic activity is limited because it's hard to find working age people who don't have haven't had an experience, with, with opioids or with, with math or, and. You know, kind of the health implications have had a lot of economic implications for rural towns. But it's not something necessarily that you go into in the book, in great detail. And, I think the question is, you know, to what extent do policymakers need to be grappling with this in connection to how it fits into the trends that you've, you've outlined?

**CONN:** Yeah. So there's a lot going on there. And let me see if I can tease some of it apart. The first thing I would say, and this is, this is exactly what you're not supposed to do, when you're doing a book talk is to recommend somebody else's book. But if you don't know the book by Beth Macy Dopesick. She's terrific. And I.

**PIPA:** Think you also.

**CONN:** Also said. That's right. And a lot she, she grew up, not too far from where I live right now. And we've become, correspondents a little bit. So that's I think that's the go to book if you want to really explore this at a, at a fine grained and journalistic level. And she is just a terrific reporter. I think that let me back up and say that when we think about the crisis of rural health care, what we're really talking about is what how do you deliver the kind of health care that the rest of us have grown to expect in areas with low population density? Why is it that health clinics and rural hospitals are closing at the rates that they are closing? It's because the catchment areas that are required for patients gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

And this is also true, just by the way, as a parallel with rural school districts, which continue to close and consolidate because there simply aren't enough kids in a particular radius to actually make a school district run. So if we want to deliver better rural health care, or let's say, even to the standards

that metropolitan Americans expect, that is going to require some kind of a subsidy. I don't think there's any, at least as I've thought about it. There's no other I don't know how you square that circle otherwise, and I know it's subsidized already, but we need to make a kind of national decision. Do we expect health care in areas of sparsely populated population to be able to get an MRI? This afternoon? And if the answer is yes, then that's going to require a tremendous amount of money from somewhere, not from the private sector, which isn't going to do this. If the answer is no, we're not prepared to do that, then that has other kinds of policy implications for how we deliver health care in these low density regions. And I'm not advocating one or the other. I think it's a conversation we're not quite having.

**PIPA:** Questions? Comments? Questions. Anyone in the audience just raise your hand. Why don't we start up front? So just let us know your name. And remember, a question ends in a question mark. Is that not on?

**Speaker 3** Now it's on. Yeah. There we go. My name is Eric. Would be. I'm a research assistant in GTS. And this is probably also going to be a question that there's a lot to unpack. But just what are your initial thoughts about the rise of online work potentially being a fifth force of American modernity, and will it help save rural America, or will it lead more to its deterioration?

**CONN:** So. One of the things I actually wrote a little essay about this, which is not part of this book, but one of the things that I've noticed has recurred across the 20th and now, 21st centuries, is that at moments of national crisis, there are a lot of voices which say, Now we're all going to leave the city and move back to the country. This happened during the Great Depression. It happened in the 1970s, late 60s and early 70s. In the midst of all of that. It happened during the COVID pandemic. Now we're all going to leave New York, and we're all going to move back out into the country. And now we can do it because we can all work remotely. I don't think I wouldn't put my money there. Because I don't think it's simply the technologies of remote work, that are at play here. I think that people want, I think that, there are reasons why. Urban spaces exist, urban forms exist, and I, there may be some of this that happens, but I don't think it's going to be significant.

Now, I make a lot of predictions, which I should never do as a historian. Most of them are wrong. Some of them are spectacularly wrong. And so I offer that caveat to say I'm not I don't I don't see it happening now. Let me footnote that as well. Go back to the 1930s, and I mentioned that the TVA is designed to deliver cheap electricity. This is part of also the Rural Electrification Administration. At the start of the Great Depression. Less than 10% of rural households had electricity by 1960. 90 plus percent of rural households had electricity. And that's because of the New Deal on rural electrification, the creation of rural co-ops and all of that, electric co-ops and all of that stuff. Fast forward to the last 20 years.

And rural people, I see this on signs all the time when I drive, around Ohio. There's no high speed internet or the high speed internet is not very good or, you know, and we haven't created a, you know, 2.0 version of rural electrification for the internet. So it's going to be hard sell to do remote work in places that don't have access to broadband and high speed and all that other sort of stuff. A problem again, which the private sector is not going to solve because it's not profitable right there.

**PIPA:** I mean, analogize that to what you were saying around, rural health care. We actually are leaving broadband up to the private sector. Correct? And now only just starting to subsidize it. But it's not a public utility. I mean, right, Bill, it's still market based. Other questions. Nope. We're not hearing you.

**Speaker 3** Oh, okay. Sorry. Thank you. You. So kind of. Maybe you're right. Sorry. I'm Riley. And this is kind of a good place to build on, so my girlfriend and I are locked in an internal debate. She grew up in Arlington. I grew up in rural upstate New York. 5.5 hours from the city. So she grew up with, you know, the idea that they were subsidizing the rest of Virginia with tax dollars. I grew up benefiting from those same kinds of tax dollars from New York City that were being sent upstate. Her dad actually worked at the FCC on the Rural Broadband Project before he retired. And so we're caught in this constant debate over whether or not these subsidies should continue.

She's a young student in economic policy, and she thinks about this sort of issue through an economic mindset and sees these subsidies as subsidizing a less efficient way of life. Why can't you

just move? Is there? Yeah. Is the feeling. Obviously, you can probably guess my, my position on that, but I wonder what you both think about this idea that, you know, what do these subsidies mean long term? Are we subsidizing a less efficient way of life? Why can't people just move?

**CONN:** Well, it was it, in fact, somebody. Well, no, I'm not going to name names. That would be impolite. But that has certainly been an economic argument made by, let's say, kind of, free market fundamentalists that the problem of rural America is solved by moving out of rural America. And there has been some work, you know, that's better than I do, I'm sure. The demographic work that we are not as mobile as we once were. And so. Yeah, and so in the 50s, you know, IBM, I've been moved. You, you went to where the jobs were and everybody went to California or whatnot, and we're not doing that to the same extent. So there is, I think, something. Anomalous in this, in this recent moment, at least in terms of the trends of American history. I think the answer that I would offer, to your question, though, is, is efficiency is a, I think, a terrible way of organizing a society.

I think it is vicious and pernicious and in the end, ultimately leaves people, dissatisfied, unhappy and resentful. But we would have to sit down and decide why. Why is it important that your small town in upstate New York, have access to X, Y, and Z? And there's probably you there may well, very well be a good answer to that, but that's at the level I think of culture, values, what we are as a society. It's not at the level of efficiency and, and productivity and all the rest of that stuff. So maybe we should get your girlfriend on the line and, and right. And see what she has to say.

**PIPA:** I would, I would add to that, that paradoxically, efficiency does not lead to sustainability. In fact, can often undermine ongoing sustainability. And I would and we could we could spend a long time trying to unpack that, but, I think you even see this in the shift to green energy. Now, we are continuing to find new and, more technological ways to produce electricity, but yet our electricity demand is also going off the roof. And so we're kind of in this never ending cycle. So, I would offer that as, as kind of a rejoinder. And I would also offer and this is one thing that I felt like was missing a little bit from your book. I think I thought the analysis of Watts shaped rural America was, you know, really excellent.

Really, really, found the ways in which those forces that you talked about, really have shaped those towns, but there wasn't much discussion of the interdependence between rural and the cities. Yeah. So it's not like cities exist on their own. Right. I mean, part of what's happening in the places that you grew up in upstate New York is the dairy being produced to feed the people in the cities, and it is the energy being produced to power those cities. And it is where I was in North Carolina, the textiles being produced to clothe people in the cities. And so. We often think of like these as a subsidization, whereas it's actually the consumerism happening in the cities that is driving what's happening in rural America as well. And so I think we, we forget that at our peril. And when we forget that, we also create a pull or like this polarization that instead of thinking about how the two need to exist better together, rather than seeing once one, one in opposition to the other.

**CONN:** I think you're absolutely right. And I think that's in some ways, one of the things I wanted people to take away from this book that in fact, this divide, which is why I wrote this book in the first place, because everybody kept asking me about it. There is a seamlessness here which people haven't really appreciated, or it isn't convenient to talk in those terms. Those homestead farmers that go out there in the 1870s, are, are sending food back to Chicago. So it's, it's those urban populations which make their farming life possible. It's that farming life which makes that urban population growth happen, etc., etc.. There's a symbiosis there. Which in some ways I think makes rural America different from a lot of older societies? Right? Rural America doesn't never really existed as a as an independent cultural entity. It's always been attached in important ways to urban centers, railroads, technologies, markets, and so forth. I want to come back to you and your girlfriend.

**PIPA:** Saying that's different than Europe or other places where there that's been this organic growth for a longer period of time.

**CONN:** That's right.

**PIPA:** We did clear the way through active harm to the populations that were here beforehand, right?

**CONN:** But I want to come back to your girlfriend for just a moment. I really want to get into that therapeutic space. Seems like you guys are having troubles. But, I part of the conversation I would want us to have, about. Is this worth subsidizing and why? And again, the answer may be yes. The answer may be no. But it also, I think, has to include a recognition of exactly what you guys are talking about, which is, that in fact, right. Nowadays urban areas, metropolitan areas are subsidizing rural areas. And plenty of those rural areas either will not acknowledge that, resent it, or just pretend, you know, it's not there. And I'm going to trot out a little correspondence I had with a retired planner from Clark County, Nevada, who contacted me a couple of weeks ago. Clark County has Las Vegas, but it's also empty in all kinds of ways.

And he put me on to something called the Code of the West, which he says you can find in many, many planning departments at the county level all across the, the West. And he sent me this from, Larimer County, Colorado, the introduction to the code of the West. It is important for you to know that life in the country, this is addressed to somebody who might be thinking about moving their buying property. It's important for you to know that life in the country is different from life in the city. County governments are not able to provide the same level of service that city governments provide. To that end, we're providing you with this following information, conclusion.

Even though you pay property taxes to the county, the amount of tax collected does not cover the cost of the services provided. In general, those living in the city subsidize the lifestyle of those who live in the country by making up the shortfall between the costs of services and the revenues received from rural dwellers. And then my little, my, my, my correspondent then said that he used to have these conversations in planning meeting saying, isn't that the definition of communism? Is this what we mean by red counties, that they are actually participating in this redistributive, process? So I think that's got to be part of the conversation. Right. And it isn't I don't think.

**PIPA:** I would also say I think we have to be. I would also say, I think we have to be really clear when we talk about, subsidization, what we mean by subsidization. You know, a lot of people look at the balance of payment analysis, that is done that that shows where, you know, federal flows tend to go to states that have, predominantly rural areas.

But those federal flows are often kind of the means tested programs. Rural is older. Rural is less healthy. That means more in terms of, Medicare, Medicaid. That means more in terms of Snap, which is the food stamps program. And a lot of money is actually that lead the federal government for infrastructure or other purposes, investment in what I would call the connectivity for economic activity, go directly to the states, and then the states decide where that money go. Yeah. And that money doesn't necessarily get to rural places, first off, because it still is metros that, have the political capital and often the capital in those states. Many of the rural places that I visit are actually starved for investment. So there may be federal flows subsidizing individual households, but actually finding the public investment to do the broadband, to do whatever it is they feel like they need in place to be able to, have kind of a different economic future that's actually very hard to, to access. And it's hard because there isn't the amount of people and bandwidth to be able to put all that together, actually.

**CONN:** To do. Which I would also add because I've been thinking about this a lot, and I knew you were going to ask me a lot of policy questions. Though I am a historian, right? I have enough trouble dealing with dead people. But I think another issue that that maybe needs more attention is the way in which governmental structures in rural areas themselves are inadequate, that I think a number of them, I suspect I would surmise that a lot of the political frustration that you find in certain pockets of rural America stems from the fact that they feel that their they have no democratic control over many of the decisions that are important in their lives, because the structures of democracy themselves are left over from the 19th century in many places, so they aren't able to keep up.

And so who steps in? Well, maybe it's the state, maybe it's the federal government that's seems unsatisfactory in some ways. When the anti-government, I just want to be left alone or I'm self-sufficient and independent has had a kind of backfired in a sense that I think lots of these communities feel powerless to do the things they might like to do to address the problems they feel they have, because in fact, the mechanisms are powerless. They're just not adequate to the task at the county level, at the township level, that sort of thing. So I'll throw that out there as well. Yeah.

**PIPA:** So let me go to a question now, that we received online. And, you were at Ohio State, for a while. What's your sense of the role that land grant universities should be playing in addressing the challenges in rural America?

**CONN:** Oh, what a great question. So there is a story to tell about the role of land grant universities in giving us the agricultural system we have today. And that might not be the happiest now story that we might want to tell. I do think that because of the way, you know, so, so, every county in the state of Ohio has an Ohio State extension office in it. And I am assuming this is true in Iowa and Illinois and everywhere else. And those extension offices are designed to work with farmers. Given the way agriculture has gone, it does seem to me that that infrastructure of extensions could begin to talk about other kinds of questions, not simply how do you increase the yield on a, on a on an acre of corn, that there are now other issues that would but those extension offices exist inside the colleges of Agriculture. You'd have to really and they're built that way, and they receive state money for that purpose. And then so on and so forth. So you have to really think about restructuring a lot of this. But there is an infrastructure already there for the state universities to be present in all of these places.

**PIPA:** Let's go back to the audience here. We've got questions right there.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Hi. Bruce Houston here. Thanks. Thanks for the fascinating talk and discussion. I missed the first ten. Did you touch on. If not, could you cover voting, procedures or not?

**CONN:** Procedures, but movement, how people are changing politically in the rural areas. So you certainly didn't miss me talking about that, because I don't know anything about it. Or at least that's not what I was interested in looking at. I do think that other scholars have tracked, the way in which a rurally located progressive political impulse has really evaporated. And maybe George McGovern was the last of these, prairie populist progressives, out there. So the scholarship, that has looked at this, especially in the Great Plains, which was, you know, in the 1880s, a hotbed of populism and kind of radical economic ideas.

You know, they were going to nationalize the railroads and whatnot. That what these scholars have found is, is and this we did talk a little bit about is that the shift in these political attitudes has a lot to do with, the relationship to the military and military spending and military bases. And if Democrats are the ones who claim that they're going to cut the military spending, then we're voting Republican now, though, that maybe not used to been the case, but by the 1980s, that shift seems to be taking place. Now, I wouldn't claim that that's true across all of rural America, where voting patterns have changed. But at least the scholarship that I know, would link this to the growth of military spending.

Yeah, even farmers, again, who see these communities as dependent on this manufacturing, this, military spending. I think one of the things that one kind of data point you might look at is that, in the 1880s, there's a there's a farm crisis, and it generates the political movement that we, the original populists in the 1980s, there's a farm crisis. And it generated Willie Nelson's farm aid. And when people tried to organize politically, farmers did not want to do that. It is really interesting what happened over the course of that, that that farmers didn't they were still voting for Ronald Reagan, even though those ag policies were. We're skewering them in a lot of ways.

**PIPA:** So let me ask a question. And this really doesn't come up in the book. And I there was a little bit of a question mark in my head as to why not? And, maybe it came up in, in your research, and maybe not, but what about the rule of faith?

**CONN:** Yeah. If I had had it that one of the things that happens when you write a book is you get really excited about what you're doing, and then at some point, you get really sick of what you're doing, and you just want it all to be over with, like a dental appointment. And I got to that point before I was going to add two chapters, which I, in retrospect, I think are really important. One is on the prison industrial complex in rural areas, and the second is on the role of churches and religious faith. So yeah, *Mia culpa* on that. I think it's an enormous and I do think that having just said that, there's a seamlessness between rural and urban.

I do think that this may prove to be a point of distinction, to say that urban people attend church at about the same rates that rural people attend church, which is what one scholar has argued recently,

is not to say very much. I live down the road from a church where they allegedly handle snakes, and that's a very different experience than going up to the National Cathedral here for services on a Sunday. So I do think that the, the kind of conservative kind of white Christian nationalism that you find in a lot of, pockets of rural America is linked to these churches. And simultaneously, the churches are what's left in a lot of these communities when the jobs have disappeared, when the schools have consolidated, when the health clinic isn't there. It serves as the center and really maybe the only center of community life.

**PIPA:** Yeah. That's a I mean, you know, having grown up in a rural town myself and I come from a big family, and even then, the network of friends and, and extended family that I have, I mean, when we were talking in our, in our last session with Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, one of the things that she said is there's a different perspective on how people see religion. While the polling may be similar across urban and rural, all rural folks were talk about their religion as the center of kind of their life almost immediately, often.

**CONN:** That's right.

**PIPA:** And even my own mother, who wasn't particularly religious, used to go to church every week. And I would ask her why. She goes, because it's my community. Like, that's, you know, I'm going there to be connected with what's going on in the in, in our community and how I can be part of and see people and those kinds of things.

**CONN:** Yeah. I have no doubt that that's right. And as I said, I see it as in part a consequence of the disappearance of lots of other places. Right. If the right if the third space kind of thing, the Friday night basketball game at the high school used to be there. Now it's not. And the Woolworth's isn't there, by the way. So you're not going to meet people there on Saturday afternoons. So. So what you have left are these churches, third spaces.

**PIPA:** Questions?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you, Lawrence with the Wells Fargo Foundation. I was curious, you touched on in a few points, the role of tourism and to bring that up. Last year, the USDA changed its rules on what they think we're rolling. So if you get a rural service grant.

**CONN:** That was after my book went to press. Right. So I don't have to say.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** You're totally fine. Totally fine. Good. But one of the things they did was they increased levels. So now larger cities and communities can take care of it. But they also introduced a rule about household density. So it removed a lot of ski towns, lake towns, mountain places. And so obviously we've talked about like the pastoral Thoreau, you know, idea what the rural is, but like the physical, you know, tactics of tourism. If that came up in your research.

**CONN:** Well, it's a yeah, so I didn't pursue this, but it is certainly the case when you if you were just to put, you know, make a long list of what are the economic activities across rural America? It ranges from, timber and mining to, ski resorts and national parks and, and it's all rural. I do think that that is, you know, in certain places, I'm thinking just next to where I live in West Virginia, if West Virginia can kind of finally let go of its attachment to coal mining. It what it's got left is a tourist economy. And there are people and places that are trying to do this. So I do think that that is a wave of a future. I don't know. It will probably be quite uneven, is my guess, but I think that's absolutely that's absolutely right.

**PIPA:** I'll also into your comment about West Virginia, West Virginia also in ten years, my prediction, and I guess I shouldn't be a Procrustes progressed, a, I shouldn't try to predict the future either. But, given some of the investments they, they've gotten over the past couple of years, they're also going to be the center of the clean energy economy in the United States.

**CONN:** Yeah. And this so one of the things that I wonder about, as well as I think about what's going to happen to a lot of these places in the future, is that right? This is this is we are in the middle of an energy transition. And as you mentioned a moment ago, it's fits and starts and it's right. It isn't going to be a straight line when I drive to campus, on Tulane roads each week, I have seen, signs that have sprouted up, in, in these fields. No industrial solar on farm land. There are ten counties, all rural

counties in Ohio, which have already passed ordinances forbidding commercial scale wind and solar projects from being built in those counties. So this troubles me, because I wonder if in 30 years we're going to have to say, well, how did those folks get left behind from the green energy revolution? And they got left behind because right now, a local decision making and just a kind of, reaction against any sense of change, any sense of what's going on right now.

**PIPA:** So let me go back to questions, from online and, your book is entitled lies of the land. This is a question. Who benefits from the lies about rural America?

**CONN:** Oh, that's so great. Who does benefit? As I said at the outset, I think there is a piece of many of us that wants our image of rural America to be true. When Gallup has done these periodic surveys, I think they started them in the 60s. And they ask Americans, where would you prefer to live? Not actually where you do live. The largest plurality, consistently say in a small town. And then the next tranche is on a farm. Now, most of these people have never been anywhere near a farm, but they have this image, that this is where life is good and this is where real Americans live.

So I think that in some ways, we all hang onto this because we want this all to be true. The pastoral, The Courier and Ives, the Norman Rockwell vision of rural America. And we, you know, it was a 19th century literary trope. And now we're all watching farmer Wants a wife on, reality TV. Because, you know, these guys project themselves as a kind of American masculinity. And that's what that's what you gals really want in the first place. And so forth. So we hang on to it because I think we want it to be true. So maybe that's how we all benefit.

**PIPA:** And so let me ask you, because you were also talking about the inadequacy of local governments in rural places. The often when we talk about it from a policy perspective, we're talking about the capacity, the constraints on capacity that those rural places, have in terms. You know, there's often volunteer elected officials. They're pretty thinly staffed, city halls. There was a question. Again, from online. Have you seen places where the that capacity is building to equip leaders in rural America? Kind of do the community engagement, convene conversations to kind of do the planning and think about what the future is going to be for those generations.

**CONN:** So the short answer to that question is, no, that's not really something I've looked at. But maybe the adjacent answer to the question is, one of the things I think a lot about is what would it mean if we imagined rural America re urbanizing? And what I mean by that is. How could we reshape rural America by reinvesting, rebuilding, rejuvenating all of these small towns, towns of 2000 people, towns of 4000 people, many of which are clearly suffering right to go down these main streets.

And a third of them are boarded up at the shops, and a third of them are antique shops, and a third of them are social service agencies. But I think that those, those capacities of democratic governance have to happen when you put a critical mass of people together and, and I and I think that one way to think about a rejuvenated rural America is to think about investing in rebuilding those small towns, encouraging people to live back there so that they now do have a capacity to think in collective and democratic ways about collective solve the problem solving.

**PIPA:** Well, and we're coming up on time here, but let me just, build on that a little bit, because I mentioned the podcast earlier, and in the podcast, I visit small towns and I visit rural places and it's, you know, it's selection bias because I'm visiting places where there's some positive change happening. Right? And what I'm doing is talking to those protagonists. And one of the things that's really struck me personally about all of that, which is not something that I expected when I started because I went in with a mindset of, okay, how does economic development work? How is change happening?

Narrative and not narrative, not national narrative about what it means to be rural or what's rural and urban, but narrative about your place, your community identity, the history of your place and what that place might offer as an opportunity or not for the future. Has been really important. And even in the place where I grew up, you know, often. And it was an it's it was a thriving place then, and it's a thriving place today of 2000 people. But there is still a subtext of if you really want to kind of beat the world, you need to leave. Yeah, right. Rather than, this is a home town that can be your home forever. You might go off, you might go to Ohio State, you might go to Miami University, you might even have a part of a professional career.

But you also might want to come back at some point or even continue to support that place in some way. And there's a bit of a narrative shift there, or a shift of even thinking about your place and what it offers and the importance of place to who you are as a person, and the importance of place to how that shaped you as well. I don't know. I don't know what that what that path. And you in your own research.

**CONN:** I think that's a really nice way to put it. You know, when Angus Deaton and, and Casey case, published their, you know, I think jaw dropping study a few years ago and, and, deaths of despair and what Deaton said, either in the book or in an interview I read, I can't remember. He said, these are people who've lost the narrative of their lives, and that's as good an explanation, vague though it is as any. And we're dealing with communities that have lost the narrative of their lives or their collective lives as well value.

**PIPA:** Their collective value.

**CONN:** Exactly. And so figuring out how you bring that back or how you're narrate, I think, is essential, because without that story to tell, most of the rest of it doesn't really make any sense. It's a program here. It's an it's an initiative over there, but it has to have some larger coherence in people's imaginations, to commit to. And I think that's I think that's a really lovely way to think about it. About how do you retell the story here?

**PIPA:** Well, let's end on that. No, I think that's a good note to end on. Steve, thanks very much for joining us from porch. Thanks to our audience for the thoughtful questions. For those of you who are here in person and have a copy of your book and one Steve to sign or are interested in, the book will be out front as well afterwards. But, thanks everyone for watching, and we will see you the next time on the front porch.

**CONN:** Thank you so much.