

**JAKE SIEWERT:** Hello everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. I'm Jake Siewert, Global Head of Corporate Communications here at the firm. And I'm delighted today to be joined by Anne Applebaum. Anne is a staff writer for *The Atlantic* and a Pulitzer Prize winning historian for the book *Gulag*. Her latest book is called *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism*. Anne, thank you so much for joining us today.

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** Thank you for having me.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** There was a quote in the book that somewhat encapsulates your thesis, "Given the right conditions, any society can turn against democracy. Indeed, if history is anything to go by, all of our societies eventually will." And while that is right over the long haul almost certainly, why do you think this movement, as you describe it, is happening right now? And what are the conditions, you know, the world is generally at peace. Societies, despite COVID, are relatively prosperous in the course of human history. Why are we seeing this develop today?

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** So, I mean, the book is a kind of extended answer to that question. And it's about why people inside democracies become attracted to autocratic ideas and thinking. But I can isolate a few things.

I mean, one I would cite is evidence that democracy is in danger. The fact that, even if you just look at US politics, but it's true of Polish politics, it's true in other countries too, the amount of disdain that political parties now have for one another, and the degree to which opposition is not recognized as legitimate. And parties who win, especially parties that come from this new radical far right, take power. And then assume that they have the right to rule. And they have the right to alter the system in favor of themselves because they have a special status. They're the only true representatives of the nation. They speak for the people. They're opposed to, whatever, foreigners, traitors, outsiders. You know? And they're the real patriots. So there's been a sea change inside the right whereas a part of the right now feels itself entitled to think and act that way.

But there are other ways in which democracy has been hollowing out for a long time. Our politics have become somewhat a realm of professionalization. I mean, it's almost like politics was something that happened among a specialized political class and ordinary people didn't really think about it or care much about

it. It seemed like something that happened far away. This was, you know, maybe in the era of technocracy. You know? Seemed like you could just leave the experts to decide everything. And that meant that a lot of people began to feel unrepresented by their governments. And didn't see themselves in the leadership of their countries. Or they didn't feel that the leadership was somehow responsible to them or responsive to them, you know, in the way that they felt it should be or once was. And this was a sea change that people had seen coming for some time.

You know, another really important sea change, and transformative in a way we know is transformative, but I still think we haven't understood how dramatic the fact that most political conversation has shifted from real life, so, from trade union halls and church associations to the internet. And that means not only to social media, but more generally to an online world in which, you know, reality looks different and is much easier to shape. And in which the ties that people once felt to their neighbors or to their, as I said, their fellow union members have disappeared. And people begin looking for other kinds of identities and affinities online. And this has had a very deep and profound impact on the way that people see politics, understand politics, and view politics.

And one of the effects it's had is to make people feel more distanced from, and more negative about the institutions of their societies. But that's just the beginning. We could talk about economies. We could talk about ethnographics. There are a lot of other sources of these changes.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** Right. So, I imagine a lot of people that are watching this don't follow Polish politics all that closely. Talk a little bit about the rise of the Law and Justice party, and what we might learn from what happened in Poland.

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** So, the Law and Justice party was a part of the anti-communist opposition alongside, kind of, center right and center left grouping, people who were also opposed to communism. But the Law and Justice party concluded at a certain point that-- rather, it became disappointed or pessimistic about what Poland had become. And it also became the party of people who for whatever reason, sometimes personal reasons, resented or disliked the new Poland or the Poland that had emerged out of the kind of chaos of the 1990s and had joined Europe and had become a country integrated into the world. And for, as I say, for personal reasons, sometimes for ideological reasons, some people didn't like what it was. And the party represented that

dislike or that distaste.

And it came to see itself as a party that had more of a right to rule, that it was somehow the party of true Poland, as I say, as opposed to the party of outsiders or traitors or foreigners. And it also revived, and this is where I had my strongest break with it, it began to revive older, I mean really older, 50 years older and 80 years older ways of doing politics in Poland. So it brought back, you know, particularly in the most recent election, it brought back anti-Semitism as an open issue that is used. Again, that was, of course, there was anti-Semitism in Poland, but not present in mainstream politics until a couple of years ago. It didn't bring back; it invented a kind of very powerful homophobia. Again, not an issue in Polish politics before except maybe on the tiny margins. And they made it the central issue of a recent presidential campaign. Brought back a rhetoric about foreigners trying to undermine Poland, trying to destroy its true nature. Created a fear of the outside and stoked up a kind of xenophobia.

And this is a kind of politics that we really had not had in Poland for the previous 30 years. And some people who might know rather well, or once knew rather well, are the leading instigators of those changes. They are journalists. They are heads of Polish state television. It's hard to exaggerate, but Polish state television, which is taxpayer funded television, is now a genuinely extremist far right broadcast which conducts smear campaigns against people. In one case hounding the mayor of the City of Gdańsk so much that created really widespread paranoia about him. And he was actually murdered by a person who was affected by this crazy propaganda. This is, of course, a story we know from the United States. You know, we've just seen an insane attempt to kidnap the Governor of Michigan. And it's following similar kinds of hate propaganda that people see and are affected by on television, on the internet.

And you know, the use of all of these tools in order to, you know, make arguments for undermining the judiciary, undermining the media, you know, all of this is actually out of a very clear playbook. I mean, we've seen these kinds of attacks on democracy before from elected political parties. And by the way, not necessarily right wing. It's not all that different from what happened over a decade in Venezuela, for example.

And because I saw some of this happening earlier, this all began in Poland in 2014 and 2015, I was very hyper aware of what was happening in the United States in 2016 and 2017 where I saw some

of the same tactics and some of the same kinds of language and some of the same ways of thinking playing themselves out in the United States. And again, the purpose of my book isn't to say that Poland is just like America or, you know, everything that happens here is going to happen there. But I do draw some analogies.

You can look across several countries at the moment and you can see similar kinds of things happening. And you know, I don't think it's accidental. I think these are all parties and movements that are reacting to these same things. The change of information, you know, of the information space, to economic change, to sociological change. And simply to change itself. The very fast speed of change, of everything, I think, has made some people nostalgic for previous eras. And there are some of these political parties and movements have found a way to tap into that real nostalgia and that feeling that things have been lost.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** Let's talk a little bit about Brexit. And you've spent a lot of time, obviously, in London. So in writing about Brexit you talk a little bit about the idea of nostalgic conservatism. I mean, there's always at some level been a political trope that things were always better in the past and we're going to make them that way again. And oftentimes it's a past that didn't exist. We certainly see that in the United States a lot, people nostalgic for a past where everyone was treated equally. And that's not really the history of our country.

Why do you think that was so powerful in Britain? And why did it take the form that it did of this, sort of, hatred of the EU? Is that just rooted in their longstanding kind of rallying around a cause? Or why exactly did it take the shape? Because you write about the lost opportunity there where Britain could have become a leader in an English-speaking union that was basically designed and in terms that were quite favored towards them.

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** Yeah. One of the great ironies is that as famously one former EU politician said, you know, "The language of the European union is bad English." I mean that is the working language of Europe. And the main European project, which is the single market, is a British project. It was Mrs. Thatcher's project. I mean, not her only, but it was certainly one that the British were very committed to and did a great deal to create.

I mean, when I look retrospectively back at Britain since the

early '90s, and to be clear, I was a journalist there in the '90s. I worked for the *Spectator* magazine, which was kind of, still is actually, sort of the house magazine of the Tory party. I mean, I was about to say "intellectual magazine of the Tory party," but that would be, I don't know, politics and intellectuals aren't generally go together in England in the same way that they do in other places, particularly in conservative England.

But I knew many of the people who are now leading the country back when they weren't particularly important. They were just, you know, journalists. But one of the conclusions I came to when looking back was that the level of kind of disappointment and discontent that people felt in Britain after Thatcher, I mean, people in the conservative party felt after Thatcher was a lot higher than we understood at the time. And in a way, Thatcher was able to be both a kind of English nationalist, which she was in some ways, and an internationalist. You know? She was friends with Reagan, and she was, I think, genuinely devoted to bringing freedom to Eastern Europe. You know, she made a very moving visit to Poland in 1988 which I saw. And you know, so she was able to both play on an international and a national stage in a way that was very satisfying.

After she was gone, you know, the 1990s, which actually were a good decade for Britain in many ways. And John Major was very effective. He was actually reelected as well. He was very effective at, just like George H. W. Bush, at knitting Europe back together again. At playing a role in kind of putting the building blocks of what would become the expansion of NATO and so on. And of putting together-- you know, keeping Britain's place in the world.

But it felt to a lot of conservatives, particularly ideological conservatives, like it was boring. You know, England was just a partner to Europe. You know? We weren't playing a leading role like we were when Mrs. Thatcher was in charge. And there began to be a kind of ground swell of disappointment. A feeling that, you know, we were somehow diminished, the country was becoming diminished.

And then I think during the years when Blair was in charge, the conservative movement became kind of desperate. I mean, they thought, I think, for a long time, that they wouldn't be able to beat it. I mean, he took all their good ideas. He moved the labor party to the center. He declared himself to be the heir of Thatcher. So what was the alternative to that? And one of the

alternatives was this radical anti-European, you know, just a bit touched by xenophobia, and frankly, English nationalism, not British, English nationalism that came to be the dominant mood of many of the Tory party.

I mean, if Tony Blair stood for internationalism in Europe and involvement in the world, then we're against it. And I think that mood emerged over the last couple of decades.

And then as I say, it was just a question of who was going to take advantage of that mood? And the person who took advantage of it was, in the end, Boris Johnson. I mean, to be clear about the nostalgia, you don't here in Britain any nostalgia for the empire. You know? Nobody wants India back. You know? It's not like that. It's more a nostalgia, a feeling that England is special, and it should be a special country. And if it's just another European country, if it's just part of the EU, I don't know, just like the Dutch and the French, you know, then that's not good enough. And it's really a nostalgia for England having a bigger say in the world and some kind of bigger, different profile. And that was what they felt they had when Mrs. Thatcher was in charge. And then they lost it.

And that, I think, has been-- much more so than I realized or understood at the time. I mean, that was one of the motivations for the anti-European mood of the country.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** It's hard to see how Brexit will give them a larger voice. But let's move to the US. You followed, as you mentioned, the 2016 election pretty closely. By the way, we should point out that you called the Brexit vote, not to the decimal point, in one. A case of wine that you never collected. But so, very prescient about politics both in the UK and also in the US.

So, you having watched what you saw in Europe and in England, you were more sensitized than most to what happened in the United States. And describe how some of the things that you saw in Hungary and in Poland played out in the US, where there's a very different political tradition that you lay out quite nicely. And how, particularly, the party that was always the party of god and country, the Republican party, developed a kind of-- became the angry party, which was certainly not the party of Reagan.

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** Yes. The transformation of the Republican party is truly incredible. I mean where to begin? You know, one

of the things I concluded by watching the Republicans, and also through watching and listening to some Republicans and ex-Republicans who I know, was that they were beginning to experience in the 2000s a very similar kind of disappointment of the kind that I described the English feeling. And the kind, a little bit, that the Polish far right feels as well. And this is a disappointment with modernity. You know?

So, things are changing very fast. There's demographic change. There's social change. And we are less and less able to impact it and influence it. And you hear very dark things, very dark comments and statements. I've pulled some of them together in the book by famous evangelicals, Franklin Graham talking about, you know, "We're at the end of our national history." You know? "The Obama administration represents the death of our civilization." You can hear people like Laura Ingraham who I also describe in the book at some length talking about, you know, "the America that we once knew and loved has disappeared." And this feeling of loss and "we're not in control and we're not having any influence anymore" began to infect a part of the right. And I think created this disappointment that racialized.

I mean, if you think about it, what is radicalism? I mean, radicalism is always, you know, what happens when you conclude that your society can't be fixed. So, within the current rules of the game, the rules of democracy or something else, there is no hope. There is no improvement to be had. And if that's the case, then you might as well smash it all up. And you might as well elect somebody incompetent to be president because it doesn't matter. Because everything is already so terrible.

And our civilization has already declined so far that we need some kind of-- I mean as Steve Bannon would say, we need a war, or we need chaos, or we need riots in order to pull ourselves together again. And this is, of course, it's an unbelievably damaging form of politics because this is what creates in other countries and in other times and places, this is what's led to violence.

And that was combined, I think, in the Republican party with also something similar that happened in the US, which is that the party sort of separated into people who actually wanted to do government and think about policy and think about how to fix things, and the people who wanted to do culture war. And the culture warriors, you know, the people who wanted anger and attacking the liberals and being every night on television and writing best selling books went one way. And then the rest of

the party who were just running government offices during the Bush administration or working in think tanks during the Obama administration went somewhere else.

And the culture warriors were the ones who got the most attention, who attracted the biggest numbers of fans and were eventually the ones who, I think, helped select first President Trump as the Republican candidate. And then helped him win. So, the party divided in a way that was very similar to the way that the British Tory party divided. And also the way that the Polish right divided.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** George Will was here last year, and I asked him who is favorite conservative, I think I said young conservative author was. And he said you, he said, although he conceded that you might not describe yourself as a conservative in his vein. Where does that old fashioned, I'll say, Republican party go from here? Where do you see? Does it splinter for good? Or is there some way to put it all back together in the wake of Trump?

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** So, first of all, thank you for the compliment sent via George Will, especially if he's describing me as his favorite young writer. You know, that's really, at this point, that's very high praise.

So, you know, the fate of the Republican party is something that interests me a lot, actually. And I do talk to others who are interested in it. A lot of it really depends on what happens on November the 3rd. You know? And not just whether Trump wins or loses, but how he wins or loses. You know?

Obviously, if he wins, then it's his party and that's it. I mean, we don't have another Republican party. The Trumpist version of Republicanism, whatever exactly you think that means, given that he himself is not very interested in other Republicans, he's interested only in himself, but that will then be the party.

If Trump loses but by not very much, if it's very close, if the Republicans maintain, maybe, their Senate majority, then a piece of the party will remain Trumpist and will say, "Well, we'd like to trial that again. Except we're going to have someone better at it this time." And then you could get, you know, in 2024, you could get presidential candidate, anyway, Mike Pompeo or Jared Kushner or Tucker Carlson, for example. I mean, you know, you would have the kind of person would be trying to run the party.



If there is, on the other hand, a very clear Biden victory, and even a Biden landslide, which is something we can't exclude, I'm not saying it will happen, but if you look at the polls it's not impossible, if there is a clear Biden victory and there is a Democratic House and Senate and Trumpism are wiped out, then you will have a moment of reckoning. And then as my Republican friends say, you still might get a Trumpist party, but at least there will then be an argument inside the party and people will begin to say, you know, we can do this differently. And there will be recrimination about who went along with the worst Trumpist stuff and who resisted it? And then there will be a useful argument inside the party.

And this is, of course, what I hope happens. Not just because I want Biden to win the election, but because I think the US needs a center right party. I mean, it needs a party that reflects the traditionalist instincts of a lot of voters and people. And I would like that party to be responsible.

I mean, if you look back through history, whenever you have a right that-- sorry, whenever you have the death of the center right, whenever you have a weak center right, this is very often when you get dictatorships. You can look at Germany in the 1930s. You can look at multiple examples. That, you know, you do need a conservative party that speaks to, you know, those kinds of voters. And I hope that we can recreate one that, not only that is more responsible, but sees itself as a national party and not just as a party for white people in rural districts. And begins, once again, to try and reach out to other kinds of communities, people in cities, people with education, people of different ethnic backgrounds.

And if we have that kind of Republican party once again, then I think it will be much better and much healthier for the country. And so, among other reasons, I'm hoping for, you know, a blue wave because I think you could save the center right.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** You end on a hopeful note. You say, "We always knew or should have known that alternative visions would try to draw us in. But maybe picking our way through the darkness we'll find that together we can resist them." As you think about the future of democracy, what makes you hopeful?

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** So, what makes me hopeful is the level of civic engagement that I see on the rise around the US, for example, but also in other countries, here in Poland. The number of people who have begun to understand that politics isn't just

like tap water. You know? You just get it, and you don't have to think about where it comes from or who cleans it. That it's actually something you might have to work for or do something for, or I don't know, you might have to be a poll workers or you might have to man a phone bank or you might have to contribute in some way to politics. And that, you know, it's the opposite of what we were talking about early on, you know? Instead of seeing politics as some distant thing that specialists do and it's not just ordinary people, I feel that there are more people now, especially in the US and especially at the lowest levels, the grassroots level, local level, state level, people who see the value of being involved in their communities in some ways or in political debate. And I think that's where the hope lies, is in reenergizing people and getting them involved.

I'm also hugely cheered by younger people who I meet, many of whom I think are probably more immune to some of the madness that comes out of the internet than older people are. And so many of whom are engaged in the US election and in other elections. There is a generation of idealists who are emerging from universities right now looking around say, "Wait, this is all nuts. You know? What can I do to fix it?" And I really, one of the reasons I resist pessimism, even though I am tempted by it, is because I think it would be unfair to them. I mean, you know, if I'm pessimistic, if I say everything's finished, that doesn't give them the opportunity to recreate the world as they want to. And I really hope they will.

**JAKE SIEWERT:** All right. Well, Anne, it was a delight to see you. Enjoy your weekend in the countryside in Poland. And thanks for taking the time.

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** Thanks. Thanks so much for the interview. And greetings to all. I'm sorry I'm not there. But maybe someday.

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