

Masthead Conversation with David Frum on February 12, 2018

Caroline: So, David, let's get going. We're going to be talking a lot about President Trump today. Your book is *Trumpocracy*. But, I want to start this conversation as you do in the book by explicitly not talking about Trump. The opening chapter of *Trumpocracy* is called, "Pre-Existing Conditions." You say, "Constitutional democracy is founded on a commitment, first and foremost, to the rules of the game. The losers in any round agree to accept their loss because, they believe, they will soon have another turn. The winners accept limits on their gains because they anticipate that next time, they may number among the losers."

So, before Trump ever came on the scene, was that commitment to the rules of the game already dissolving, and how did that make our country vulnerable?

David: I believe that the commitment was dissolving, and it's been dissolving for a time. If I had to give a start date for the dissolution, I would put it at about 1990, and the end of the Cold War. Looking backwards, it's amazing how the politics I grew up with ... I was born in 1960, and came of age in the 1980's ... was based on ideas from the Cold War. The country had to stay united because it faced an international enemy. The president was the central figure in the government, because the first question was avoiding nuclear war. The parties had kind of tacit understandings because on Cold War questions, they shared more than they disagreed with, and those were always the most important questions.

When the Cold War ended, that broke one of the connections to the system, and the game began to be played more and more radically. I think the swings in the game got even wilder after about the year 2000. I think the Bush vs. Gore outcome persuaded a lot of Democrats that this was a game that was being played now by much tougher rules. 9/11, I think, put some real intense new passions into the politics of the country. Then, of course, came the terrible Great Recession, the worst economic shock since the 1930's. That again, radicalized people, especially on the more conservative side, who felt that the way was open to take away from them a lot of the things they had counted on.

Caroline: Is this new? Has this dissolving of the rules of the game, has this happened before in American history?

David: It has happened before, and the rules of the game got reasserted. It happened, I think, in the late 1960's during the Vietnam era, and the time when the Civil Rights Movement really turned into the riots and violence. We responded by what we call Watergate. It was a scandal, but it also was a reasserting the rules of the game. We wrote a lot of new rules. In fact, most of the ethics rules that Donald Trump is violating today were written in the years after Watergate. The House Intelligence and Senate Intelligence Committees that we talk so much about, they were created after Watergate in order to give Congress a way of looking at the activities of the CIA and FBI.

Of course, the most spectacular breakdown of the rules of the game were in the years leading up to the Civil War. We don't want to go back there. Other countries have seen the rules of the game breakdown in a way that didn't have a happy ending, that led to the end of the game and the end of democratic politics.

Caroline: How is the breakdown of the rules of the game ... How did that lead us to this particular political moment with Trump and *Trumpocracy*?

David: The whole written and unwritten American political system, not just the Constitution, but the party system, and the norms by which people engage in political competition is designed to exclude somebody like Donald Trump from power. Donald Trump was attractive to those to whom he was attractive because he so flagrantly rejected the rules. He did things that were so shocking. American candidates do not call for locking up their political opponents. That doesn't happen. But he did it, and people found it exciting.

American candidates were supposed to make some effort to pretend to be good husbands, fathers, vaguely aware of the contents of the Bible. Donald Trump didn't do any of those things. And, again, a lot of the people just welcomed that. Most importantly, it was during the election that we saw that Donald Trump was exposed being in contact with Russian Intelligence. That was once a deal breaker. Not anymore.

Caroline: We've got a big question from Robert, one of our members. He wants to know, has democracy failed us, or have we failed democracy? Has democracy failed to meet the needs of the masses? Would working class Americans actually benefit from the regression of democracy?

David: The short answer to that is, obviously, no. Democracy ... People with a lot of money and power have never been that enthusiastic about democracy, and tend to emphasize the liberal part of the democracy. Democracy is a philosophy for the benefit of ordinary people. But, we have a special form of democracy in the modern world, which is, we don't let a majority do whatever it wants. There are lots of things majorities can't do.

Democracy was super legitimate for the 40 years after World War II, for two reasons. Both because it did a great job upholding people's rights and immunities, and because it delivered a standard of living to ordinary people, not only higher than ever before in history, but rapidly improvement. So, for a lot of people ... One would like to think that people like democracy, or approve of it because it defended liberties, but for a lot of people, it was just a very powerful form of magic. In the past generation, it has become less magical and has ceased to deliver the goods.

Caroline: I want to step back for a second and talk about this book in particular and your process for writing it. Am I right in saying that it grew out of our *Atlantic* cover story last March, right?

David: Well, that was the ... Actually, it grew out of things before. I've been writing about the obsolescence of Republican ideas since about 2007. I've been writing about the

attractiveness of authoritarian politics since about 2014. Just before I joined *The Atlantic*, I had a big article in *Foreign Affairs* about the Tea Party, and sort of describing the Tea Party in these terms. But, *The Atlantic* article triggered it, and then this book did grow out of that.

I'll say, we had a very short deadline, and the publisher just said, "Well, you can just repurpose a lot of your articles." Then it turns out, that is never true. And in fact, while there are paragraphs and sentences that are reused, they don't appear in the same place. No, I had to write it all, all over again. But it was a place to put ... The research certainly had been accumulated over the past three years. So, I didn't have to do any ... I had to cope with my incompetent and chaotic filing system. But I didn't have to go dig up new stuff.

Caroline: I'm interested in what it is like to write a book like this in what is very much middle of the story. You say in the book that the last week that you were editing was when everything was going on in Puerto Rico. And Trump was making those attacks on the mayor of San Juan. I couldn't stop thinking, reading the book, what must it have been like to send this book away for publishing and know how quickly everything is changing. What was that like? What was hard about that?

David: Look, for me, in general, one of my struggles as a writer has been, I edit, revise, I do it again, and I never like to surrender the manuscript. It's like taking the puppy away to the dog groomer. I don't want to relinquish it. So, that was a challenge. Then you worry, what if something spectacular happens? What if there's some huge break in the Russia story? So, it's risky. I thought very hard when I was discussing the book, shouldn't this really be done at the end of the story? But, the only way I can make an impact on events is by writing about them, and I realize that to wait 'til the end of the story meant that I would not help to shape that ending. And I wanted to help shape it.

So, you take the risk. Life's full of risks and as it happened, there was no major break in the Russia story, and Donald Trump didn't have a stroke, and things actually, in January, there are new events, but the contours of the story are not that different from what they were in September of 2017.

Caroline: Is there anything that, if you were taking another pass at editing it today, that you would take out or change?

David: Well, the big change I would make is, I was skeptical in the fall of 2017 that the Republicans would be able to pass the tax plan that they ultimately passed, because reconciling the different interests that had to be reconciled, I thought, was going to be very, very difficult. So, I don't say that it won't happen, but I'm kind of skeptical in the book that it will, and obviously, it did.

Caroline: I'm interested in the moments in the book when you do make declarative statements. So, for example, you say, "There will be no wall, and Mexico will pay for nothing." Things like that. I feel so much that we're living in a political time when anything can happen.

So, how do you make those decisions about when to make firm predictions like that in a book?

David: The wall's easy, because what you do is you get a topographical map of the Rio Grande Valley, and you see a lot of it is really very marshy. So, you just cannot ... you can't build a wall through marshland. And, you have to pour concrete, and if you have ground into which concrete can't be poured ... I mean, I suppose you could do anything with enough money, but ... Then there are private property considerations that the government was gonna have to take over land. It just ... It struck me as something ... And it was already true by then, that Donald Trump was saying that, well, when he said a wall, he meant a fence, and when he meant a fence, he meant flying drones. And then, you know, you can actually make the wall ... If the wall ends up being flying drones, then it's a good idea. But, of course, then it doesn't have the impact. I think there are probably drones flying along the border right now, and probably have been for a decade.

Caroline: As a journalist, I'm really interested in, when do you decide to hedge, and when do you decide not to hedge? It's such a hard question.

David: Right. I'm prepared to take risks with these things. If I see something strongly, and I think you have to write carefully. I think you apply your best judgment, and you need to be clear what are probabilistic statements. It's not a matter of hedging, because that's just leaving yourself a trap door, but there's a dis ... between things that are probably going to happen, that are probably true. I mean, we can see this with the Russia story. There's a lot of that story that remains uncertain today. But, the basic facts, I think we have a pretty good idea of what happened.

Caroline: You devote a lot of time in the book to talking about the media. And you call the chapter, "The Enemies of The People." You start with this statistic, 45% of Trump supporters, and 45% of Republicans say they favor permitting courts to shut down media organizations that are biased or inaccurate. That's pretty striking. Can we attribute those numbers entirely to Trump? Or was that building on feelings that were already there. Was that building on pre-existing conditions?

David: What it means to be a Republican and conservative in America, what it's meant for a long time, is to be strongly committed to beliefs that people of more conventional information systems insist are not true. So, it's very demoralizing. I mean, there are things that you strongly feel to be true, and they're not validated by the external world. We all crave to be taken seriously. And, we find that ... Whether the thing is big or small, we find it irritating to be told that something is untrue.

The idea that we live in a world full of pollution and toxins, and they're prevalent, and they're getting worse. That's something that a lot of people just assume. So, if they were constantly confronted with the contradiction that actually, no. Things are pretty safe, and getting safer all the time, and that most of the things ... Think how often you've heard someone say, I'm going to do this ... I need to have, you know, yam juice in order to get the toxins out of my system. And you say, actually the reason you're having trouble digesting is because you don't have enough bugs in your gut. Those are sort of

upsetting things. So, people want to believe what they want to believe. And that has been especially true on the right hand side of the spectrum.

Caroline: When Trump is not president anymore, do you think that the American people will continue to rally against the press in the way that we have seen during his presidency?

David: Yeah. I think those are pre-existing feelings that Donald Trump built upon.

Caroline: And you think that will continue?

David: And that will continue because I think what we have done ... this is both a cause and an effect of Trump ... is we have tribalized information systems. And if you partake in the Trump world, or in the Fox system, that has become now, quite a closed system. In the same way, I think ... I'll occasionally meet somebody that says, "Well I try to watch a little Fox and a little MSNBC to get both sides." But, I think most people find it just ... There are very few people who do that who aren't professionals, because if you're not inside the Fox system, then ... It looks like a form of propaganda.

And it also is impossible to enter for reasons that don't have to do with the content. I remember when my kids were young, my in-laws loved Bill O'Reilly, and they would watch him in the evening. The kids would step into the living room of their house, and if Bill O'Reilly was on, they would just step back out again. They had no particular views about Bill O'Reilly. They probably couldn't even have told you exactly who he was. They just knew there was something about that show that meant, "Oh, we shouldn't be in the living room right now. We don't fit here."

Fox has always been organized the news program around the same principle as an Italian game show. Which is get the most ugly troll-ish host, and you surround him with beautiful women who all agree with him, and it's like a kind of Italian game show fantasy of heaven. So, I think, a lot of women turn on Fox and say, I guess I'm not supposed to be here. It's not a matter of the point of view. It's the total system that tells you. One of the things that's very striking about Fox when you turn it on is how ugly the sets are. Why are the sets so ugly? Television sets, they're all made out of cardboard anyway.

Caroline: So, why are they?

David: Why are they made ugly? Well, they're made ugly because the people who like Fos feel uncomfortable with modern aesthetic design. The ugliness assures them, I am home. There's a reason ... If you walk into a Cracker Barrel restaurant, it doesn't cost anymore to make a Cracker Barrel look like the inside of a Design Within Reach store. It's all made out of cardboard. But, the people going to Design Within Reach need a certain visual effect to feel at home, and the people going to Cracker Barrel need a certain effect in the same way. Fox is ugly on purpose. To send a message, "Don't be unnerved. We too have been passed by, by the last 30 or 40 years of design."

Caroline: Don't you think there are conservatives who watch Fox who don't feel that way?

David: I'm sure there are conservatives who watch Fox who would be happy if the Fox set were as visually attractive as the MSNBC set. But, it's not done ... I'm sure it's done more by Roger Ailes' intuitive genius, than by scientific study. But, he knew that he had ... There was a certain aesthetic that he had in mind, and he knew if it looked to up to date, his viewers would not feel at home.

Caroline: You have an interesting section in the book where you talk about how mainstream media journalists feel compelled to report on both sides, and in such a ... On a topic where there sometimes feels like there's so little good to say about the president, it can turn into a very determined search for the one positive thing. And there's a lot of pressure in mainstream media to report on that one positive thing.

David: The surest way to get an op-ed on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* is to find something nice to say about Donald Trump. Then it just ... it gets the TSA pre-cleared treatment. Zing.

Caroline: As a journalist, do you feel that pressure? And how do you deal with that pressure as somebody who writes so much critical—

David: I do not feel that. Years and years, and years ago, I read a profile of an actress. I think it was Debra Winger but it was so long ago that I have to be careful, it may not have been. This was an actress who'd had a pretty wild life, and she was asked, what do you think of the press you get? She said, "Well, the press says I've had a history of trouble with drugs and alcohol, and that's true. They said I'm very difficult to work with on the set, and I can be. And they say I've been with a lot of men, and I sure have. So, really, I have no complaints."

So, really I feel like ... I think, actually, Donald Trump, whether we get positive press or non-positive press is relative to what we've done. So, if you were an abusive parent, and you're described in the press as grouchy, grouchy isn't positive, but compared to what the truth is, you've gotten a big step off. So, I think that Donald Trump does get that the press leans over backwards to cover him. The press is ... There are large areas of rumor about his personal life that everyone in Washington has heard. The press, they would report it if they were put in a position where they could not refrain from reporting it, but they don't go looking for it. And it's institutionalized, this desire to find something positive to say. Even the very fact that you're asking the question, that is something we do. Is there something nice to say about Donald Trump?

And then he has, by the way, this whole other ecosystem that gives him more slavish attention than a more liberal president would get from more conventionally liberal media.

Caroline: How do you withstand that pressure? Because it doesn't seem like you've caved to it.

David: I'm pretty immersed in his world, and I also ... I can see the difference between outcomes that I like, and decisions that I like. There have been things that have come out of this administration that I favor. For example, I'm glad that the corporate income

tax rate is now 21%, not 35%. But, if you have done that with a bad decision making process, and if you've told a lot of untruths on the way to achieving this outcome, and if the price of this outcome is damage to other institutions that are more important ... That's just the way my brain works, I'm able to distinguish between those things.

One other thing, one of the things that is really a peculiar thing that the Trump people do is, the President will do something that you like, and you're then supposed to be grateful to him. The Trump people radically misunderstand that their guy is an employee. So if you're the owner of a company and an employee does a particularly good job, obviously, you wanna show your appreciation. But, the gratitude relationship misconceives. The president is not the king. The president is a public sector employee. And he is supposed to be thinking all the time about how to make the country a better place. That's his job.

There's the story in Bill Clinton's memoirs of him at a county fair running into a farmer who'd been a regular supporter of his. Clinton was, at this point, going for like a sixth term, or something unprecedented. Arkansas in those years had two year terms. And, so he asked this farmer, "Can I count on your support?" And the farmer says, "Well, what are you planning on doing in the next term?" Clinton, you know, "Bruce, why are you asking me this? You always voted for me? I've done this, and I've done that." The farmer said, "Well, you got paid every two weeks, didn't you?"

It's a job, and the president's supposed to do the job. And Donald Trump, uniquely, and the people around him, have this kind of kingly understanding of the office.

Caroline: That's true. I wanna move now into talking about a big focus of your book, which is the people who are propping him up, the people who are supporting the president, in particular, republicans in Congress. I wanna talk about their loyalty to the president, and why they've stayed loyal to the president. You reference in your book, a June 2010 Gallup poll that reviewed all House elections since World War II. According to that data, when a president polls above 50% approval, his party loses an average of 13 seats in the midterms, but 37 seats when he polls below 50%. You write, "The worse Trump behaved, the more frantically, Congressional republicans worked to protect him. Particularly, with regards to the Russia investigation, shouldn't there come point when republicans in Congress stop thinking about protecting republicans in Congress as a whole, and start thinking about protecting themselves.

David: They are. They're like, caught in a trap. They don't know how bad the scandal is. They have imaginations same as anybody else. I remember that famous joke that Kevin McCarthy told, Vladimir Putin pays two people, Dana Rohrabacher and Donald Trump, and everybody laughed, and Paul Ryan hushed them up. They don't make those jokes anymore where there's microphone. But, they get it. And they say, okay, where does this story go? What happens? There comes a point where you're in so deep, that you know ... Put another way, there's a saying from the Watergate days, "The cover-up is worse than the crime." To which we say, it depends on what crime it is. Sometimes, if a crime is bad enough, a cover up is your best option.

Caroline: So, wait and see?

David: They are hoping if they all cohere they can limit the damage. You know, just take for example about the president's approval rating, and the losses. One thing to keep in mind is, why does a president have a below 50% approval rating? There's usually two things that drive down an approval rating. One is bad economic news. That's why Obama was below 50% in 2010 and 2014. The other is military failure, military defeat. That's why George Bush was below 50% in 2006, and the House flipped.

In years where the House has flipped, there has usually been a problem, either with the economy, or with a foreign war. Bill Clinton, in 1994 when he lost the House, there had been a recession in '92, the recovery ... It hadn't been that deep. So in 2010, 2014, the president was below 50% because the economy was in bad shape, or the recovery was slow in 2014. In 2006, George Bush was below 50% because of the Iraq war. That's normally what drives down the president's approval ratings. What's weird about Trump in 2018 is, the country's not engaged in major military operations, and the economy is in really good shape. So, it's strange that he's below 50%. That, for many Republicans, opens up the possibility that maybe they can break the curse. Because, if he's below 50% for subjective, rather than objective reasons, and they stick with him and protect him, maybe they can protect themselves against losses in November.

Caroline: I wanna ask you one more question about the Republican Party in particular. You said on our call back in October, that the Republican Party has been on a path toward radicalization, not only in its ideology, but also in its attitudes towards democracy. Four months later, do you still feel the same way? Has anything changed?

David: I think the situation is getting worse. Let me try putting this in a somewhat different way. This may be a little abstract but maybe makes it clear to see. One of the things that's very striking when you watch the pro Trump talk is, they endlessly speak as if Donald Trump had won some huge victory in 2016, and as if he now had some big popular majority behind him.

I was on a Fox show three weeks ago. The first time I'd been on Fox in eight years. And the host kept making a point about how people like me, we're standing up against the American people. I had to make a point, actually, you are standing up, if we're measuring them. But, they also, even at Fox, they can see polls, and they know what happened in November 2016. They've got a private interior definition, which is, yeah, there are 330 odd million people residing within the boundaries of the United States. But, some of those people have much greater entitlement to confer legitimacy than others. So, if you are someone whose grandparents didn't belong to the local ethnic majority, what you feel really counts less than what someone whose grandparents did belong to the local ethnic majority. That's what they mean by real America. It's not just that real America is rural, because Staten Island is also part of real America.

Real America are those Americans whose opinions matter, as opposed to the Americans whose don't. When you get in that way of thinking, it becomes very possible to then say, the thing that's wrong with democracy, is it counts very vote the same whether or not, those votes are cast by proper Americans. That's what the point about the illegal voting. When media people say, well that's just not true, we may not be understanding what the people complaining about illegal voting mean by ... If we change the word, illegal to



improper or illegitimate, then we get closer to what they mean, that they think that Donald Trump has a majority of legitimate America. But, once you start saying that, then you're on a path to a different type of political system.

It's still one with elections. It's not a system in which elections have been abolished. But, it's now a non-democratic system because it's one in which different people's views count to different degrees and weight.

Caroline: For the last 15 minutes of our call, I want to talk about what comes next. Many, many of our reader questions were about what comes next. This question comes from Laura. She wants to know, if the Democrats were to win the House in 2018, or the House and the Senate, what do you think is the most powerful thing that they could do with control of the committees and with more control of the legislature? Laura says, people tend to focus so much on impeachment power. But, I think there should be so much more that should be possible for if the Democrats get back this control.

David: If the Democrats get back one house of Congress, the most powerful thing they can do is use the gavels to get some answers to some basic questions. I think we've all been impressed by the difference in the seriousness with Adam Schiff and Devin Nunes have taken their job of understanding what happened with the election. So, getting to the bottom of what happened in 2016 will be important. That's an investigative task. There's an investigative task in understanding many of the things that may have happened in that election may not be illegal.

When the Trump people say, collusion is not a crime, they're not wrong. There are elements of the story that could be crimes, if you violate federal election law. But, on the core activity of sitting down with a foreign government and working together to win an American election, that probably doesn't break any laws. But, we still need to understand it, and there are political consequences, even if there are no legal consequences. One of the problems with special council investigation is Mueller is looking for prosecutable crimes. I have an intuition that what we're gonna discover in this case is that the worst things that have happened aren't prosecutable, and the things that are prosecutable aren't the worst things that happened. So, Congress needs to get to the bottom of those things.

I think we need to get to the bottom of why there are so many people who don't have security clearances seeing classified information. And, I think given that people in this White House, now two of them, lost their jobs over domestic abuse, I think Kirsten Gillibrand's ... I mean, obviously understanding that we have a statute of limitations, and that there are legal processes, but getting to the bottom of whether the president, by his own standards, is somebody that has violated the standards that are being applied to other members of the staff, that's useful information. You wanna know, is the president guilty of these things.

So, if the Democrats have two houses of Congress ... With one house, you have gavels. With two houses you have the ability to pass legislation that the president must veto. Then, I think it would be useful to put down some ethical markers. And, I think it would be good form to put them down for the future. Like, if two houses of Congress passed a

law that said, once you win a major party nomination and accept the Secret Service protection paid for by the taxpayer that comes with it, at that point, the Secretary of the Treasury shall, ... not optional, the Secretary of the Treasury shall release your past two tax returns. And to be fair, the Trump people say this was litigated in 2016. Okay, make it apply to the 2020 candidates. Make the conventions of 2020 the start point for his. The president may veto that, but at least it clarifies the issue.

I think we need to revisit the disclosure rules. One of the things that has been true in the Trump years is, that we've discovered the disclosure rules, although they do a good job of capturing the financial behaviors of people who normally work at the higher levels of federal ... They're exactly designed to capture the financials of the lawyers and business executives, and business owners, who normally go in. But they don't capture oligarchs and plutocrats. So, we need to revisit what those disclosure forms should look like.

I think we need a debate ... This is a very complicated and generally difficult question about the disclosure that should be required of people who are in one degree of relationship to the president, whether they are in government, or not. We've seen in other countries that corruption is the province of the president's children, or the president's siblings. Should there be some degree of disclosure from those people? I think it's time to talk about that. As I said, I don't want to be too conclusive, because, it is a hard problem. But, that would be a good debate to have on the floor of Congress.

Caroline: You have said in a recent *Atlantic* article that congressional defeats in 2018 could actually strengthen President Trump. How?

David: Relative to the rest of his party.

Caroline: Mm-hmm (affirmative). How would that happen?

David: Most basically, it takes House, Senate, and the president to pass a tax cut, but it takes only one of the three to defend a tax cut. So, if your top priority after the elections is making sure that the tax cut stays in place, and if you've lost the House, and even the Senate too, then, Republicans who want to defend the tax cut have to. Remember, given that Donald Trump cares nothing about his party's policy agenda, he's taking ... it's always possible as a Republican that he may flip on you. Remember, also, that Donald Trump constantly fails to appreciate what other people truly think of him. So, on election night, even if Republicans take horrifying losses, Trump will think, "I can do business with Schumer and Pelosi and do a deal with them." That's maybe unlikely, but a lot of Republicans in Congress may fear that he'll do it. And they'll have to be ... they'll remain loyal to him.

You know that famous line, I think of Nietzsche's, that Memory says, I did this. Pride says, I could not have done this. And, after a short struggle, Memory yields. Republicans have to be loyal to Donald Trump because if he is the way his critic says he is, then what kind of person are you if you have backed him? It can't be true. It mustn't be true, because if it's true, it implicates me in ways that the human mind won't process.

Caroline: You've written and spoken a lot about citizen responsibility. We've had one of our members write in, Thomas. He asked, other than get out the vote to change the congressional mix, what can I as an individual do, to challenge and contribute to the taking down of *Trumpocracy*?

David: First, the mere fact of writing that, the acceptance of that kind of personal responsibility is already a huge step. That you're saying, I understand that this is not going to happen automatically, it's on me. So, salute to you for that. Here are two things that I would recommend. The first is to remember if you're carrying a smartphone, and if you are a reader of *The Atlantic*, you probably are, you should remember that you're not just a news consumer, you're also a news publisher, an information publisher. What you share, what you tell people, you can potentially make ... You can make a video that can instantly reach everyone on earth with a cell phone. Is that two billion people, something like that?

Walter Cronkite never had that kind of reach, and certainly not that kind of speed. Take that power seriously, and use it responsibly. One thing is be ... There is a very unfortunate example of this that happened just today. There was a plane crash in Russia, seventy-something people were tragically killed. Many of them have very ordinary, common Russian names, and there were people who looked through the manifests, saw a name that they thought they recognized as being an important person in the story, and then tweeted and put on Facebook false news. So, don't be that person. And, if it comes to you, be a firewall against spreading false news, just to the extent that it's up to you. Be your own quality control desk for information.

I think one of the other things that is important to do is to look for common ground, not with the people who are most different from you. I'm not recommending that you take day trips into coal country and lecture people about why they're wrong. But there are a lot of people who are more or less reachable by you, who have slightly different values, and there, I think just that one to one conversation is productive. There are a lot of people who will say, "My taxes are lower. I don't like the way the president treats women, but my taxes are lower." A lot of how they behave, it's not a matter of changing their mind, it's a matter of changing their weighting, or their balance a little—

Caroline: What do you mean by that?

David: I mean that if Donald Trump were to lose the election in 2020, he's going to be beaten not by people who say, "My God, I was mistaken this whole time." But, he will be beaten by people who thought, "Well, I didn't like the tweeting, I didn't like the behaviors, but you know, I do need taxes down." They will change, not because you've changed their mind, but because you've persuaded them that the two things they believe are in conflict, one of them deserves higher priority than the other. Maybe how he treats women is more important than the tax rate.

Caroline: My last question, when you're writing this book, is that, what's on your mind?

David: Speaking of being in a bubble, I wrote this book in Canada. I wrote this book in a town with a population of 1700 people. And I wrote it, by the way, with a very sluggish internet connection. So, I was really disrupted. But, it's also the time of year when ... Two of my children live outside of the home, but they are with us in the summer, and we were just more together. So, I had them in mind all the way through this. Both the conventional thing of, you want to leave your children a better world, but also, a very particular thing is, I was conscious of their judgment of me. What was I doing in this time? Children tend to look up to their parents, and one of the things that you want to think of as parent is, am I being the person that my children think I am.

Caroline: Alright, we're going to leave it there. I am so glad that you were able to come in and talk to us today, David.

David: Well, thank you.

Caroline: Thank you.

David: It was so great. Thanks to all for their support of *The Atlantic*. Speaking of being the people others think we are, I mean, we all think of the people on the other end of this call every day here, and we try to live up to you.