

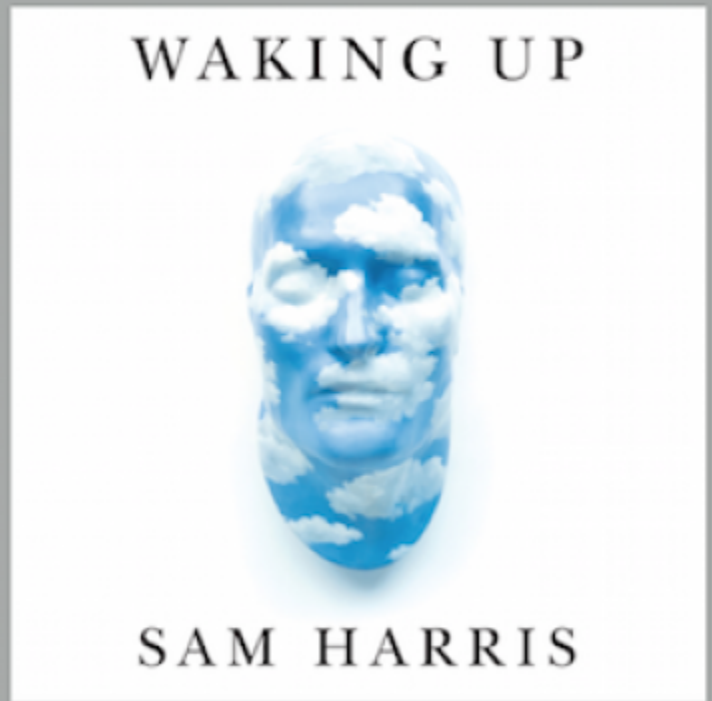
SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Shouldering the Burden of History: A Conversation with Dan Carlin

Podcast Transcript

[Ethics](#) | [News](#) | [Politics](#) | [Religion](#) | [Islam](#) | [Terrorism](#) | [War](#) | April 6, 2016



The following is a transcript from my Waking Up podcast ([“Shouldering the Burden of History: A Crosscast with Dan Carlin”](#)). The text has been lightly edited for clarity readability.—**SH**

Welcome to the Waking Up podcast. This is Sam Harris. Today I’ll be speaking with a man whose work I greatly admire—Dan Carlin, the host of the Hardcore History and Common Sense podcasts—and Dan and I will be releasing this conversation jointly on both of our podcasts. We’re calling this a “crosscast,” which is analogous to a crosspost one sometimes sees on blogs that publish content simultaneously. It turns out we have many listeners in common, and many of you have been urging us to have a conversation, I think anticipating considerable disagreement on issues like the War on Terror, state security, and foreign policy. I don’t know that we collided as much as anyone might have expected, but we’ve had a good, energetic conversation, which I greatly enjoyed and I hope you will too. So in a moment, I give you Dan

Carlin...

SH: Hey, Dan, how are you doing?

DC: I'm good, how are you?

SH: I'm great. Well, listen, as my listeners know, I have been frequently referring to you as the greatest history professor on earth, and I know this may cause you to blush, but I am just a huge fan of your Hardcore History podcast and have been recommending it to anyone with ears at this point.

DC: That is very dirty pool to start off a discussion with a compliment like that, because now what am I supposed to say? You said some of the nicest things, and I really appreciate them, thank you so much. Listen, isn't it amazing we're having these kinds of public discussions in the virtual realm here where everyone gets to watch? Modern technology has taken us back almost to an Athens-type situation, where we can have these sorts of public conversations and we don't require some TV network to figure out if they can sell airtime or whatever for something like that. It's a pretty interesting new world.

SH: Yeah, and I do not say this to preempt any criticism—

DC: Which always comes from me. That's what I'm going to do.

SH: Actually, this was a question I wanted to ask you. You refer to yourself as “a fan of history,” and you are at pains to distinguish yourself from a professional historian or the legions thereof who may, in fact, be listening to your show and scrutinizing it for errors. Do you get pushback from academics? What's that experience like for you?

DC: Well, I have to be honest. My own opinion here, but I think everyone's been remarkably generous and nice to me on everything, because I had envisioned a completely different type of program when we started it. I wasn't going to talk about any sort of narrative history at all. I was just going to talk about “Isn't this weird?” and “Isn't this funny?” and stuff history majors used to talk about on their lunch break. As the show evolved, the audience wanted more of the background, and so it went into territory I had never given a lot of thought to. You know, “Do I want to go challenge historians?” or something like that. This is why we use so many quotes and whatnot during the program, because I think, coming from the position that you know you're not an expert, you're not pretending to be an expert, when you make some sort of statement, we feel like you want “audio footnotes.” You want to say, “Listen, it's not me saying this—here's a couple of historical points of view.” You're still picking and choosing, so it's not totally fair, but I think I build that into the way we do things. If I was a professional historian with all the credentials and published all this, I would approach the program differently. Because I'm not, I try to make sure that every time we say something, we have somebody who is credible and trustworthy—or at least someone we should listen to a little bit more than the podcast host—back up what I'm saying. It's become a key way that the show has evolved.

SH: Well, I wonder how deep that caveat actually cuts, because in my career, I have weighed in on many questions that fall outside the official area of my academic expertise, and occasionally I get pushback on this very point, that I don't have a credential that would cause someone to be confident about my opinions in this area—let's say on the topic of religion. But many of these subjects simply require that one read the books and be attentive to one's sources and have conversations with experts. And at a certain point you're playing the same language game the experts are. It's certainly appropriate to have

humility and be attentive to the frontiers of one's ignorance, but in science this really breaks down quite starkly, because I'm surrounded by scientists who simply do not have the academic bona fides you would expect, and yet they are contributing in various areas of science at the highest level. There are physicists who don't have Ph.D.s in physics; there are computer scientists who don't have even college degrees. I am in dialogue now with an expert on artificial intelligence who never went to high school, so at a certain point it's a matter of how you can function in a given domain, not a matter of what your CV looks like. And scientists, as long as you're making sense, accept this far more readily, in my experience, than people in the humanities. I'm wondering how you view this, because unless you're making mistakes and not correcting them, I don't see how you're not functioning as an expert on those topics you touch. Maybe if you want to be an expert on World War II, or at least the Nazi side of it, you need to deal with primary sources in German, and that's some wrinkle there. But I'm just wondering how you see that.

DC: I think it sort of depends on the specialty we're talking about. For example, take a surgeon who operates on people's brains. I think we can agree that you're not going to want your amateur brain surgeon coming in and saying, "Listen, I read this expert, and this is how he suggests we do it." There's a specific specialty there. I think bringing up the humanities, though, is a wonderful point, because the humanities by their very nature are all things with much more leeway than you get in something like brain surgery, for example. Look at the subjects that make up the humanities: law, religion, language, arts, music. I think the way to put it would be that you were just suggesting that people outside the expertise have something, perhaps, that they can bring to the table. In a lot of these cases, I think it three-dimensionalizes things a little bit to have somebody from another discipline apply the mode of thinking common in their discipline to an unusual realm—in other words, get a 360° view of things. Take a historical event. You might want to have the Second World War examined by somebody who's an expert in military affairs. Obviously, somebody who's an expert in international relations is going to write a book with a different point of view. One of the best books I ever read on the Second World War was done by an economist who looked at it from a completely different point of view. So in that sense, I think you can three-dimensionalize reality, and that's what you're doing when you look at history—you're looking at a moment in reality, and there are multiple Rashomons, a variety of ways to look at things. What I maybe bring to the table is, I'm looking at this from outside the specialty. You know, when you deal with a lot of historians today, you are dealing with scientists in a certain realm. These are people who aren't going to talk about things that they can't quantify. Any good scientist is going to want to be able to back up what they say in a peer-reviewed journal. That's how a lot of historians are today. But the specialty they study takes away that ability to look at things from a farther-away lens. So fifty years ago you would've had all these historians who would've been just fine looking at events as though they were in a satellite and giving you these big pronouncements. Most historians today wouldn't be comfortable with that. The problem is, historians aren't dealing with brain surgery, they're dealing with human beings. That by its very nature is hard to quantify and hard to get your mind around. So I guess it gives me a lot more leeway than a brain surgeon. And they've been very kind to me, all these professionals. I think they sometimes don't like the way I dramatize events, but I look at this like what Alfred Hitchcock famously said about drama: Drama is just reality with the boring bits taken out. That's kind of how I look at the history show. I'm giving you the story that an author would give you or a writer would give you or a historian fifty years ago might give you.

SH: Well, what you're doing is fantastic, and that will be my last dollop of praise before we get into areas of controversy.

DC: That's it. It's got to stop now.

SH: So I've been hearing rumors from among our mutual fans that you and I should have a conversation about the sorts of things that you treat on your Common Sense podcast, which, frankly, I have listened to less. I've only heard a few episodes

of it, but I get a sense that people are expecting us to not fully align on questions of foreign policy, just war, the War on Terror, and the role of Islam in inspiring the terror side of that war, etc. I don't know how much you know of my positions on these areas, but I suggest that we just meander into them and see what happens.

DC: Well, sure, and maybe we can start with how do you keep getting these people angry with you? If you Google "Sam Harris," there's going to be all these wonderful moments—like the Ben Affleck moment and all these other things. You know, I feel like I've got pretty thin skin when it comes to things like Twitter. How do you deal with these situations and then go back and do them again? It seems like the position you put yourself in is to enjoy that, because you're going to just do that again on the next show.

SH: Well, I guess there's a Freudian diagnosis for this. It's called masochism.

DC: I'm not going there, I'm just suggesting you might consider it.

SH: Well, I realized at some point that it doesn't bother me to be hated for positions I actually hold. If someone understands what I think, and they think it's reprehensible and they want nothing more to do with me as a result, I'm fine with that. The thing that gets under my skin—which, unfortunately, I have to deal with more than anything else—is a frank misunderstanding of my position or a malicious distortion of it so as to spread a misunderstanding of it. I deal with that more and more now, and unfortunately there's no way to deal with it elegantly, comprehensively, and effectively. You can't keep writing letters to the editor. You can't follow your dishonest critics around cleaning up the mess they're making. It is much easier to make a mess than to clean it up. So wherever you go and see my views discussed, you see total distortions of them. That does wear on me, and as a result, I've attempted to pick my battles. I avoid certain controversies now, because I anticipate the cost, in terms of both time and annoyance, and then just decide it's not worth it. I actually just gave up a book contract that was the best book contract I've ever had and maybe will ever have, but I decided that the topic was going to put me in an all-out war against critics whose first impulse would be to ignore all the nuance in my arguments. So I'm being more selective about the battles I pick now, although I'm liable to stumble into any area of controversy in the middle of a conversation like this and reap the whirlwind. It's annoying, but I think some of what this conversation would be if we touched those topics is me distinguishing what I actually mean from what many of these people, like Ben Affleck, think I mean.

DC: It's funny, too, for those who maybe don't understand—and I've only had the tiniest, tiniest sampling of what you must go through Sam—but people will sometimes point me to, say, a Reddit page or a bulletin board somewhere where the headline topic is "Dan Carlin said blank. Is he right?" You'll read what it says you said and you never said it, but there will be hundreds of responses of people debating what an idiot you are for saying it. You don't even know how to begin to correct that element, and you just think, "If this continues to proliferate over time, the Internet will be full of stuff that I never said, can't defend, and will have people slam me for." So I can only imagine how you get it. And you're dealing with topics that require huge amounts of nuance and lots of clarifying statements and lots of disclaimers and all that other stuff. And if you just take a piece out of that to sample in a blog, it's really hard to give the overall impression you're trying to convey on any of these subjects. We all have that problem.

SH: Also, I'm coming up against certain taboos that amplify misunderstanding. The taboo around criticizing religion as opposed to other sets of ideas—that is something that people are really biased against. They think there's something indecent, just as a matter of principle, in criticizing people's deeply held religious convictions, whereas there is nothing

wrong with criticizing their false ideas about history or biology or anything else. There's also a lot of understandable guilt about the history of slavery and colonialism and the wealth imbalance between the developed nations and the developing ones. So criticism of Islam in particular gets mapped onto those concerns about inequalities in our world, and you get a lot of confusion. It's interesting to look at cases that pass through this filter more or less undistorted. For instance, on North Korea you get a pretty perfect convergence from people in the West, liberal or conservative, on the ethical wrongness of the regime there, and I think more or less everyone would acknowledge that if there was something we could do to liberate the North Korean people without too much bloodshed, we should do it. It's a hostage crisis. We have a couple of maniacs—or now generations of maniacs—with bouffant hair holding millions of people hostage, starving some significant percentage of them, and brainwashing them with an ideology that is clearly out of register with any real understanding of what's going on in the world. I mean, these people think they're a master race, when they're essentially a cargo cult armed with nuclear weapons. And if you talk to liberals and conservatives about this, the real problem is just a practical one. There is no way to resolve this hostage crisis without massive loss of life. They have nuclear weapons, that's one problem; but even short of that, they have so much artillery aimed at Seoul that there's no way to do it without a horrendous conventional war. But everyone acknowledges that if we could wave a magic wand and change the situation and disabuse these people of their mythology and their intellectual isolation and cancel that regime, that would be a good thing. Yet if you try to move that to a similar consideration of Islamist regimes, things begin to break down under the influence of political correctness. I just put that to you as a potential starting point.

DC: Well, let me suggest a difference. Take the North Koreans, for example, and brainwashing. I think your analysis was right on, but here's the thing: If all of a sudden they allowed actual free elections in North Korea, it would be interesting to see the results. It would be interesting to see if the brainwashing took hold to such a degree that people there voted to continue the regime or if all of a sudden, like the emperor having no clothes, we would see that all these people are actually more savvy and are able to resist the brainwashing more than we think and vote to do away with the regime. I think about extreme Islamic regimes, the sort of state that ISIS/ISIL is trying to put together, or even one that's been a more functional and valued member of the world community, let's say Saudi Arabia—if all of a sudden you had free and fair elections in Saudi Arabia that included all adults able to vote, it would be very interesting to see what the results were. So when you talk about the ability of liberals or let's call them paleoconservatives or anyone else to look at North Korea and agree that it's a tragedy and that it would be nice if those people were freed and ask doesn't this also apply to these Islamic regimes, I'm not sure. I remember getting an email from a woman who lived here in the West and was Islamic. I had made some comment about women in burqas and the rights of women in some of these countries, and I had used that as a particular touchstone. She wrote me back and said, "Listen, no offense, but this is what you don't understand not growing up in this society." She said, "I want this, I want this burqa." (She called it something else; there's another word for it.) She said, "I was raised in a society where we began as little girls to look at this and couldn't wait until we got to the age," and "Now, my views may not be representative, and certainly different regions and different areas have different feelings about this, but from the traditional little town I came from, I didn't see this as an imposition on my freedom. To me it was a rite of passage." It was a cultural change for me to see it as some sort of inhibition, because here in the West I think she should have the right to wear a miniskirt, which is not something that might have occurred to her. So if you could go to these areas that the ISIS folks are beginning to take over—or lose, as the case may be—and ask what the people there want, it would be very interesting to hear whether or not they want to be liberated. And you can have two kinds of liberation—the kind of pie-in-the-sky one where we say, "We're going to liberate you and in fifty years you're going to be like Germany is today," or "We can liberate you and you Sunni folks will be living under Shiites who take advantage of you all the time." It's not a perfect world where we can offer these people a panacea either. So they're often making the same sorts of choices in their heads that we're

making at the ballot box: “Are we going to get a lot of difference if I vote for this Democrat or this Republican? Nothing seems to change.” So you start to vote for the lesser of two evils. I think those people would react in a similar way. So I guess what I’m saying is there might be a difference between a country where it really does look like all these people are captives, like North Korea, and another country, like Saudi Arabia, where you’re just not sure whether, if you actually polled people in a free poll, they would say they wanted to continue to live like that or not. There may be a cultural difference it’s hard for us to notice.

SH: I think this goes to the foundational issue of whether anyone can want the wrong things and whether there’s a place to stand where you can say that in fact they do want the wrong things—they have been brainwashed, as I said in the case of North Korea, or some concatenation of causes has trimmed down their worldview in such a way that the doors to human flourishing are closed or closing to them, and someone outside that culture, someone who has not been brainwashed by it, could open those doors. For instance, literacy for women: I think that is an intrinsic good, and it really doesn’t matter how many women tell you from behind their burqas that they don’t want to read. They don’t know what they’re missing. It’s possible not to know what you’re missing. I think that once you strip away political correctness, you have to agree that to be born a woman in Afghanistan any time in the past thirty years was to be unlucky. Now, that’s not to say that you couldn’t find one happy woman there who, if given the chance to sample all the human experiences on offer, would, for whatever reason, realize that she is happiest in a burqa, not reading. That’s possible. But that’s not how most of the women there came to live the lives they’re living. These lives have been imposed on them, and for the most part, when you listen to the expressions of relief and humility and clarity that you get around this notion of wearing the veil in the Muslim world (I don’t hear too much around wearing a burqa, but lesser veils like the hijab), you are hearing a response to the thuggish misogyny of the men in those cultures. Women are treated like whores and considered to be whores if they’re not appropriately veiled. They are groped and, in most of these societies, beaten for not being appropriately veiled. When you have that kind of stigma around the empowerment of women or just the mere sexuality of women, and when you have every man’s notion of his own honor predicated on the chastity of the women in his life, then it’s two sides of a coin, and no doubt many women feel relieved to be appropriately veiled in those cultures. And I’m also not holding up the miniskirt as the ultimate example of psychological health with respect to variables like youth and beauty and female sexuality, etc. There may be interesting things to talk about there, but I don’t think there really is much daylight between these theocratic societies within the Muslim world—I’m not saying all of the Muslim world fits this description, but when you’re talking about the Taliban or ISIS or any of those contexts—and something like North Korea, which we recognize rather readily to be a condition of brainwashing in a political cult as opposed to a religious one.

DC: And this is where I always have my issues with that. If somebody were going out there (when I say somebody, I mean somebody in our government) and saying, “Listen, part of what we’re doing in this world is making the world safe for women to walk the streets and to vote in their societies and to drive and to enjoy everything,” you know, it’s a human rights question, and I agree with everything you said about that. But the problem then becomes one of selectivity. Somehow we care about these things as a country with a foreign policy where we happen to have reasons to care. Afghanistan might be important, or Iraq might be important, but in a country like Saudi Arabia—which isn’t just doing these things but in an educational sense is a bit of a fountainhead for these ideas and the most extreme of the extreme ideas—they get a pass.

SH: We should plant a flag there, because that, I think, we agree is a really perverse result of our dependence on their oil, and if we could pull that off the table, then I think things look very different. They get a pass because we need them to be our friends or have needed them to be our friends, at almost any moral cost.

DC: Let's talk about that, because it's better than putting a flag there. I would make the case that so many of the problems we are having as a result of, shall we say, the radicalization of a region have to do with the fact that we're over there and they don't like it. And the reason we're there has to do in large part with the resources. Oil, petrochemicals of any kind, are obviously the main reason, but there are others. Sam, you've heard my shows, you know this is how I think—I always try to ask myself, “How would we react in a comparable situation?” Not that long ago I was reading a book on the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79 and how the shah's secret police were so good at monitoring any gathering of people that might be seditious, that might want to overthrow the government in any sort of capacity to replace it with any sort of government. The one place the shah had a hard time was when these people met in mosques and over religious purposes, because it was difficult for the government to crack down on religious people without looking bad to its own population. That created a safe zone that involved religion in a way that thirty or forty or fifty years previously—back in the era when guys like Nasser were trying to push a, by Middle Eastern standards, secular sort of nationalism. We might have a sort of “Red Dawn” scenario if a bunch of Islamic people were stationing their tanks on our territory because something under our ground was a national security interest to them. I have a feeling we would be doing things. We might not be slitting throats ISIS-style, but I bet we'd have some guys in big trucks with gun racks in the back who were fond of planting explosives sometimes. I mean, I don't think we would react all that differently. I think the fact that there's a religious overtone to this makes us feel like we would react differently. I bet we're not all that much nicer than some of these people we see fighting what they see as outside colonialists or people foisting culture on them or stealing their resources or what have you. Do you think we'd be all that different if the shoe were on the other foot?

SH: I think the analogy breaks down a little bit, because we're not stealing oil from Saudi Arabia. We are just protective of it because we need it. Now, that's a problem we absolutely must solve, and we should be running a Manhattan Project to solve it. The technology is very much within reach. We could all be driving electric cars, we could all be on solar, we could have true resource security, and that would be an extraordinarily good thing to do. The analogy breaks down for me because we're not mere invaders of these countries. Now, I didn't support the war in Iraq. I thought it was a terrible idea, especially in retrospect, although I think an argument could have been made for it more or less along the lines I just gave for the North Korean case. You had a virtually psychopathic dictator and a hostage crisis, and it would have been a good thing if the civilized world could have found a way to intervene and liberate the Iraqi people. Except the level of religious sectarianism in that society caused it to explode into civil war. I don't hold us responsible, nor do I think anyone should hold us responsible, for the millennia-long internecine hostility between Shia and Sunni. That's entirely a religious confection.

DC: But surely, Sam, it was a known quantity that needed to be taken into account.

SH: Of course.

DC: It's why there were people at the highest levels saying, “Don't do this. This is a fractured society that's being held together by a vicious strongman, and if you take the vicious strongman out, who the heck's going to hold it together?” It's Yugoslavia without Tito all of a sudden.

SH: Yes, but that just points to the problem that religious sectarianism posed here.

DC: But wait, wouldn't ethnic tensions play the same sort of role in some of these other societies? I mean religion is not a unique situation, it's a variable that can be replaced by other variables in other places. The Nazis—there was a religious component with them, but it wasn't primarily religious; an ideological concept played the same variant role in their

situation. I think you could find hundreds of those. An ethnocentrism, a racism, a superiority complex, ancient hatreds—any of those things plays that variant role.

SH: Well, it's not the same. There are other forms of "us-them" thinking, and you just ran through the list. Racism, and xenophobia, and any kind of ingroup-outgroup tribalism can get people to go to war with each other periodically. But the notion of Paradise, I think, changes the equation significantly, true belief in Paradise and in martyrdom as a way to arrive there—in fact, the most reliable way to arrive there. The Christian tradition has never had this doctrine the way it exists within Islam. The psychological phenomenon that I'm most worried about, frankly, is the fact that you can be someone without any political grievances—you've never been mistreated by anyone, you're just a guy who grew up in the suburbs of Marin County or Maryland or any of these places where we've seen people so-called "self-radicalize"—and an Internet meme gets into your head. A person may have been born Muslim or not, but at a certain point he decides, "In think, Islam is really worth looking into," and he read the books and goes down the rabbit hole. Eventually, he comes to believe that "Jihad is incumbent upon every Muslim male. There's nothing more beautiful or important to give your life over to, and Paradise really exists. It really is waiting for me. I'm going to get there. I'm going to get those virgins." All this stuff is believed by the kinds of people who are being recruited to ISIS, and they're going over there in a spirit of jubilation. ISIS isn't functioning like a bug light for the psychopaths of the world. It isn't recruiting clinically depressed people who just want to die in the desert. The people who join are highly motivated. They feel a great sense of meaning. We might take comfort in the fact that at this point we're only talking about some tens of thousands of people coming from other societies to join the Islamic State. But this phenomenon is a window onto the psychology of people throughout the world who are committed to these ideas. A profound feeling of meaning and purpose comes with actually believing these things, and it explains why you can get mothers to celebrate the suicidal atrocities committed by their sons. There was a very chilling conversation I just read and excerpted in the book I'm publishing in the fall, between a former Muslim, now an atheist, Ali Rizvi, and a supporter of the Taliban after the school bombing in Peshawar in Pakistan, where 150 students were massacred. This fan of the Taliban was expressing his support, and Ali got into a bit of a debate with him, and the guy pulled back the veil on this sort of thinking. He said, "Listen, you are a materialist. You don't believe in Paradise, therefore you think that these kids were just annihilated. They weren't. We know them to be in Paradise, because they've not taken on the sinfulness of their apostate parents, and we did them a favor. There's no problem killing these kids." The problem I'm dealing with in talking to ordinary people, like many of your listeners, is that secular, liberal Westerners have to burn a lot of fuel to convince themselves that anyone actually believes this stuff. The moment you accept the proposition that millions and millions of people actually believe in Paradise and think there's no problem with death—and that all these jihadists who say, "We love death more than you infidels love life" are actually giving us an honest statement of psychological fact—the moment you understand this, you must admit the game has changed. It hasn't *totally* changed. It's not like it has nothing in common with the other sorts of tribalism you mentioned. It's not that politics never plays a role here, and it's not that we don't do stupid things like ignore the sectarianism between Shia and Sunni. But the thing I'm focused on, which has me truly worried, is the fact that you can get even educated Westerners to believe these incredible ideas and to act on their basis.

DC: But Sam, here's the thing. You suggest that this is unusual or singular or different. It's a variant of human behavior we've seen over and over again. I was having a talk with a southerner not that long ago who was talking to me about the Civil War and about the American South before the Civil War as what he called an "honor culture." Honor cultures are common throughout history. I mean, take what you were saying about Paradise and the willingness to die and embrace death and enjoy death and make it beautiful and something to be sought. That's exactly how my stepfather, in absolutely horrifically scared terms by the way, talked about fighting the Japanese in the Second World War, right? That wasn't quite

secular, because there was a religious overtone to the whole thing. At the same time, the feeling that one of the most important things was to scratch off the imperial chrysanthemum on your rifle so that it was marred before you died and didn't fall into the hands of the—I mean, your mind reels, but what it seems to show is a window onto a certain human experience that is recurring and not that uncommon. Spartans had the idea that people born in that society were born to die for the state. Go have more sons so that the state will be glorified when they die for it. What's the old line that one Spartan had when his wife was going to see him off to certain death and she said, "What do you want me to do?" He said, "Marry someone else and have a lot of sons." The whole society is predicated on an honor system that says, "You die for the state" or "You die for the underlying cause that justifies the state." Whether that's the emperor and his infallibility and his godlike nature or somebody actually telling you what God wants and what awaits you on the other side, it seems to me that we're talking about something that is not singular and not that unusual when you look at the entire breadth and reach of history.

SH: Well, I would agree it's on a continuum.

DC: And it's not always religious.

SH: The whole continuum isn't. Religion is just part of a larger continuum of—

DC: Agreed.

SH: —ideas that can motivate people to give their lives over to a greater cause.

DC: Don't you agree that that will always exist? You get rid of this particular ideology that's motivating these suicide bombers, and there will be something else.

SH: Well, no, I think we genuinely make progress in this area. I think that, for instance, Christianity—apart from a few pockets of fundamentalism in the West and a few aberrations that we're in the process of overcoming—has moderated itself significantly as a result of its collisions with modernity, science, secular politics, notions of human rights, and just the fact that in the developed world, most Christians want more out of life than is suggested between the covers of the Bible. So they ignore the bad parts in the Old Testament, they ignore the bad parts in the New Testament, and they try to focus on Jesus in half his moods. The truth is that, most people, no matter how Christian they are, are very different from the Christians of the fourteenth century. I believe your podcast on this topic was called "Prophets of Doom." When you listen to what it was like in that community and how credulous those people were and how they expected history to end in their lifetime—those people are now a tiny minority within the Christian tradition, even among fundamentalists in the United States. You can get fundamentalists to talk about the Rapture, but the beliefs that are operative for them day-to-day have been knocked back considerably since the fourteenth century. I would argue that what we're confronting in the Muslim world now is a little bit like a tear in the fabric of time: We have the Christians of the fourteenth century pouring into our world armed with modern weapons. Again, this doesn't cover all 1.6 billion Muslims, but it covers a disconcerting number of people throughout the world, in Muslim communities East and West, who are motivated by a very literal and comprehensive reading of these texts, the Quran and the hadith. And a few differences between Islam and Christianity make it even more incorrigible than Christianity was. The Quran does not have a line like the one in Matthew, "Render unto Caesar those things that are Caesar's and unto God those things that are God's." That line does a lot of work for Christians who just want to get out of politics. We have to find a way forward within the Muslim world for genuine reform. There are people working on that, and I'm trying to help them. I've collaborated on a book with one of them, Maajid Nawaz. There are people who are doing really

heroic and risky work. That's another thing that is quite disanalogous at this moment in history: To stand up as a Muslim and say any of the things that I've just said will very likely get you killed in a hundred different countries, and that's a unique problem within Islam that we as a global civil society have to find some way to overcome.

DC: You mention something very similar to this. If you go back and read the Old Testament of the Bible, as the Christians call it, there will be stuff in there where it says that you should stone women who are not virgins on their wedding night. If you did that today in the name of Judaism, more than 99% of Jews would think that was crazy. Why? Because once upon a time it not only was crazy but the book authorized it in a way that maybe some of the people in ISIS or some radical Islamic group would say their text legitimized. But here's the thing—

SH: Before you go too far down there—don't forget your thought, but in defense of all the truly crazy Jews who still exist, there are those who will tell you, "No, it still holds, we just don't have a Sanhedrin, we don't have a consecrated religious body to—

DC: To enforce it. Okay, I've got you.

SH: So there are people who will actually say that all of that's just been place on hold until the Messiah returns, but they are a minority.

DC: Yeah, if you saw it on YouTube, I don't know how many people would stand up and say, "You know, finally somebody is living up to the religion." I guess my point, and you mentioned it, is that the vast majority of Islam—I know Islamic folks. I'm sure you do too—don't seem anything like the people that we have a problem with. I know one who can quote the Bible like a televangelist. He quotes the Quran in multiple languages. Every time I say, "So, I hear a lot about this aspect of the Quran. Tell me what you think," he'll explain the different ways it can be interpreted and the different Islamic thinkers over time and the way they've approached these things. The people that we're having problems with, by and large, are a minority. The problem that Islam has, in a sense, is that the Ottoman Empire, before its disintegration, had some sort of ability to proclaim what was heretical and what wasn't a part of the religion. Suppose we had this caliph that people like ISIS always say they want, right? Somebody who could play—I'm sorry for the analogy, it's imperfect—a Muslim pope, let's just say, who's not going to be able to deal with Shiite and Sunni things right away, but someone who could essentially say (because often there will be some terror attack and a couple of Western Muslim leaders will say) "This does not represent true Islam." But true Islam right now is a difficult thing. It's a little like that guy who burns Qurans in the US South and says that he's a preacher, he has just as much right to make these decisions as anyone else. If you have a caliph who is a religious leader who can say, "Listen, I can't stop them from doing that but let me just tell you, you do that, and the 72 virgins claim is not going to come true. And who are you going to believe, that weirdo with his track record or me?" That's missing in the system, which is why, you know, if you look at the problems we're having with Islam, the vast majority of Islamic folks are embarrassed and horrified by the whole thing and are getting blowback in their own personal lives. People who wouldn't hurt anything pay the price for people who would. And so you turn around and say, "What can we do?" If you want to win this war, if you look at this as a war on Islamic extremism, then to me—and you know, this is what I studied in school—try to come up with victories, right? Military victories. It's a hearts and minds conflict.

SH: Yes.

DC: The people who are going to win this war for us are Muslim. So anything we do that alienates the people we need to

win is counterproductive in the end.

SH: Well, I totally agree that this is a war of ideas that has to be waged by Muslims with other Muslims.

DC: They're the only people who are credible to those other people.

SH: It's a war of ideas, and also a civil war, and we have to figure out how to help the true secularists and reformers in the Muslim world to win it. But the one thing I take issue with in what you just said is that it's only a tiny minority who support the ideas and behaviors that need to change. That, in fact, isn't true.

DC: Pick a number.

SH: There has been a lot of polling on this. And, frankly, the only way to gauge public opinion—you can't gauge it by just meeting as many people as you can—is with opinion polls.

DC: But throw out a number. Let's play with whatever number you want to play with.

SH: First, there's a distinction we should make that was first impressed upon me by my friend Maajid Nawaz, with whom I collaborated on that book. Maajid is a former Islamist, a former radical who was trying to engineer coups in places like Pakistan. He wasn't technically a jihadist, he wasn't perpetrating terrorism, but he spent nearly five years in prison for his activities in Egypt, and he knows why radicals do what they do. He's in dialogue with jihadists, and he now runs a counter-extremism think tank, the Quilliam Foundation, in the UK, trying to come up with a counter-narrative for devout Muslims to disentangle Islam from the kinds of theology that justifies the behavior of the Islamic State and other "radical" or "extremist" groups. The problem, however, is that if you run an opinion poll in the UK asking, "What do you think should happen to the Danish cartoonists?" after the cartoon controversy, or "Do you think the 7/7 bombers were justified in their actions?" you get shocking levels of support for them. I mean, something like 70% of British Muslims think that the Danish cartoonists should all have been imprisoned. I don't know what percentage of those think that they should have been killed, but 70% don't understand the imperative that free speech win in situations of this kind. And those are British-born Muslims. So you can only imagine what the percentage is in Tehran or Mecca. The distinction that Maajid impressed upon me is that between Islamists/jihadists and conservatives. This has always confused me, and it's now clear. And this is actually the distinction I was trying to make on that show with Ben Affleck, and you could see the results there. Islamists are people who are trying to impose Islam on society politically. They want a state religion wherever they happen to have a state, wherever they live. They want society to be obliged to live under Sharia law. Jihadists are the subset of Islamists who are willing to do this through violence immediately. The broader set of Islamists just want to do it through some political process, but the goal is Sharia law for everyone. This is a global aspiration. Now, most Muslims are not Islamists; I think the percentage is around 15% or 20% worldwide. And there are differences among Islamists. But Islamists agree that Islam has to ultimately become the global religion, and there's no way to separate politics from religion. The rest of the Muslim world—now we're talking about something like 80%—are not Islamists; they don't want their religion imposed by the state. But a majority of that 80% is extremely conservative in their religious views. They have views about the veiling of women and the honor implications of female sexuality and the acceptability of homosexuality and free speech and cartoons about the Prophet. They have very conservative views, which, in any given moment, may seem to align them with Islamists and jihadists and the people who burn embassies in response to cartoons, but when you ask them how they feel about the Islamic State or about Al-Qaeda, they will tell you everything you would be consoled to hear. Of course they hate Al-Qaeda, of course they

think Al-Qaeda has hijacked their peaceful religion, and they want nothing to do with it. But when you drill down on their specific moral attitudes, they are extremely conservative, and I would argue, as would Maajid, that we have to apply pressure to both these communities to embrace a global, pluralistic, liberal, secular mode of tolerance that is subscribed to at this point by only a minority within the Muslim world, not a majority. The numbers are not consoling, and it is, as you say, not something that a white infidel like me is going to impress upon 1.6 billion people. This has to happen within the Muslim world by Muslims.

DC: Here's the thing. I've seen this, and I'm going to take it in another direction in a second, to try to show how I think this is a recurring thing, and we've just plugged Islam in for something else. But let's take Islam out of this and go to a bunch of Americans down in the Bible Belt and say, "Do you think the newspaper in your community should publish that piece of artwork that shows Christ in a beaker of urine?"

SH: Piss Christ.

DC: Right. "What do you think? And should that be legal?" What their reaction would be to that. Or if you went to a bunch of people who were veterans of the United States military who served on, let's say, D-Day, and say, "Should people be allowed to urinate on the flag?" And then show other people who are wearing T-shirts that show horrible mangleings of the US flag—"Should that be illegal?" The difference is that while they may think that's horrible and worthy of a punch in the nose, they're not going to go blow up a shopping center because they're offended. So I think the being offended side of this is a very human way to behave—

SH: Yes.

DC: —and I think you would get similar sorts of reactions, if you framed the question a certain way, from all kinds of groups of human beings. Being offended to the point of wanting to punch somebody—pretty standard human reaction. The difference, as you would point out, is the desire to kill somebody over it as a way to intimidate them into behaving the way you want them to behave.

SH: And I want to add, further along that continuum, the difference once you believe that you will go to Paradise for doing so, or once you believe that your children, whose bodies you're using as a human shield, will go to Paradise if they're killed while you're behaving that way.

DC: Again, I feel compelled to take a nonreligious example to point out that—

SH: But I'm agreeing with the continuum you're sketching out. I think this kind of offense is a very human and universal principle.

DC: And yeah, let's talk about a heroic death. For example, look at the anarchist movement from 110 to 115 years ago. Every time I mention it, all the peaceful anarchists out there say, "Please distinguish my views from the ones you're talking about." But about 120 years ago it was en vogue, let's put it that way, for people who thought that political change was so necessary it was worth killing people over to do something that involved what was known at the time as the "propaganda of the deed." The idea behind this was that if you, let's say, assassinate—and a bunch of foreign leaders, foreign from an American standpoint, were assassinated; there were even American attempts at assassination—a leading figure, you get the publicity that comes with it and that encourages others to kill important political figures that are part of the establishment.

The propaganda of the deed's whole idea was that you would be giving up the rest of your life, whether you got hung for capital murder or spent the rest of your days in prison or whatever, as a hero to the movement. It's like the old non-religious Soviet Union, the hero of the Soviet Union, right? The kid who turns his parents in so they can be executed at the camp because they were counter-revolutionaries, and then the little kid gets a statue devoted to him. These are not unusual kinds of things, and they don't have to be religiously driven to happen. So when we talk about people who are offended and lash out, I think that is where the rubber meets the road in terms of when you say in a free society, "How do we make it not okay?" Let me give you an example. Once upon a time, if you killed your wife when you found her in bed with another man, there were courts and juries that might have let you off for that. A lot less likely today, because things have changed. But there are a lot of people out there who would say, "Listen, I'm just telling you, man, if you find your spouse out with somebody else and somebody gets shot, you know, not that hard to understand." I think you may have made a case when you talked about the time fabric ripped open and how we're seeing a bunch of people with a mentality that used to be more widespread or that runs counter to modern, liberal, secular sensibilities. At the same time, that's like saying that a bunch of people have a worldview that's dangerous and wrong, and the way we're going to solve that is by bombing and doing things that end up providing propaganda to the people we're trying to beat that they can use against the people we're trying to convert, or at least keep on our side, saying, "See, these people talk a good game, but they kill women and children too." You can talk about intention all the time, but if it's your kid who gets caught in the crossfire when we're trying to get a bad guy in Pakistan, there's nothing I'm going to say to you that's going to calm you down and make you rational and not make you think, "I'm going to go get the bastards who did that to my kid." So you're creating the next round. I remember my train of thought, where I was going to go with this. I know you're about my age. We grew up during the last half of the Cold War, the so-called "Red Scare." For those of us who lived through it and were at least of my political viewpoint, it would drive you crazy how we were obsessed with this Communist threat. And once the spell was broken, we looked back and said, "God, it's amazing we got so wound up over that." And then, in a historical sense, almost right afterward we got this Islamic thing. What used to be a sort of godless, atheist, ideological enemy is now an extra-god-believing, non-secular enemy. I mean, I feel like it's déjà vu all over again, and I just have Islamic terrorist plugged in for former Soviet spreaders of world revolution. But the justification that our government uses to impede those very secular values that you were just defending is the same. It's a wonderful hammer with which to hit our Constitution, like the Soviet Union was before it.

SH: Well, it did get plugged in, but we should recall that it plugged itself in. We had September 11th, which was a moment when history intruded into our lives. I don't know how you felt, but I felt that was the first moment when it was absolutely clear to me that I was living in history, of the sort that I had read about in books, where things can go fully into the ditch at a moment's notice, where there are forces aimed at your life that you were not aware of, and all of a sudden you must shoulder the burden of actually defending civilization. But I agree with you, there are many similarities there, and I think we should be dropping bombs very selectively. The problem of collateral damage is a huge one. But I don't think we should overestimate the number of people who become radicalized as a result of our collateral damage. I think it is a genuine phenomenon. But what's of more concern to me is that certain ideas, if merely accepted, create the conditions for a total repudiation of the values we need the better part of humanity to embrace at this point—a commitment to free speech, political equality between the sexes, tolerance for diversity, and so forth. We need these things globally. We can't just live on islands of tolerance where we're obliged to interact with, and maintain porous borders with, genuinely intolerant, medieval societies. So we need to spread these values worldwide, and that's difficult.

I think we've discussed Islam as much as we need to at the moment. I want to make a lateral move to a similar topic and ask what you think about this recent controversy around the Confederate flag and whether it can be displayed on the statehouse

in South Carolina or on the license plates of people who are fond of it.

DC: But I don't want to let you run away with the idea that we have to spread and we have to change these kinds of things, because I think—

SH: Okay, so maybe you can carry it through to here, because I'm saying we also need to spread these values within our own society. We need to spread them to the South as well, at least on this particular point.

DC: Okay, because I think there's a Wilsonian, idealistic, rainbows-and-unicorns side to this idea that we have to spread our view of things to other peoples. And if you were going to say Islam, that's a big enough problem, but there are places like China that call what you just mentioned and framed as a sort of human rights question—a universal minimum standard, shall we say, for modern people to embrace ethically—nothing more than “Western rights.”

SH: I'm comfortable saying that they're wrong.

DC: But how do you change that?

SH: First, let me say that there must be things I'm wrong about too. I don't think that I am in possession of the perfect moral code, which I don't have to continually reexamine, but I think it's fine for us to believe that on many points we are right—and “we” means, now, not just the United States. I would use the phrase “civilized world.” How that maps onto the developed versus the undeveloped world is not totally clear. I'm talking about people who are committed to freedom of speech and scientific progress and all the intellectual and ethical virtues that allow strangers from different parts of the world, and different cultures, speaking different languages, to collaborate peacefully on a common project of building a world where we can flourish. I view it as a global civil society that is struggling to be born.

DC: I don't think that the majority of listeners to these podcasts are going to disagree with that as an ultimate goal. The problem in this world is that there are a lot of very powerful states made up of hundreds of millions of people who have a different view. The question is, how far are you willing to go in a crusade, essentially—whether it be a moral crusade to shame them into behavior, or something a little bit more muscular, involving drones and the Middle East and sanctions or whatever you want to say to get these people to convert to your view. If several major countries, let's say China and Russia, decide that they don't like the view of an open Internet, they don't like the view of free speech and all that, what the heck are you going to do about it? There's a big difference between deciding all of a sudden that you're going to impose Western values on a small, relatively defenseless country and that you're going to impose United States values on a large chunk of the world that is hostile to them. This idea that it's our job or responsibility or duty to take our belief system and spread it elsewhere, while it may be morally defensible and justifiable theoretically, has awful, realistic, real-world consequences.

SH: I agree. I don't dispute any of that.

DC: Thermonuclear war, once upon a time.

SH: What you're describing is a practical limitation on our good intentions. It's possible to apply pressure on a society in an attempt to make that society a better place, and it's possible to fail in doing that, given how hard a task it is, and to make it a worse place—that is, to create more suffering than was there to begin with. And presumably it's possible to succeed and actually liberate a people who would've been immiserated for another generation under the current regime. I think anything

between those two poles is possible. I totally accept the spirit of your skepticism, that we are not well-equipped to invade and surgically remove a bad regime and then through our powers of persuasion reform the backward attitudes of the population. This is not something we can easily do. So I agree that our uses of force should be limited to what is absolutely necessary to stop the worst actors out there who we know are already culpable for terrible crimes.

DC: Yes, but what do you do about the worst actors that we cozy up to? One of the complaints I always had during the Cold War was that this was always portrayed as a values conflict, right? The values of the ethical West versus the leaders who wouldn't allow elections and ruled their people against their will. And we would go as a country and either help keep dictators in power or foist dictators on people because we were afraid that if they were allowed to vote, they might vote for our adversaries. In other words, we were not living up to the very ideals that we claimed the entire ideological conflict was about. For example, one of the parts of George W. Bush's speech after 9/11 where he talked about the gloves are off, and if you support terrorism you're in trouble, you're either with us or against us. And then we're hands-off a bunch of our allied countries because of oil or whatever you say. Saudi Arabia is the great example for all time, but it's not the only one. To me, when you let them off the hook, all bets are off. To me, that shows the reality of the situation beyond the talking points. There's a big difference between what governments, all governments, say they're doing and what they're really doing, and I think sometimes we take them at face value too much. The Saudi Arabian thing is a perfect example. If you're really going to defend Western values and try to take on what you might call radical or deadly Islam for people who think that they're going to Paradise, don't you have to say, "We've had enough with Saudi Arabia?" And let's understand something: When I say we take their oil, the people of Saudi Arabia are not the ones getting that oil wealth, unless they're getting it trickled down indirectly. It's this cabal of people that we help keep in power who run the country. It's a very different situation than if Saudi Arabia had free and fair elections and some sort of representative system.

SH: That's the problem with any of these oil-rich states that can just pull their wealth out of the ground. They can buy off the people and never have to respond to their political concerns.

DC: They flog them! They don't buy them off, they flog them if they say something against the regime.

SH: Of course. And that's why very few do. I'm not defending Saudi Arabia at all. I'm just saying that the fact that we can't do anything other than pay lip service to our values when confronted with Saudi Arabia is a symptom of our abject and unnecessary dependence on oil. If oil were worthless, we could take a very different line with them. I'm not saying we would invade them, because that would be analogous to the other misadventures we've had in the Middle East. But we could take a very hard line, whether it was sanctions or just non-collaboration. We could treat them the way the world began to treat South Africa during apartheid.

DC: To go back to the George W. Bush speech, when he said the gloves are off, you're with us or against us. You've got to win this war by shutting down the ideological fountainheads. And when you don't, it looks like you either don't want to win the war or you don't think we can win in this ideological Islamic hearts and minds conflict. If you don't go to ground zero of the people polluting the hearts and minds and say, "Listen, the first thing that has to stop is this money to these religious schools that tell people they're going to heaven if they kill an infidel," right?

SH: That's certainly part of it, no question. Saudi Arabia has been exporting Wahhabi Islam for decades, and while they're a minority in the Muslim world, they have captured most of the mosques worldwide.

DC: Yeah, who's making the textbooks? Exactly.

SH: Yes, they export the literature, they create the madrassas, and it's all very sinister. Perversely, we've been funding both sides of the war on terror. But everything you've said here, you've put forward as though it muddies the water ethically, and I don't think it does. It just muddies it practically. Yes, there are dictators we have not been able to distance ourselves from and have even decided to support, simply because they're the lesser of two evils. Presumably we'd want a better dictator there, even a truly benevolent one. But because there's not a benevolent one available, we back the one in power, because the alternative would be Islamic theocracy.

DC: But what happens, then, when a people who finally overthrow a government that wouldn't have been able to stay in power so long without our support—if you believe the old idea that the people will inevitably take power back—what happens when they do? This is the problem we have with Iran. A lot of people made a lot of money and a lot of foreign policy hay by overthrowing the Mohammad Mosaddegh government in 1952/1953. A whole generation of American policymakers benefited from that. The problem is that when they're dead and gone in 1979, there's a revolution, and the people who look like the bad guys at that point are the people who kept the regime in power that everyone's mad at. So long-term, we have modern policymakers paying for the temporary success of past policymakers. And you could say that that's ancient history and water under the bridge, but we continue to play that same dynamic over and over again.

SH: Yes, it's a problem, and each place is different. The Arab Spring has been different in different countries. Tunisia is not Egypt or Libya. But, at some point, we have to get a majority of human beings converging on the same basic values and aspirations—and how we work that magic is the problem we're discussing. I think there are transitional moments where a specific society might not be ready for democracy. If you just open the polls and stain everybody's finger purple, what you will get is a vote for a Sunni regime that's going to turn around and kill all the Shia, or vice versa, or be in perpetual war with the West. And if you had engineered things slightly differently, or just waited ten years or a generation, or merely got lucky, you would have a society that's ready for democracy, that is sick of theocracy. Arguably, Iran is closer to that than most countries we might name here.

DC: Listen, I'm with you 1000% on the Iran thing, and I think that would be the biggest game-changer in the region. And of course everything we're doing in that region is probably working against what a good outcome for us that would be. But here's the problem with the tone, Sam. The tone is that somehow, when we say these people are not ready for democracy, we act as though we are part of a cabal of nations or an international community that gets to decide this and say, "You know what, El Salvador? Finally you're ready for democracy and, by the way, on a probationary and, you know, we'll see how you use it." I guess what I'm saying is that part of what upsets people in smaller countries, I think, is this idea that it's our job to make the decision when you're ready for this or that. See what I'm saying?

SH: We have to pull whatever levers are within reach. We have a decision with respect to whom we're going to collaborate with economically or politically. Again, I think a good analogy is South Africa. At a certain point, the global culture decided, "All right, what's going on in South Africa is ethically and politically unacceptable. The jury is no longer out on questions of this kind, and it's time we not only paid lip service to this but actually made our common interests known globally."

DC: But Sam, that's not how it happened. Our government pushed back against that forever. I mean, in the 80s I was protesting the Reagan administration's involvement in helping to prop up the South African regime. I mean, my God, there

were artists who wouldn't play the city. It was almost a grassroots effort as opposed to a government effort. A lot of times people who were against that were fighting our own government, which was still supporting that regime. They were the last ones to cave.

SH: But public pressure what ultimately effective. There's no question that the US government is trailing a history of, at best, morally confused policy with respect to supporting or collaborating with corrupt governments. So we have a lot to atone for. The question is, when can we start being good? When can we start being wise at any moment in history?

DC: I think you're making an assumption that there's a motivation amongst the people who are decision-makers that doesn't exist. I think you're thinking that they're thinking, "Now, who can we collaborate with?" and "Who shares our values?" when I don't think that's their intention at all. They may have a PR firm that says what their intentions are, but I think their intentions are resource extraction, making sure we have a footprint in the region here, there, and the other. I don't think that these benign ideas you're talking about are actually being debated very much in the halls of power, and I've been there. I've been at some of these debates where part of what we talk about is "Okay, who's going to use whose spare parts in their military?" so that we can sell spare parts. I think your idea that they have these discussions about international morality at the highest levels is only for public consumption. I don't think they do.

SH: Just as you admonished me not to take at face value what the PR representative of any government would say as to the nobility of its motives, I would admonish you and our listeners not to be so cynical as to imagine that no one in government ever has good, or even self-sacrificing, motives. Governments are filled with people like you and me. There's a range, from psychopaths to, undoubtedly, a few saints, and everything in between. So the motives are always mixed, and yes, we privilege our national interests over the interests of other countries to some degree. But the question is, what is the coefficient there? I don't know. I think it's coming down. And when you look at cases like Rwanda, where we didn't get involved but now we feel we should have, because we just presided over a genocide. Those are cases where we don't have interests apart from humanitarian ones. I think there are pure examples—such as deciding to get, however tentatively, back into a war in Iraq to save the Yazidis from annihilation at the hands of ISIS. Many people think we didn't do enough, we didn't act quickly enough, we seem to have done just enough to save a fair number of people from starving to death on the side of a mountain. That wasn't based on our lust for oil. The Obama administration doesn't want to go near Iraq or Syria with a ten-foot pole. They're being dragged kicking and screaming toward any involvement there because of what a fiasco the last two wars were, and yet we had to do something, because to do nothing was to watch women and children buried alive, crucified, and so forth.

DC: But Sam, why do they care?

SH: For the same reasons we do. You have to attribute at least your own level of moral concern to most people in government. The system may be stacked against them, but they are just people.

DC: Sam, let me throw an alternative scenario at you: We let people—as if it was our job, as if we were the God-country—we let people die in huge numbers all over the world every day. The government cared about that because it was going to be a political embarrassment and horrible nightmare for the policymakers at hand if all of a sudden it looked like they were going to have blood on their hands if they didn't act. I think they acted for political reasons and to protect their ass, because if all of a sudden the nightly news is showing all these dead women and children, who are people going to blame? They're going to blame the administration for not acting. It's not some high-minded idea. The administration didn't

go into the Sudan where a bunch of people were all of a sudden in trouble in a place like Darfur. They went in a place because they thought, “Oh, my God, our hands are dirty here, we’re going to take a huge political hit, the Republicans will destroy us in Congress, we’ll look weak, we’ll look like we’re losing Iraq. Do something.” So in other words—

SH: What about Bosnia?

DC: Absolutely a very similar situation. A lot of good books have been written about the situation in Bosnia and how when the difference really could have been made, we didn’t do anything. And by the way, at the time, I was absolutely up in arms about this, but I didn’t think it was the US’s job to go in there and fix it. There’s a lot of stuff about David Petraeus and other arguments at the high levels about utilizing American air power to sort of send a message. I mean, there’s a lot of backstory in here connected with Russia and everything in that region, but all of it happened sort of after the fact, and we ended up destroying a bunch of Serbian infrastructure and probably not saving a ton of lives. But I would argue, as I always do, that these sorts of situations are better to stay out of, because even if you have the purest of motives, when you get down to the bottom line, it never turns out the way we’re hoping it will.

SH: You think that’s the historical verdict on Bosnia? That we didn’t save many, many Muslim lives and that it wasn’t a good thing in the end to have knocked Serbia back into line?

DC: I think by the time all of that happened, most of it was essentially over. If you wanted to really get involved, you would have to have gotten involved in ‘93 and ‘94, back when these massacres were, for the most part, taking place. I think it was a sort of bombing after the barn door closed. Now, maybe you’re going to say, “Okay, Dan, when situations like this happen, is it the job of the international community to intervene?” Well, in my mind, there ought to be a European group that, when things are happening in their backyard, use all sorts of diplomatic and maybe more forceful pressure. I would leave it up to the people in the region to solve those kinds of problems. What I object to is that every time there’s an international hot spot, the giant global eye of the media and everything else turns to us. I don’t want that job. I think most American taxpayers don’t want to fund that job and certainly don’t want to send their kids to carry out the imperial grunt side of it. And yet I don’t think we ever get asked. So when I talk about my objection to this, it’s that we don’t have any say about whether or not we involve ourselves in this at all. When did the American people get to say, “We’ve seen this movie. It often turns out poorly. We’re going to sit on the sidelines and see if the Europeans can do a better job of handling something in their backyard.”

SH: I agree that this shouldn’t be America’s job alone. We need some global institution that marshals the appropriate use of force. The problem is the UN is broken, and there’s no one else to do this job.

DC: When you have five nations that essentially have veto power, you designed it broken.

SH: So that’s a problem. But the *reductio ad absurdum* of the kinds of concerns you’re expressing is pacifism—a fundamental unwillingness to ever get involved even if you have the power to do so. And I think the problem with that is then you are just allowing the thugs to inherit the earth and create immense misery for helpless people, generation after generation, with no remedy in sight. The world needs some way to respond to the malignant despotism of a North Korea, or Iraq under Saddam Hussein, or the imperial ambitions of a state that starts gobbling up its neighbors. What we’re talking about is how difficult a project that is, rather than whether or not there should be such a project. But I keep hearing you say things that cast fundamental doubt on the project itself and seem to recommend a kind of isolationism for the US and an

unwillingness to use force even when that force can be surgically applied without too much collateral damage—when you can actually get the bad guys and create a situation in which, if rational people are going to seize the stage, nobody with a whip or a Kalashnikov will prevent it.

DC: I've always thought it was interesting that advocating a foreign policy that's the same in more than 95% of the countries of the world would be called isolationist, because 95% of the countries in the world are not isolationist. And yet I'd be happier with their foreign policy than ours. It's a foreign policy that says, like any nation-state's, We have interests, but our interests are not everywhere all the time. When you can say we go to war to protect our vital interests, but our vital interests are everything or anything, then you can go to war for any reason. You've probably read *Not a Suicide Pact*, by Richard Posner, who tries to give you a rundown of the Constitution that, basically, allows anything in times of war to safeguard the nation. The problem with this view—because it's certainly right; if you examine the legal history, the Constitution gives extraordinary power to the president and the executive branch to run wars in wartime—is what happens if it's always wartime? What if you have temporary martial law forever? The founding members of this country's elite (and this was not obvious) did not have a unified opinion on this, but I happen to be a Jefferson fan, for example, a Madison fan. They thought that long wars were the death of republics. And they didn't see these powers that they were giving, these extreme powers to the president, as permanent things. But they didn't envision a war that never ended. We're in a war now that essentially never ends, and part of the reason why is that we're this whip you talked about, right? We have to be, because who else is going to do this job? I'm suggesting that to destroy the republic—which I think it will do if it hasn't already—in order to fight this conflict is to lose your soul trying to save some sort of global ideological better good. You can argue all these wonderful good things. If I can find an analogy, it's a little like making sure that you've put your own oxygen mask on when the airliner is dropping ten thousand feet before you give it to the person next to you. We're going to destroy what makes this country great by trying to push the ideals that we feel make it great.

SH: I guess I'm reluctant to keep seeing this through the lens of our national interests. I think we are talking about the problem of building and maintaining a global civilization. For instance, what should the world have done in Rwanda once that genocide was getting started?

DC: Well, if you recall the way it turned out, it happened quickly. The whole thing was like a month.

SH: A few months.

DC: Yeah, and really it was just like the Bosnia situation. There was a very intense period followed by a long, lingering sort of aftershock. But the thing is, it was interesting. I remember at the time watching world governments try to react to something that was unfolding so quickly, right? And that's where you heard lots of talk about a ready deployment force and all these sorts of things. From a military standpoint, the best thing at the time would've been for the neighbors in Rwanda to have gone in there—they're the ones close by—and done something to settle the situation, right? Look at how we tried to deal with Somalia, which arguably is a comparable situation. With the starvation in Somalia, we sent lots of aid, the globe sent aid to that area, But warlords—Mohammad Aidid and those guys—prevented it from reaching the people we were after. So you have to go in and clear out the warlords so the food can reach the starving people, but look what happened. It's a little like what the police always say when they go to a domestic violence situation, trying to help one or both parties involved in beating up on each other. They get there, and often both parties unite against the officers, who are there only to help. We could have gone into Rwanda and found ourselves bogged down there against both sides. If history is any guide, that happens way more than we assume ahead of time.

SH: Your analogy to domestic violence is interesting, because I do ultimately view all this—once you shed the idea of some sanctity of the nation-state structure—as a kind of crime problem. North Korea is rather like the state of Florida being held hostage by some maniac: If that were the case, we would figure out how to help the people in Florida, because they're part of our nation, and it would be a domestic violence situation. When you start hearing screams coming from your neighbor's house, and you realize that the guy who lives next door to you is beating his wife and his kids, and he's too scary for you to deal with on your own, it seems to me that, if you're a decent person, you'll want somebody qualified to kick down the door and stop the violence. There is surely a foreign policy analog to that which we need to figure out—how can we create it and minimize the chaotic secondary effects that you're talking about. It's a huge problem. But I keep hearing you flirt with abdicating responsibility here. I agree, it shouldn't be the US's responsibility alone, but at this moment in history there is no one else to do the job. Granted, we've often done it badly, but you seem to be recommending that, as a matter of principle, we should never attempt such interventions, because it's impossible to save the wife: She will always unite against you with her husband, and you'll wind up fighting both of them.

DC: Well, let's understand, part of the reason there is no one else to do this job is because that is official, documented US foreign policy. We will have no military competitors. I mean, that's the written thing. We're not going to allow a competitor who could do this job. So when you say, "Only the United States can do this job," that's because that's the way we want it, first of all. The second thing is—if we want to keep the analogy to a hostage situation going—that we have this heavily armed and very efficient and very high-quality SWAT team that we send in to these situations, and yet, historically speaking, most of the time they end up shooting the hostages and destroying the facility, and the bad guys often get away. At what point do you turn around and say, "Listen, theoretically this SWAT team idea is a great one, but our track record sucks"? I mean, at a certain point you have to ask, "What are we learning from this?" It's the same reason that the original guys around George H.W. Bush didn't want to go into Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein the first time around. They looked at that situation and said, "Oh, my God, that's a hornet's nest that will fall apart, and we'll have sectarian violence and all this kind of stuff." And then, after 9/11, all of a sudden we decide, "You know what? That awful idea from ten or twelve years ago sounds great." Or we're willing to risk it again, and once again the SWAT team kills the hostages, the bad guys get away, and the shopping center burns down. At a certain point, is this passivity on my part that you see—this isolationist tendency, as you call it—really a way to say, "Let's not make the same mistakes"? And instead of saying, "We'll do a better job with the SWAT team this time," why don't we turn around and say, "Maybe this SWAT team idea would really be much more effective if we used it in our hemisphere than if we keep creating new commands on new continents around the world

to extend what we do to Africa, for example, with AFRICOM”?

SH: Well, again, you seem to be arguing that the US can't do this alone and that we're overextended, and now you're suggesting that—to continue with the analogy—the Germans and the British and the Kenyans and these other countries that may or may not be on the border of any new emergency should have their own SWAT teams so that ours doesn't have to get involved.

DC: Isn't that the way it's always happened, Sam? That's how it's always happened. People in regional powers deal with regional situations, and those are their hemispheres of operation. That's why we had the Monroe Doctrine in this hemisphere.

SH: Given our level of war fatigue now, I don't think many people in our government would dispute that. And I certainly notice that we sell weapons rather avidly to virtually anyone who wants to buy them, so the idea that we're trying to keep a monopoly on military power—I don't see it. I understand we want to have the strongest armed forces in the world, for reasons that are understandable—consider a war with China, or any other great power—but I think we want people other than ourselves to do this work because—this will not be news to you—we are hostage to a political cycle. When the time horizon for thinking about any of these problems is trimmed down to a mere four years at the presidential level—and I view that as a very important piece of this—our domestic politics is just about the worst piece of software imaginable to be running a significant part of the foreign policy of a global civilization.

DC: Well, let me piggyback on that, because it's a good point, but I think it plays into this dynamic and clouds the idea of these good intentions that you keep hoping a major state would act in, for example, solving Rwandan crises before they happen. There's a lot of money in all this, Sam, and money becomes a dynamic. You have a 9/11 attack, and the amount of money being thrown to security-related firms and outlets and establishments skyrockets. That money then makes its way into our political system. What if the threat level then declines? How much political pressure, based on campaign contributions and all that, do you think there's going to be from people whose stock prices and everything else depend on the threat level remaining, shall we say, vigorous? How much do you think that creates a dynamic where the political system is unable to respond to changing situations, where we must always be concerned about terrorism to the nth degree, because a lot of the people making money off it are funneling that money to our politicians, who are then told, “Make sure you don't get soft on terrorism at any time”? In other words, do we have the flexibility, politically speaking, to look at a situation and say, “Do we want to get involved or do we not want to get involved? Let's see if we can sell some more tanks to these people.”

SH: I think that's worth worrying about. But I don't think it's the main variable in keeping our perception of the threat level high. It's interesting to consider what happened to President Obama when he took office, because he was against the Iraq War. He was very dovish in his proclamations before becoming president, certainly by comparison with Bush and anyone on the neocon side of our foreign policy. And many liberals expected—and he expected, or at least claimed—that he was going to undo many of the wrongs of his predecessor. He was going to close Guantánamo, and so forth, but then he gets into office and very quickly begins behaving in a very different way. And now, according to the Left, and even by some objective measures, he is viewed as even more hawkish in certain respects than Bush and many neoconservatives. The question is, what happened to him? Was he some kind of Manchurian candidate? Does he have these hidden financial interests that you worry are corrupting his thinking process? Did he buy a ton of stock in the Carlyle Group, and now he's got a mixed motivation, and he wants to keep the War on Terror always ramped up? Does he own stock in the next-best drone maker? I don't think that's what happened. I think what happened is he became president, he finally became privy to

the daily White House briefing—the top-secret briefing that tells you exactly what analysts think are the threats pointed at us on a daily basis—and it is totally terrifying. The level of malevolence directed at us, the fact that there really are people trying to figure out how to perform acts of nuclear and biological terrorism, and that we have some information on what they're doing—that will keep the threat level high. That will keep us flying drones. And again, I'm not disputing that there are mixed motives. Somebody is raking in a lot of money based on the status quo, but I think we live in a world that is becoming increasingly terrifying in at least one sense, while becoming less terrifying than it used to be in many other ways. The Mongols are not going to come over the hills suddenly—that is, people you've never heard of—and decimate you. And it doesn't seem that we're likely to get into an intentional nuclear exchange with Russia, although an accidental one, or one that happens in some way inadvertently, is a real concern, given the existence of these bombs. But we are in a world where it is becoming easier and easier for non-state actors and even a few individuals to cause global-level catastrophes: economic catastrophes, environmental catastrophes, and acts of terrorism that are orders of magnitude beyond anything we've ever seen. And it's the president's job to anticipate this and respond. How you dial down the threat level, given the continuous nature of the threat and the fact that it's only going in one direction in terms of technology giving more power to individuals and small groups—I think that's a real challenge.

DC: Let me address both points, one at a time. This is a perception thing. As a history nut—and I'm sure you know this, but I'm just going to throw it out there—I think there is no way on earth you could say that we are not magnitudes of order safer than we were when I was growing up, and I mean *magnitudes* of order. I try to explain to people who give me their worst-case scenario for a terrorist—they're going to smuggle some nuclear device into some US harbor or something, maybe kill a million people—that we had, we still probably have, tens of thousands of nuclear weapons aimed at this country on hair-trigger alert all the time. We did disaster drills in our schools growing up. We had several near misses. Go read anything from the Eisenhower administration, and you will crap your pants. You think to yourself, “Our worst-case scenario now would have been a best-case scenario during the Cold War if nuclear weapons were used at all.” To have only one go off, people would have been saying, “Thank goodness that wasn't worse.” So I think it's a perception question. We are much safer than we were a couple of decades ago, but we feel worse because some buildings were hit by airplanes. The second thing is, you mentioned the almost Manchurian candidate-like change in the Obama administration between the guy who ran in 2008 and the guy who's governing, and we talk about that a lot. There's a really good recent book, *Double Government*, by Michael Glennon, who used to be in with the Foreign Relations Committee people. He's an international law professor. He tries to address just that point: Why don't we get this change that these people run on? Of course you could go a couple of different ways with that. One is, they never intended the change. That this was a campaign promise, boom, it's proverbial, everyone knows that you lie. The other is—and this is Glennon's point—that there's a government that never changes. You talked about the vagaries in our system, where every four years or eight years we get a turnover in government. You know, when I was at the CENTCOM meeting a while back that they invited me to, which was a surreal experience for a podcaster, it was fascinating listening to the people at the table who oversee sometimes 25,000 or 30,000 federal employees, but they've been in their position for thirty years, right? Governments change and come and go, but these guys remain. They're the famous bureaucrats, I guess you could say, but they're the only ones who know where all the stuff is, and if I need a screwdriver, where do I go? So when the politicians get into these positions, they're the ones—they turn to these guys. The custodians of government, maybe you could call them. Glennon's book is essentially saying that those people, in a sense, manage to handle the political operatives. The classic example he uses in his book, which supposedly every president gets confronted with, is that you are a victim of the choices that the establishment in government gives you. So, for example, Obama might have this Rwanda situation you mentioned flare up again, and he might say, “Okay, what are our options?” and the generals might come to him and say, “Okay, you have three choices.” Glennon points out in his book

that they're usually horrifying, terrible, and awful, but somewhat realistic. Obama even said, I guess, at one of these things, "You guys are giving me no choices." And what Glennon is saying in his book is, that's how it is. It's the old line about how do you control an absolute dictator? Sometimes you filter the stuff you want him to know, and then he makes the decision you want. So that's his point of view on the whole Manchurian candidate thing. My point is that this attitude that we are threatened as never before is not just wrong, it's manifestly wrong.

SH: Well, just to be clear, I'm not saying that. I concede everything you said about us being objectively safer, at least along those lines. Having a Cold War with the Soviet Union that was at its apex of animosity—that was by every measure worse, except for the fact that the Soviet Union was rational in the sense that they were no more eager to die than we were. That's one way in which the force of global jihad is very different from communism.

DC: But Sam, that's in hindsight. That's not the way it was framed at the time.

SH: I think we understood what was true—that there was no ideology within communism that made immediate death for oneself and one's children look like a good thing.

DC: No, but the idea that a first strike was survivable and useful and logical, all that stuff was built into it.

SH: Okay, but that's different than a first strike being *good* because you're going to get to Paradise. It doesn't even matter who dies. Paradise awaits. That breaks down the logic of mutually assured destruction completely. You can't have a Cold War with the nineteen hijackers who are willing to wake up in the morning and hit the wall at 400 miles an hour. So let's leave that aside.

DC: But let's address the way you solve that. So we had a similar situation with the Japanese in the Second World War, right? Where you had guys on islands thirty-five years later who wouldn't surrender without the emperor saying it was okay. I mean, they had an emperor, right? So we get back to what we were saying about the caliph and the pope and having someone who could at least say, "This is heretical and this is not." I mean, if you want to get to the germ of how to maybe solve this problem, realize that the emperor telling the Japanese people to follow the directives of the occupying power, or whatever, made all the difference in the world. So how could you set that up in the Islamic world so that there were enough folks of credible background that people would listen to in the Islamic world who would say, "When you send your child out to be a suicide bomber, not only are you not going to heaven with 72 virgins, but your son's probably burning in hell somewhere"? Where you turn the carrots and sticks on their head.

SH: Right. That would be a great development. It's difficult to do, given the fact that there is no central authority in the Sunni world, and the caliph is not really analogous to a pope, and you can't really make—or it would be a very heavy lift to make—the notions of martyrdom and Paradise anathema. That's very difficult theologically.

DC: I talk to Muslims all the time who say it's an interpretive question, just like jihad is an interpretive question.

SH: But they have only so many tools to work with. Every possible reading of the relevant passages is not available to you, and you are constrained to make some rational sense of what it actually says in the text. And what it says in the text is, jihad as holy war is a central feature of Islam. It's not just an inner spiritual struggle, and there's nothing better to lay your life down for than to defend the faith against aggressors—and aggression is understood in all kinds of ways that are incompatible with our current view of free speech, pluralism, tolerance, etc. But I don't want to go down that rabbit hole. I

want to concede that we have gotten safer in many, many ways, and that we have a distorted view of the significance of events like September 11th. Actually, Bill Maher made this point brilliantly. He pointed to Hurricane Katrina and the resulting devastation—you know, billions of dollars lost, a city flattened, something like 1,500 people died—and he said, “Just imagine if that had been a terrorist act.” We would have been totally destabilized by it. We would have had yet another response analogous to the multi-trillion-dollar expenditure of wealth and the multiple wars that followed 9/11, and yet because this was just a natural disaster, we more or less shrugged it off. And one can certainly argue that we need to be thicker-skinned than we are with respect to human-caused chaos.

DC: Threat triage is what we need.

SH: Yes. And it is also true that conflict worldwide has come down. My friend Steven Pinker wrote a truly magisterial book on this topic, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, about how violence has declined more or less linearly over the centuries. Your chances of dying violently today, even with a perpetual threat of global terrorism, are miniscule compared to what they used to be, and they were far worse in any traditional society. So all that’s true. What has changed, though, is the power of one person or small groups of people to harm vast numbers of people. That is going up. It is getting easier and easier to create terrible suffering for even millions of people if you are a so-called lone wolf. And I think technology is always tending to take us further and further in that direction. There’s an asymmetry between the technology that prevents that kind of thing and the technology that initiates it. It’s easier to break things than to fix them, or to prevent people from breaking them. You see this with cybercrime and cyberterrorism, and I think you see it in most other areas as well. We’re meandering into a future where people will be able to create their own novel viruses on their desktop—I mean biological viruses, not computer viruses—in the same way they can create computer viruses now, and we’re not intelligently steering a safe course through all those developments. So I think that is one concern. The other concern is that, as you said, the best possible case in the Cold War would be just one bomb going off. But what would be the consequences of a single act of nuclear terrorism in Los Angeles or New York where, let’s say, just 100,000 people die directly? You render some area of a major city uninhabitable for quite some period of time, depending on what kind of bomb it is. But the global economic consequences of that, and the political fallout, and the Patriot-Act-on-steroids overreaction—I feel like we are poised to be far more destabilized than we have ever been. And I say we, as a global civilization, because of how interlinked we are economically. So I think there are greater implications to killing 5,000, 10,000, 100,000 people than there have ever been, politically and economically.

DC: But let me show you what the problem is, Sam. Okay, you mentioned the perfect situation, and this is maybe where I differ with most people, but I’m admittedly weird. But here’s the thing—call that day after the next big terror attack 9/12. Not 100 people, but another couple of thousand, right? You talk to the experts, and the experts all say that it’s a numbers game and it’s an inevitability. It’s going to happen sometime. The job is to protect yourself from as many of these things as you can. But if it’s an inevitability, and if it’s got a system-wrecking potential, when 9/12 happens, you can forget any of these constitutional protections. We’re going to ratchet things down as much as we did after 9/11, but from where we are now, right? So we’re going to ratchet things down like crazy, and it’s a predictable human overreaction. So if you know those things are going to happen, why wouldn’t you be doing something now, in a prophylactic sense, to inure yourself to that damage? In other words, if it’s up to me, I’ve got a waiting period that I’m working on right now. I’m going to work on some legislation that says you’ve got to have a cooling-off period after the next attack. You can close any loopholes that make you imminently vulnerable that the attack may have made clear to you—you know, okay, they can use airplanes to run into buildings, let’s fix that—but no Patriot Act #2 until things have sat down for a few months and people have had a

chance to get their wits back. By not doing that, we are opening the door to legislating while under the influence of total fear. If you wanted to prevent that, you could be working on that now. But there are people who don't want to work on that.

SH: I think that's a great idea.

DC: Yeah, but nobody wants to work on that.

SH: That is a meme that is well worth spreading: a cooling-off period. You wait at least until the flags have come off the cars and people are able to speak rationally about what has happened. I think that's a great idea.

DC: Well, shoot, Sam, is this where you end a show? Where we bow-tie it all in a nice agreement at the end?

SH: Well, before we end, I do have a question for you, because I feel like this is something that I haven't thought about enough, and it's very much in the news, and it dovetails nicely with what we have been speaking about. This whole Confederate flag issue, I think, is the same problem in microcosm, where we have the "we" who feel that our values supersede the values of people who are stuck in another decade, if not another century, of moral order. And I'm wondering, is there some sort of counter-narrative about the Confederate flag that actually separates it from the history of racism and slavery in a way that is convincing? Or is this just a case of people who really feel that it would have been better if the South had won the Civil War are holding on to their relics?

DC: I think that's a great question. I mentioned earlier that I had a conversation with somebody recently who was trying to talk about the South as an honor culture. And he was lamenting—this was a media guy—that you can't talk about the South in any sort of a positive way without mentioning the racism and the history of slavery and all that. His point was, there's a heck of a lot of good that gets thrown under the table because in this society you have to mention the bad things at the same time. In my mind, there's the best argument in the world for getting rid of the Confederate flag just because it's a reminder, maybe outside the South would be a good way to put it, of stuff that maybe the South would love to let people know that they've moved past. I'm assuming they have—I'm going with that. I do hear from people who talk about heritage. And I understand heritage. But this is a perfect example of what you talked about, Sam, where you can sort of make things unacceptable. I mean, I'm a freedom guy. If you want to fly a—and I'm sorry, southerners—if you want to fly a swastika flag, or a hammer-and-sickle flag, or a North Vietnamese flag when we're in the Vietnam War, I'm okay with that. And I'm shocked to find out that it's considered acceptable. When I see it, I do a double take, and I turn my head, and I always wonder about the person who's flying it. At the same time, there are people who are very passionate about that. If I'm a black person in the United States, if I'm a person of color of any kind, it's offensive at the base level. We live in a free society, though, and I'm one of those people who believe in freedom. Now here's the difference: You don't fly it over some state capital. I don't even see a gray area there. I don't know why those states have been flying it like that or getting away with flying it like that up till now. Some guy wants to fly it on the back of his truck, you know, that's freedom. You want to fly a swastika? I'm okay with that too. But the statehouse? I don't get that and never have.

SH: That's what I'm searching for here, because it's totally clear-cut from my point of view. But I'm wondering if there's something I'm missing, because the analogy to the Nazi flag—is there some point of view that I haven't heard well expressed that makes that a false analogy? If you're going to fly the Nazi flag or you're going to have a swastika tattooed on your forehead, you are expressing, in the clearest possible way, an ideological commitment—and that ideology is genocidal, it's anti-Semitic, and it suggests a view of history wherein you would rather live under the Thousand Year Reich than under

the current order. To my eye, the Confederate flag entails the same kind of declaration. It is a statement that the cause of the South during the Civil War was not only a cause worth fighting for, it was the right one, and it is some kind of sacrilege or moral problem that the South lost the war. I'm wondering if all the people who think the flag is "their tradition" and morally blameless have simply never been obliged to unpack what they mean by that, and what they mean is, "Yeah, we wish the South had won the Civil War." This is something I simply don't know. I'm wondering if you have any understanding of the psychology, or the culture, around venerating that flag.

DC: Here's what I don't understand. I would love to interview these folks, because whenever somebody writes me a letter about this, they always say it's not about the slaves, and it's not about the racial situation, it's about the right to secede, it's a right to protect your life, it's a right to do all that. In other words, take every reason for the Civil War besides the slavery aspect, and they will say it's about that. Nobody, or very few people I've ever spoken to, say, "Yeah, I fly the flag because black people are inferior and blah blah blah." I would love to see a notation to the flag. You know, there's a lot of flags from other countries where something will happen, and a new regime will take over or something will change, and they'll alter the flag slightly, right? We always put another star on our flag when a new state came in. It seems to me you could put something like a chain being snapped in the center of the flag, or something that indicated that this flag isn't in favor of slavery, or this is the post-slavery Confederacy. Or "Welcome back, black people, to the new South." Something that just sort of said, "You know the little chain on the flag being snapped? That shows that this flag does not represent something that said that the slavery was the part we would like to see returned." I'm not sure that makes anybody happy, but I've got to tell you, it's a whole different thing for me to see one of these things on a car than it is to see it on some state capital somewhere. I mean, why would you celebrate that? This whole southern heritage thing, it's hard for me to handle.

SH: The South has had an honor culture in the way that the North and the coasts really never have. Even psychological experiments show the difference between North and South in that respect. I think it does seem pretty clear-cut, and again, it seems like one of those moments where there's a tipping point and you think, "This is going to change very quickly." We've seen a tipping point on our national view of gay rights in a way that I don't think anyone expected 20 years ago, and one has to hope for and try to engineer similar moments of change in the rest of the world. The question is, what tools do we have to do that? And one always hopes that they're conversational first, economic second, and more coercive a distant third. I actually don't think you and I disagree—I think it's a matter of degree. I don't think we have a categorical disagreement about wanting to have all the tools available. I just think we may have a different sense of how circumspect you have to be when it comes time to use force. But we may not in fact even disagree there if we're talking about any individual case.

DC: I would be interested to see polls—if the questions were asked correctly—amongst southerners about how they feel about it. As I said, in the emails that I get about this, people will talk about "It's just a pride in your heritage" sort of thing. I think the pity is that there isn't an alternative symbol that, if you wanted to say, "I'm a southerner and I'm proud of it," you could show that didn't have the same overtones, that didn't appear to some people to be saying, "Yes, I'm proud of the South, and I'm proud of the things the South did before the Civil War." I mean, the United States, for example, has a whole bunch of other flags that we've flown at one time or another—the Gadsden flag, all those kinds of things—which different people can appropriate to show different aspects or ideas. Seems to me, if you're into southern pride—and I don't think there's anything wrong with having pride in your heritage or your grandfathers or anything like that—it's a pity that the symbol you use to show that has all sorts of other overtones that are not just deeply offensive but make people who are valued members of your community feel not just like second-class citizens but maybe even a little afraid. I mean, who would want to show that in a way that took other southerners and instead of making them feel proud, made them feel the

opposite of proud?

SH: And I don't know why one would want to celebrate the right to secede at this point either.

DC: Oh, I'm okay with that. I think that if this is a free society and Texas wants to leave, I want them to go. I'm fine with that. And I think that you might even make the case that when we talk about solving some of our national ills, the problems are so giant, so huge, and so complex that you might argue that if this were not a country with national things that hold us together, it might make perfect sense, if this was some giant corporation, to break off pieces of it and make it more manageable. It obviously becomes a whole different question when you're talking about a nation, but in a theoretical concept, if you don't want to be in the United States, I'm not sure I want you here.

SH: Well, that's an interesting topic. I don't have the expertise to have strong opinions about it, but the idea that progress may be in the direction of—

DC: Decentralization.

SH: —disintegration politically, as opposed to global integration—I am deeply suspicious of that intuition. I hold the other one. If we could run the experiment both ways, and it's possible the results could be quite different and one would be altogether preferable.

DC: I had an interesting conversation with the guy who used to do the old *Connections* series and *The Day the Universe Changed*, James Burke, the science historian. He's awesome. I would interview him every day if he'd let me. But once was enough, I guess, for him. He said that the way the world is evolving, this idea that bigger is better in terms of nation-states may be part of an outmoded idea, and that you could almost have someday virtual communities of like-minded people who may not be connected geographically at all but in a virtual or computer sense.

SH: Well, yes, we do that already. That's not someday, that's now. When I look at my intellectual life and, in some important respects, my moral life, it's a matter of being integrated with a global community that holds similar values and finds certain ideas compelling. And that is more or less totally uncoupled from geography. Science is the perfect case of this. Science is an international enterprise. Science knows no borders, apart from funding, and to be adequate to the conversation about science, you have to shed all your provincial commitments. There's no such thing as Japanese science versus American science as far as the science is concerned, and I think that is a model for much else that we care about.

DC: The question is, are you going to be willing to tolerate the levels of variation that you're going to get? If you think it's weird to have a few countries that are beyond the pale, wait till we have these groups that rally around the Nazi flag and decide that sounds good in a virtual community, you know?

SH: We're tolerating everything, as far as I can tell, on the Internet. I'm as committed to free speech as anyone. I think you should be able to speak about anything and imagine anything and argue for anything, and you should also be free to suffer the consequences to your reputation for doing that. So if you're a neo-Nazi who wants to cover his body with the appropriate tattoos, you will be treated a certain way for having advertised those despicable opinions to all of humanity. I think that's how we should keep those bad ideas in check. Insofar as they're just ideas being talked about and being advocated, we have to push back against them through conversation. The problem, of course, is when people are motivated to act based on their ideas, and there is no remedy apart from resisting them with force. And we keep finding ourselves in a

borderless world. If in fact this idea of going toward disintegration is the endgame for a global civilization, then the question is, how do you handle the Islamic State or North Korea or any other group that gets sufficiently empowered in that context? If there's no 800-pound gorilla to do it, if there's no global mechanism to do it, then you just have to try in a very piecemeal way to get your neighbors to agree that something should be done. And I'm not sure that works. I wouldn't want my police force to be functioning that way, as just a bunch of vigilantes trying to reinvent a police force every time there's a problem. And I think on a global scale, we may not want that either.

DC: It's one of those things where I think we're getting into theory versus results. A lot of what you describe is kind of the way we do things now. It might not be perfect, but theoretically, that's the construct we're working with. And I would argue that what you're seeing—so many of these world events that we tout as a reason why you have to have this global police force and whatnot—that many of these things have grown out of failed past efforts on our part to do exactly what you're talking about. The unanticipated ramifications—the blowback, if you will—from past attempts to do just that. Whereas theoretically, I'm right on board with you that you need some international police force, you need someone to go into Rwanda when they start chopping each other up. In a practical sense, when I watch that work, I see something that not only usually doesn't do the job but ends up coming back to haunt us. Like the two domestic violence victims who blame the police officers, where we turn out to be the bad guy when maybe our intentions were benign the whole time. Leaving that open for debate. But it's the difference between the theoretical construct and the way things are really working out in practical application.

SH: Well, I think technology, as always, will keep changing this, probably both for good and for ill. Just as it's getting easier for one person to break things, it's also getting easier for us to apply pressure to a society, at least economically, than it has ever been.

DC: Let's remember, though, that that has always been the example about why you shouldn't use history as a guide. Because the technology and the conditions have changed. Why can we go into Iraq and not have it be Vietnam? Because the technology is better and we can do things we couldn't do. There are certain things that sometimes turn out to be little lessons, if you will, that remind us that just because certain things have changed, other realities may stay the same. I think that it's a mirage and it's something that continually lures you into bad decisions to think, "Listen, we don't have to say Afghanistan is a tough country to occupy, because we have satellites now," or something like that.

SH: Ultimately, technology does change the game. I think we're in this unhappy valley between the old and the new, and the new could be even scarier than the old once we fully understand its implications. The prospect of having an all-drone war or a war where you have credible robot soldiers—that's not science fiction anymore. That is a very plausible future. Wars where nobody has to send their son or daughter to die, because they're all fighting from an office park outside Las Vegas. I would be very surprised if we don't arrive in a future very much like that. And then the ethics of warfare become something that you have to think about differently, and it's worth thinking about in advance, because when the technology finally arrives, it will matter what we think about it.

DC: Well, we'll end it here only because I could open up a whole can of worms suggesting that there's a yin-yang that happens with the technology, where as one side gets this seemingly bloodless—on our end—massive technological advantage, human barbarity almost becomes the opposite polarity. When the situation was going on in Ukraine recently, they were showing some Russian soldiers, and a military guy I know called me up and said, "Look at those badasses. Look at those Russians—they're just so down, they're down-home tough." And in a funny way, that becomes the compensatory

thing you could use to counter the bloodless super-high technology of somebody: If you took that drone operator from the Nebraska or Colorado technology center where he's pushing the buttons and put him in the field with that Russian soldier, it's over. Hans Delbrück, the German military historian, used to say that the way that barbarian peoples compensated for the technology of people like the Romans was by being harsher, more badass, and more dangerous on an old-fashioned level. I think you could make the case that the barbarity of ISIS-like groups almost becomes the counterpoint to our ability to bloodlessly go in there and create chaos but not on our end. Does that make sense?

SH: May we never live to see much more of it.

DC: From your words to God's ear, right Sam?

SH: Well, I guess God could take that two different ways.

DC: That's right, I wanted you to take it as many ways as you could. Hey, it's been great talking with you, buddy.

SH: It's really been a pleasure, Dan, and I hope it's the first of many occasions. And again, keep up what you're doing on your other podcasts, because we're living through the great age of radio as far as I can tell—it's the great age of podcasts, and you are my principal reason for saying that, so keep it up.

DC: Oh, man, well then I just owe you lunch or dinner. Fair enough? We'll call it even.

SH: I'll take it.

DC: Thank you, buddy, I appreciate it.

SH: Take care.

Notes

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