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Intelligence Squared U.S.
Special Release: A Thanksgiving Challenge, Thinking Across the Aisle
In Conversation: John Donovan & Ken Stern

Start Time: (00:00:00)

John Donovan:

Hello, everyone, John Donovan here. And early happy Thanksgiving to everybody about which more in a moment. But first, let me tell you how thankful I'm feeling about the great season we've been having. And I know that from your incoming comments, and also because, of course, I was there standing in the middle literally of some of the best debates we have ever put on. So, give them a listen if you haven't already, like the debate we did in partnership with the Mayo Clinic on whether Americans healthcare system needs to be knocked down before it can be put back together. Or the fascinating look at the state of western democracy and whether it is doomed and our nuanced take on the U.S.-China relationship. And that was a night where we actually worked through four different resolutions on that theme.

And then, for sports fans -- and also not for sports fans actually -- our latest debate asked a question that has nagged athletic endeavor for a long time. And that is: should college athletes get paid? You can find all of these as podcasts, the very same way you found this one.

But this podcast is not going to be a debate per se. It is part of our continuing series of conversations on the quality of discourse in this time and place we're living in. Where we talk about just how good or bad we are as a culture in talking with and listening to each other. And it's coming just in time for those family gatherings that most of us are going to be part of on Thanksgiving Day.

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And honestly are you a little stressed out at that thought? I mean, the thought of getting together with aunts and uncles and cousins who may come from parts of the country or just parts of the family where the way people think and talk about Trump and the media and politics is, let's say, at odds with your view on things. So, how do you talk about these no doubt touchy topics at Thanksgiving dinner without giving into the desire to throw a pumpkin pie in somebody's face? Well, here to give some insight on the experience of talking across the political divide, I am joined for this podcast by a good friend, a two-time author, and the former CEO of National Public Radio, Ken Stern. Hi, Ken. Welcome to Intelligence Squared.

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Ken Stearn:

Hello, John thanks for having me on the show.

John Donovan:

And, Ken, it is the occasion of the publication of your second book that brings you here. It is called "Republican Like Me." And it is a really interesting account of your experiment when you set out to meet with and talk to and listen to people from the end of the political spectrum that you had always seen as, well if not the enemy, at least the opposite side from you values and beliefs. To put this much more clearly, you're a liberal who decided to go venture among conservatives.

Full disclosure, I found the book so good that there's a blurb from me on the back cover. But the reason that I found it so good is that you tried your hand at what Intelligence Squared aims to do as part of its mission. And that is to recognize that most arguments have respectable people and respectable positions on all sides. And not that everybody needs to agree, it's not about finding the middle, but at least you really should know what it is that the other side is saying. Do I have that, about right?

00:03:03

Ken Stearn:

That's right. That's right; exactly right. So, the book is built around my concern, which is shared by a lot, that we're becoming increasingly polarized. We're increasingly angry at the other side often in ways that are unrelated issues. It's become almost tribal. They are the other, they are not like us, and we're angry, and look down on the other side. Whichever side you're on. And I think my year on this book was really built around the notion that that can't be the right way for democracy, let me do my own personal journey to see things from the other side.

John Donovan:

Well I want to talk about how that journey worked out, and along the way maybe you can extract some lessons for folks that are in fact dreading Thanksgiving dinner this year in particular. But what's the starting point? I just now declared that you are a liberal who ventured among conservatives. Do I have that right?

Ken Stearn:

Yes.

John Donovan:

How liberal is your world or was your world?

Ken Stearn:

So, the book actually starts with Hobart Street, my home street in a Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, D.C. A 93 percent Democratic ward, 100 percent Democratic household.

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I've grown up as a Democrat, I have early memories of handing out leaflets for McGovern as a child. So, it gives you -- and throughout my entire career -- probably in Democratic politics and elsewhere -- I've always have surrounded by people who are like-minded in that regard.

John Donovan:

And comfortably so.

Ken Stearn:

Very comfortably. And I think not unusually so. That's the thing. There was actually a fascinating study -- poll that The Washington Post did during the last election. They went to Virginia, an evenly divided state, and they asked Clinton supporters do you have any close personal friends or family members who are going to vote for Trump? And they asked the same of Trump supporters. And think about it, I mean we're talking big circles here, family members, friends. And over 50 percent of the people said that they didn't know anyone who was going to vote for the other side. And that's sort of an extraordinary thing how we've now fashioned our world so that we only talk to the same side.

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John Donovan:

So, what -- at some level something must have been nagging at you about this world that you lived in?

Ken Stearn:

Well, so I'll tell you sort of the creation story of the book. The issue has been nagging me for a long time. I mean, the stories of how angry we are. The fact that we now -- this is actually something that's been tracked for a long time: do you want your children to marry someone from the other party? And that sort of number of people, Democrats, who don't want their kids to marry Republicans, and vice versa, has gone way up. Just social division.

But it all began on Hobart Street where I began the story is a lovely street a lot of team spirit. We have a lot of festivals, Halloween, and our big annual festival is called Porch Fest. And it always begins with a Hobart Street pledge, which changes every year. And I always like it until one year, a couple of years ago it went, "Everyone is welcome at Hobart Street, man, or woman, white or black, gay, or straight, everyone but Republicans."

John Donovan:

Seriously?

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Ken Stearn:

Yeah.

John Donovan:

Was it tongue in cheek?

Ken Stearn:

It was tongue in cheek, but it wasn't tongue in cheek, right. So -- because it really reflected, it was a joke and got laughs, but I think it really reflected the truth is we actually didn't want the other as our neighbors. And we defined the other in this world increasingly by the other party. And that was sort of the starters pistol for me. Like, that can't be right. It can't be right for Hobart Street, it can't be right for me. And there I began to sort of chart out what this book would be about. Trying to, as Atticus Finch said in "To Kill a Mockingbird," "If you want to understand someone, try to see things from his point of view."

John Donovan:

So, how did you go about doing it?

Ken Stearn:

So, I spent probably a year and a half doing a whole variety of things that all can be I think put into the category of listening to others. So, some of that was just going down to conservative experts at AEI or Manhattan Institute, or any number of other places. But mostly meant going around where I could find lots of Republicans and just talking to them; spending time in their homes, eating meals with them.

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That could be NASCAR races, that could be Evangelical churches, I went to a 15,000-person gathering of Evangelical youths. I was the oldest and most Jewish person there. I went pig hunting in Texas. I went to Pikeville, Kentucky, Youngstown, Ohio and just spent days talking to people trying to understand things from their point of view.

John Donovan:

How good were you instinctively at being able to hear the other side?

Ken Stearn:

So, this is -- going back to Atticus Finch, I tried as much as I could. So, the book will be the judgement on how good I was at it. Really tried to think of myself as Republican for a year. I mean, that's sort of how it went. I actually went down to the Voter Registration Office in Washington, D.C. and changed my registration to Republican.

John Donovan:

Seriously?

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, I did that. I mean I changed my media, I read Breitbart, I spent time with Steve Bannon before he was famous. I watched a lot of Fox, I listened to Mark Levin, I spent six or seven trips to a small Assembly of God church in Fredericksburg, Virginia run, by now, my friend, Pastor Steve.

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And I really tried to think of how I would look at things if I were them. If I were—If I had a different background, a different orientation. And really that's my approach to it. A lot of our politics are inherited. I mean, we have to recognize it's not just about right or wrong, it's where we come from, who we talk to, who are parents are. And you have to start with that and say, not that we're right, they're wrong, that's the end of the story, essentially -- a radio line from a conservative talk show host. But that there are people of value and distinction and good ideas, and dedication to community, on both sides and you really need to listen to them.

John Donovan:

So, in terms of listening to somebody, let's take this to the Thanksgiving dinner table for a moment. If you want to have that kind of communication with somebody and you want to keep the peace does that mean that you as the listener need to only listen and you have to shut up and not push back?

Ken Stearn:

No, that's not a conversation, right. That's a speech.

John Donovan:

Right.

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Ken Stearn:

So, the interesting thing I did -- my interesting experience was I was interviewing, right. I was doing this for a book and I was always transparent about that, but I tried to have conversations, right. Which is sort of share where I'm coming from. Because I'm not like Walter Dixon in Pikeville, Kentucky, or Scott Sikes in Trumbull County, Ohio. We have different backgrounds. And when they said things and I would say things and we'd really try to talk and find common ground. And the interesting thing was, it may not be at your Thanksgiving dinner table, but Americans to me are actually surprisingly moderate people when they actually talk about the issues. They tend to gravitate towards the middle.

And one of the most interesting things was -- it's in the research but it was in my own conversations was --we actually don't disagree any more than we used to over the last 25 years. What we've done is become angry and angry and more personal about the conversation. And when you take that personality out of it, if you sort of -- it's not about whether you like or dislike Donald Trump it's about people and their views of the world it actually becomes a lot easier.

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John Donovan:

So, you're saying that we actually agree on a lot more than we're aware we agree on?

Ken Stearn:

Oh, for sure. For sure. I mean if you look at some of the most divisive issues of our time -- they can be anything from guns to immigration to abortion -- the actual data and the actual conversations are much closer. It doesn't mean that they aren't real. Of course, there differences in views and different issues and cultural differences as well, but they're not nearly as distinct as you would think. Yuval Levin the conservative writer, philosopher said to me, "You know, we're really playing between the 45-yard lines." And that was my experience. That we actually share more in common than we think. We're in a culture dominated by the loudest and angriest.

John Donovan:

What explains that? Why are we in that stage?

Ken Stearn:

Well, so I think there a number of things going on. One of which is actually demographic. There used to be conservative Democrats, there used to be liberal Republicans; you had to deal with people of different views within your own circles. And I think that meant you were much more nuanced in your thinking.

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And that's actually happened in geography now. We've actually started to sort ourselves physically from others based upon political parties. Ten years ago, there were about 1,000, 1,100 landslide counties. Counties that go one way or the other by more than 20 percent. The last election it was 2,500, 60 percent of the country. We're actually shifting around and once everyone you're talking to thinks like you, like on Hobart Street, it becomes really easy to demonize the other side. You don't know them, you don't deal with them, and it's easy to think badly of them. Because there's no personal rebuttal to it. And, of course, media and social media plays into it an enormous amount as well.

John Donovan:

Did you hold demonized views of people on the other side of the spectrum?

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, of course I did.

John Donovan:

Yeah.

Ken Stearn:

And I don't like to admit it. But again I will say, I will admit it, and also say it's pretty typical. The Washington Post -- apparently, I still read the Washington Post a lot -- did a word cloud. You know they went out and asked Republicans, give me one or two words that you think of Democrats and the same with Democrats. And then they you know they do a physical representation of what they hear back. And all the words from both sides pop up.

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So, Democrats think of Republicans, racist, bigoted, selfish, sexist, greedy. Those are the words that pop up. And, you know, I know enough on an intellectual basis to say, that's not going to describe everyone I meet for sure. But still sits at the back of the mind that is a philosophy there's something off with Republicans.

John Donovan:

That was you starting out on this journey?

Ken Stearn:

Me starting out knowing, that can't be right. But somewhere extensively I still had that belief.

John Donovan:

All right. The book is a journey and that's where the fun of it comes from. So, let's take parts of the journey with you. So, you've already alluded to some of the places you went that were clearly outside your comfort zone. I think pig hunting in Texas was probably the most clear-cut cast of it. And even in setting up pig -- I'm a liberal Jewish Democrat from the northeast and I'm going to go pig hunting in Texas, it's already in sense stereotyping what the other side is about by choosing that as a target. What did you have in mind and what happened out there?

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Ken Stearn:

So, let me actually sort of set up the pig hunting, which is I didn't sit in my house and say, I need to go find Republicans and there are certain stereotyping in this let's admit this up front. But you know you want to go to a target rich environment. So, it started off, I read a quote by the head of Heritage Action, who said, "What people in the Acela corridor miss is the," and that was his phrase 'Acela corridor,' "the awesomeness of Middle America." I'm like I want that. I want the awesomeness of Middle America. But I didn't know where to find it, so I went to see Tucker Carlson. Also from Washington, D.C. and the Acela corridor and I said to him --

John Donovan:

Let's tell everybody that the Acela corridor refers to the space between Washington and New York City where the Amtrak train, the Acela, runs several times a day.

Ken Stearn:

Right. And, of course, you know --

John Donovan:

And it's expensive and it's the fast train and it's the one that all the power brokers take.

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Ken Stearn:

That's right. So, it's full of -- look are lives are full of stereotypes it's how we understand the world and that's a stereotype as well.

John Donovan:

Sure.

Ken Stearn:

But be that as it may, gave Tucker you know an icon of the Acela corridor in some ways, and said, "Where do I find the awesomeness of the America?" And he said, "Go pig hunting in Texas." I'll go. The biggest problem being, I never shot a gun before in my life. So, I found a friend from Iowa, a Democrat in that case, and he took me out skeet shooting. And I was amazingly bad. I mean, just the idea of being able to hit one of those clay pigeons was impossible.

John Donovan:

But did you enjoy it?

Ken Stearn:

Not particularly. I actually found it very frustrating. And that led me to go pig hunting. I found a place to go pig hunting in Texas. Gonzales, Texas. And spent the day there shooting also badly, but having a much more enjoyable experience because of the people I met. The morning I spent with a three-generation family from Georgia: Paps the grandfather, CJ the father, and Isaac, who is all of 8, which is the same age as my son. And Isaac became my sort of hunting mentor and took me around and sort of showed me, you know, what to do and what not to do.

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And in the afternoon, I spent shooting with a group of uniform salesmen from Houston. Who collectively were like a demographic bar joke. There was a Hispanic soldier, there was a black middle-class guy, and there was a Serbian immigrant, and there was me the Jew from Washington, D.C. go out on a pig hunt. And, you know, the experience you have with them, the conversations you have really gives you a different flavor of both guns and America.

John Donovan:

So, what did you learn?

Ken Stearn:

Here is actually an interesting sort of codicil to this Gonzales, Texas is about eight miles from Sutherland Springs as the crow flies. So, you know, people's views on guns -- I mean, it's one of the interesting things that everyone takes their own lessons away. Sutherland Springs: the horror of people owning semiautomatic weapons to some, to others it's the story much beloved in Texas of the individual citizenry rushing to the rescue.

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And we actually talked about those things and, you know, sort of the idea that I was told that crime in Texas -- there's no mass murders in Texas -- incorrectly, of course -- is because everyone's armed. And it's just foolish for anyone to take on the armed citizenry. But people have different relationship with guns. For them, it was, you know, something that -- for people I was talking to it was something they'd grown up with, something they thought was necessary to protect them and their families in dangerous times.

Some of them, that was just part of a way of life. I mean Isaac, 8-year-old Isaac, you know, even then it would have been unthinkable for him to grow up without a gun. I'm sure he would have said that to me. And it's just a different take on the world.

John Donovan:

But what you're doing is describing who they were when you found them and what they're attitude towards guns was. But what evolution did you have in your thinking about the way that you picture people who haven't owned guns? Did you -- did you have a transformation?

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Ken Stearn:

Yeah, I did. I mean so I started off -- so, one thing interesting thing that happens after every horrible event, and let's admit how horrible these things are and the challenge of solving it is that everyone goes out and says from one side says, "This wouldn't happen if we had sensible gun control."

John Donovan:

And that was you?

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, that was me, of course. It was like if those bastards at the NRA would get out of the way we could really take a chunk out of gun homicides. And I sort of took that into these conversations both with people sort of ordinary people, and then calling up John Lott the conservative columnist the guy who

wrote, "More Guns, Less Crime." And I thought when I called him up, I would take him on.

John Donovan:

He's debated with Intelligence Squared by the way.

Ken Stearn:

Yeah. I thought I would take him on, and I would convince him to see the errors of his ways. But I like to expose the fallacies of you know at least to myself, the fallacies of his thinking. And it was an education. I mean, sort of. And got me thinking and doing a lot of research about the challenge of it. And I'm still for sensible gun control. I can't think of anything I'm against. But I've lost the notion that's actually going to have a transformative effect on crime. We actually see it in individual circumstances.

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And the biggest thing is, to me we always miss the big story. You know, gun crimes have actually gone down by 50 percent in this country. It's actually the biggest change in criminology probably in a century. And this has nothing to do with gun control, because, of course, the numbers of guns have gone up. John Lott would say that those are cause and effect. I won't. But we've actually figured out a lot of how to get -- how to reduce gun crimes; that's got nothing to do with gun control. We don't spend any time talking about those things. We miss it because we want to go for the easy thing. Are we pro-guns or are we anti-guns? And that seems to miss the mark when you get down to really solving complex problems.

John Donovan:

When you turn to your Hobart Street neighbors, theoretically, and have a conversation about gun control, what is it that you're know saying to them?

Ken Stearn:

So, I'm saying -- I'm starting with a couple of things, one of which is it's not a black and white matter, it's not right versus wrong. These are complex issues that can be seen from different perspectives. So, that's number one.

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And then, substantively, I tried to engage on terms of what we can do as a society to drive -- everyone wants to get the crime rate down. Let's take that as a given. Let's have a conversation about what can be done. It's not whether you're for or against crime, that's really not the conversation out there. It's the question of what is the most effective way to do that.

John Donovan:

And what about the -- how would you characterize gun owners today versus gun owners -- how you would characterize them before you made that journey?

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, it's so interesting. I had, sort of, "ah-ha" moments along the way. And I've been to you know this is about how I learned of the right, and that means I don't agree with everyone I heard but I met sort of many admiral people. But I also met -- there's still the paranoid style in America politics and you meet a lot of interesting people, let's call them interesting, along the way. And I've been to some Tea Party meetings which really sort of setback my love of the Right during this journey. Because addiction's all --

to me all offensive, all wrong, all angry, and that's not where I think we need to be. And I went to one the day before I talked to John Lott.

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John Donovan:
A Tea Party meeting?

Ken Stearn:
A Tea Party meeting. Yeah.

John Donovan:
Where was that?

Ken Stearn:
It was here in Northern Virginia. I was telling this story to John the next day, John Lott the next day. And he said, you know, "By the way, you probably know a lot of those people were carrying concealed weapons." And I sort of paused and said -- thought to myself, "that's a pretty scary notion." And then, he said to me, you know, "People carry guns, who actually are legal owners of guns, are the most law-abiding people in the country. More than police officers. And if you go and ask a police officer" -- which I did, you know -- "what happens when you stop a car and you see that they're a licensed carrier which comes up in the police data base. Does that make you nervous? And the answer is no, it doesn't, because you know that those people by and large are going to be more law-abiding than others."

And I try to sort of hold that even though I'm still not comfortable with guns, it's still not me and my culture, I hold that notion in my head that the people who carry guns by and large are a law-abiding people. More so than others and we've got to respect that.

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John Donovan:
And to quote President Obama's statement, which was considered so offensive, "people clinging to their guns and their bibles." Do you have some smidgen of that sense of people clinging to their guns and there was something about wanting to own a gun that indicated a character flaw?

Ken Stearn:
Yeah, I guess, I would start with an extra line that I didn't really get it. I mean, why would you need a gun when there's a police officer nearby? I mean, in my life, you know, in Washington, D.C. there are people who are supposed to have guns -- they generally have badges -- and people who aren't, and that's everyone else. I didn't get that notion, it wasn't obvious to me why anyone would think differently.

John Donovan:
Do you get it now?

Ken Stearn:
I do -- yeah of course.

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John Donovan:

What is it? I mean for those who aren't from that side of the line, what is it?

Ken Stearn:

So, I think there are a couple of things, one is -- well I think there a lot of them. Like it's all complex stew. Some of it's cultural. Look Isaac, 8-year-old Isaac -- it's part of, you know -- that gun hangs over his bed. It's just part of what he does, it's part of what he does with his father and his grandfather, it's the tradition. He would --you know, he told me how proud the day before he was able to "shoot the [bleep] out of a pig." And he did that with his father and grandfather it wasn't you know just a random thing. He grew up with that and it's meaningful.

Second of all, is -- look, if you don't live in a big city that police officer is not at hand. The bumper stickers, "I'd rather have a gun in my hand than a police officer on the phone." And, you know, things that happen when if you're in Gonzales, Texas where the nearest police officer might be 25 miles away, very different then me where I live down the street from a substation.

John Donovan:

So, this was eye opening to you?

Ken Stearn:

It was. Yeah, it was a lot that was eye opening because we all live in this -- it probably makes me sound naïve, but you know we all live in a bubble talking to people like ourselves. And that's the danger that we face.

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You know, to me, it's a question of is our society better off with 300 million guns out there? And I still would say, heck, if we could get rid of 300 million guns we'd probably be a much safer society. But the way between here and there is just not clear to me and we need to sort of talk about what's effective not what is, you know, some abstract notion of right and wrong.

John Donovan:

So, another of your journeys was into the Evangelical world. Tell me about that.

Ken Stearn:

So, you have to --

John Donovan:

And again, I want to start this with what was your perception of who Evangelicals are?

Ken Stearn:

I do know some Evangelicals. I want to start off where I'm not quite as sheltered as some of this might suggest. But, you know, look, I'm an agnostic Jew, so you know my knowledge of the Evangelical community was very limited. It was probably described most by what the movie "Footloose" and what I knew about Jerry Falwell who's been dead for a decade now.

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So, I went to this Evangelical convocation called Urbanist, it happens every three years. And you know I couldn't tell you what I expected. But I did not expect to find kids talking about Black Lives Matter, or talking about the refugee problem, how to help people not how to keep them out. And recognizing that Evangelicals and other churches play a big role in refugees we settle in the U.S. And I was really surprised and again I feel sort of naïve saying these things now, but I think it's the truth, just sort of how these kids wanted to dedicate their lives to helping the poor, the homeless, the people who live in the shadows. Sort of, you know, the life of Jesus in some ways; the message of Jesus.

John Donovan:

That they were doing it and they were sincere and they were making effort and putting in the hours?

Ken Stearn:

They were, they were. And, you know, I wanted to talk to them about sort of the issues that I thought defined Evangelicals. Abortion, gay rights, and you know they would talk to me about it but that wasn't their issues. I mean, that was us defining them, not the other way around. And that's I think a wrong way to understand people and what they're about.

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John Donovan:

How did the conversation about gay rights go? As I recall from the book you were surprised that there was a broader view than you had anticipated?

Ken Stearn:

Yes, so there is. So, there's actually a fair amount of data on it. So, like 25 percent of Evangelicals, you know, now support gay marriage. And that's, of course, a minority. But it's a group in transition. I mean, they're very conservative, they have a literal view of the Bible, that's one of the definitions of Evangelicals.

And many of them will say to you like Pastor Steve at the Assembly of God Church in Fredericksburg, which is, "Look you know the Bible is first truth for me." And, you know, "Whether I personally sort of gut level have friends who are gay and otherwise," you know, "I have to follow the dictates of my Bible first and foremost." But I found just a sort of variety of views in the most surprising of places.

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So, you know I went to Liberty University, Jerry Falwell's university. It was sort of my tour of places I thought I would hate.

John Donovan:

[laughs]

Ken Stearn:

And before I went, I had a conversation with a man -- a professor at Washington University in Saint Louis a guy name John Inazu who's an Evangelical and a law professor there, and a remarkable man. And he said to me, you know, "I've always found Liberty to be a terribly nuanced place." I thought that's such

an odd thing to say.

And so, I asked Jerry Falwell, Jr. about the, you know, what are the students' views on gays? What do you think about having gay students on campus? And he surprised me by saying you know -- he just sort of shrugged and said, "Yeah, of course we have gay students." You know, I mean, I think that masks a complex set of issues. But I think the notion of -- I would not have had that conversation with Jerry Falwell, Sr. It just, you know, a decade has changed not only the country, but the Evangelicals and I think it is a more nuanced view. Still a terribly conservative view but one that is changing with the times which I didn't give them credit for.

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John Donovan:

What was the experience of -- you said you spent a lot of time watching Fox News and watching -- being on the Breitbart site: places you hadn't -- I'm guessing you hadn't spent a lot time before. For you coming in there as a complete novice and then spending months watching it consistently what was the experience for you?

Ken Stearn:

So, I mean, some of it is quite awful actually.

John Donovan:

Really? [affirmative]

Ken Stearn:

So, I spent -- you know, I sat in on Steve Bannon's radio show a couple of times, listening and talking to him. Trying to understand the impact that Breitbart has. But the part that actually got me -- and I think -- so let's actually say the sort of the good thing which is, you know, I think they, and they I think is sort of a media roll, raise issues that others haven't seen. And speak to people who feel locked out of the mainstream media.

But if you spend time, as I did, on the comment page of Breitbart, you see such an ugly, angry, often racist, often sort of people-bashing world that really was very different than the conversations I had. And, you know, I've tried to hold those two ideas together.

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I met hundreds of people who I liked, and admired, and could have credible conversations with, but there's also a world out there that is angry and racist, and, you know, potentially violent frankly if you read sort of the diction of it. And, you know, those worlds somehow coexist and I found it often hard to sort of fit those things together.

John Donovan:

Yeah, I mean, you say you're an agnostic Jew but you're still a Jew, and you write in the book about encountering antisemitism, being at gun shows and seeing Nazi memorabilia [laughs]. I remember your line about one guy had this line up of Nazi stuff and you said, "I'm willing to listen to a lot of stuff, but that guy can kiss my ass."

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, so, you know, that's the thing which is you go -- look, I mean, gun shows is not my world. But you go there, and, you know, you try to remember that a lot of people you're seeing are people we lionize elsewhere. Law enforcement, military, ex-military, you know that forms a -- and others law-abiding citizens form a big part of the gun show audience. And you hold that one in, and then you also notice people sort of streaming by this booth which was at -- You know, I went to the same gun show twice over the course of six months.

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A guy selling Nazi paraphernalia, you know, Panzer movies, you know, Afrika Korps T-shirts, things that clearly have sort of a deviant, from my perspective, message. And no one seems to notice. And I still don't quite know how to hold that together.

John Donovan:

So, I mean you went out to places that you anticipated having this sort of luster of being exotic for you.

Ken Stearn:

[laughs] Yes.

John Donovan:

What did those people make of you coming from the northeast? Were you exotic to them?

Ken Stearn:

You know they never made me feel like I was a stranger. I mean I got invited to people's homes, we ate meals together, people wanted to talk.

00:30:07

And often they wanted -- because of my background they wanted to talk about media, but they often wanted to talk, you know, in places about how they felt -- and this goes I think to some of the stories of Trump and the white working class who form so much a part of his base. Sort of the feeling of alienation, the feeling of abandonment by the political parties, both of them, the elites of both, the establishment of both coasts. So, I think people by and large, not always, but by and large wanted the chance to sort of share their views to me of how they felt they were perceived and abandoned.

John Donovan:

So, you set out on this journey pretty much in time of period that overlapped with the beginning of the Republican primaries and goes all the way through Donald Trump's election.

Ken Stearn:

Just about. I actually started about six months before Trump entered the race and then went through the election.

00:31:01

John Donovan:

Okay. Did Trump come up a lot in your conversations?

Ken Stearn:

Oh, sure. I mean, you know, this is a -- certainly by the second half I mean every conversation was about Trump. He owned the space, the public conversation, the public mantra. Not just in the media but just everyone wanted to talk about their take on him.

John Donovan:

And now, as we said at the beginning we have Thanksgiving coming up. How did -- what did you learn about how to have these conversations? Not just about Trump, but yeah, yes, also about Trump, in ways that allowed for the thing that you wanted to have which was getting to know each other really and hearing each other.

Ken Stearn:

Yeah, so, it was interesting to me, which is, you know, I think your question assumes quite rightly that I have a negative view of the President and certainly that negative view has not been reduced over the last nine months. But I actually found myself understanding, not agreeing, but understanding why people gravitated towards him. The feeling of -- the notion that the establishment of both parties and well captured by Hillary Clinton, had abandoned them.

00:32:06

When you talk about the white working class which is on a kind of 30-year losing streak, income down, life expectancy down, opioid addiction up, the sense of the future down. The thing you would hear over and over again, is, you know, "I don't know about this guy Trump" and expressed in different ways. "But he's so different. Everything else hasn't worked we might as well give him a shot." And that was expressed in lots of different ways. So, a lot of people you know there are fan boys out there who you know yell and cheer for them. But a lot of the views of him was more a sense of failure of the political system for them. And, you know, when you're in Pikeville, Kentucky and people are out of jobs, and see no future, it's easier to understand that than when you sit on Hobart Street.

John Donovan:

Do you have any advice for people getting through the Thanksgiving if in fact it comes up?

Ken Stearn:

Well, so actually a number of people sort of talked about this with me. And the first thing I always say is, you know, Thanksgiving is going to be less of a problem for people than they think.

00:33:02

So, there's a very good political scientist out of the University of Maryland named Lilly Mason who's known as sort of the partisan divide in our sorting, which says, you know, people didn't like to use to talk about politics at dinners because it would start a fight. Now, they don't have to worry about it because everyone is more likely to think alike. And that's a truism that you see in the polling and in people's lives. But that only speaks to some and a lot of people have different views.

And, to me, you know, whenever I talked about personalities, Trump, Clinton, things got angry, or at least risked getting angry. When people actually sat and talked about the issues and actually sort of talked about their views and why they had the views, it was so much easier to find common ground than

we talked about. And that's I think because our politics become so tribal, you know, win or lose, us against them. When you actually talk about what the things that matter it's much easier to find it then whether you're supporting the President or not.

00:34:00

John Donovan:

Does it help to come to the dinner table armed with facts?

Ken Stearn:

I thought you were going to say, "Does it help to come to the dinner table armed?"

[laughter]

Yeah, sure. I mean, you know, look families are hard. So, I'm not going to play Dear Abby for families. Knowing people better doesn't always help, but with strangers you know people always seem to be willing to listen. You know, I didn't convert anyone, no one converted me on their point of view. There's a lot of low-information voters including a lot of people who don't think of him that way. I mean, how many of us are really experts on the issues. But I think a willingness to note none of us are 100 percent right. We really aren't. I mean, I started off with a bunch of issues that I thought I had to be right on. And I found that they were much more complex and there were thoughtful views on both sides of the issue.

John Donovan:

Does knowing that leave you paralyzed in terms of knowing what you considered the best policy choices?

Ken Stearn:

Well, so, I think it leads me to understand the complexity of some -- you know too I think disagree with simple solutions. And somewhat jaundiced, I mean, I sort of have come back -- you know, I didn't come back a Democrat, I didn't come back a Republican, I came back sort of an angry moderate.

00:35:07

John Donovan:

[laughs] So, you're still angry huh?

Ken Stearn:

I'm still angry. Right, yes, I'm angry because I think the parties are about simple solutions. And there aren't simple solutions out there. But there are solutions I mean there are answers to problems if you're willing to sort of look past the talking points of the political party.

John Donovan:

And bottom line, what is the thing you learned how to do over the course of this experiment?

Ken Stearn:

So, I think I learned to live outside my tribe. And tribe is, I think -- or clan or whatever you want to call it -- is a really important way of understanding our politics now. It's often about, you know, we live in a

world of confirmation bias. We always look for information that proves that we're right and the other side is wrong. And I now -- whatever my -- whatever the issue is I deliberately go out and try to find views from both sides. So, it's, you know, if I'm going to read Vox I'm also going to read National Review. If I'm going to watch MSNBC, I'm also going to watch Fox. And really try to understand perspectives of both sides.

00:36:10

John Donovan:

And the members of your former tribe, do they feel betrayed by what you're doing and saying?

Ken Stearn:

Well, my now 10-year-old son Nate, has been known to boo my television appearances about this book. But no, I think look -- I think what I was doing was sort of inherently an American, democratic thing. And so, my tribe as I define it very narrowly, you know is very supportive. But I do get, and this, you know, worries me about it, which is a lot of people haven't read the book who read the title and the subtitle --

John Donovan:

Remind me of the subtitle.

Ken Stearn:

Oh, "How I Left a Little Bubble and Learned to Love the Right." If you love the Right, you must be a white supremacist like them. You must hate gays, or be a Benedict Arnold. All things I've been called by people who haven't read the book.

John Donovan:

It sort of proves your point in a way.

Ken Stearn:

It does prove my point, but it worries me, you know, immensely.

00:37:00

John Donovan:

Ken Stern is the author of "Republican Like Me." Thanks so much for joining us Ken.

Ken Stearn:

Thanks for having me John.

John Donovan:

So, you can find a link to Ken's book on our website IQ2US.org, and something else you're going to find there is a way to help us out, help us get to do more of these debates and more of these podcasts. Because perhaps you don't know this, but Intelligence Squared U.S. is a philanthropic enterprise and it is funded by contributions that are always tax deductible and always, always, appreciated by me whether they are large or small. And, seriously, even the small donations are a way that we know that you're a part of our family and we want you in the family. We want you in our tribe.

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our website which once again is IQ2US.org or you can do it by text. By texting the word “debate” to the number 797979. That’s “debate” to 797979. And now time to roll our credits.

00:38:00

The Chairman of Intelligence Squared U.S. is Robert Rosenkranz, Clea Chang is Chief Operating Officer, Lia Matthow is Vice President of Programing, Shea O’Meara is Manager of Editorial Operations, Taylor Quimby and Rob Christenson are the Radio Producers, Damien Whittemore is the Audio Engineer, and I’m your host John Donovan. Bye everyone.

Happy Thanksgiving, and I’ll see you from center stage.

[end of transcript]