

Guest Post: Jeffro at “Democracy360”, sponsored by the Karsh Institute of Democracy

I have to say...I love living in college towns! For the past 15 years or so, Mrs. Fro and I have lived and worked in college towns, and in addition to all of the live music venues and abundant, varied eateries, you also get great guest speakers and conferences occurring all year 'round.

A little over a week ago, I spent a couple of days bopping in and out of democracy-related panel sessions and speakers at the UVA Karsh Institute of Democracy's inaugural “Democracy360”. (Note: Karsh is what you get when you don't tax rich people enough BUT a couple of them manage to do the right thing with their extra bucks anyway. Hey, it beats having them fund the next Antonin Scalia School of Law, right?) Democracy360 brought politicians, journalists, policymakers, scholars, and activists to the students, staff, and faculty of UVA “to imagine how we can collectively shape a thriving democratic future”. It was put on in collaboration with The Atlantic and several of the centers and schools at the University of Virginia.

A couple of the virtual sessions were slow (who wants to watch a dozen old hands gabbing around a table?) and most were variations on the theme, “Trump was horrible” but the *official* theme of those sessions was, “how can we promote a more effective and responsible presidency?” For the 50% of commentators who bothered to actually answer the question, their responses seemed to fall into one of three areas: 1) formalize the informal ‘guardrails and norms’ that we used to take for granted, 2) strengthen Congress in any number of ways in the hopes that it'll push back against future presidents' overreach, and 3) “ya got me – I think we're screwed.” Oddly enough, there was only one person who I recall saying, “howzabout we make a historic example out of trump?!” and that was me, yelling at my computer screen. Alas.

However, a few of the in-person sessions were really engaging. They were also revealing in many ways. You can take a look at the whole schedule for the week [here](#).

I wish I'd been able to attend the presentation about climate change causing an increasing number of refugees (and thus, impacting democracies) around the world – it is a huge issue that we small-d democrats will be dealing with for the next couple of decades at a minimum. I also, unfortunately, missed Danielle Allen's sessions: one on connecting K-12 & post-secondary education civics and a second one on renewing American democracy. Allen's [recent columns](#) in the Washington Post have been excellent, helping readers find the right balance of time and resources to allocate across what she calls a “portfolio of democracy protection, democracy renovation, and partisan electoral work.” In addition to being a professor at Harvard, Ms. Allen is also on the national advisory council of an organization called *More Perfect* – a partnership between all 14 of the nation's presidential centers, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and Karsh. You can also find out more about More Perfect [here](#) (and hey while I'm at it, you can find the AAAS' excellent report on ways to strengthen democracy, *Our Common Purpose*, [here](#)).

However, I was able to attend three in-person presentations, and the two best were Judy Woodruff's panel on covering the White House, and Adam Kinzinger's discussion with Jeffrey Goldberg.

Woodruff's panel consisted of current/former White House correspondents Laura Barron' Lopez from PBS NewsHour, Mike Emanuel from Fox News, and Elaina Plott Calabro from The Atlantic. Peter Baker from the NY Times was supposed to have been there, but he ended up canceling. Woodruff opened by thanking the crowd for such a warm welcome, "...the warmest I've received since my early days covering in the McKinley Administration." Ha!

The three correspondents were all clearly excited to be a part of the proceedings, and Woodruff kept things flowing along nicely. So nicely that amongst the anecdotes about the ins and outs of covering the White House and the many irritations of dealing with social media, it would have been easy to miss two key exchanges.

The first was when Woodruff shifted the conversation towards covering the 2024 candidates for president. Barron' Lopez took a pretty assertive stance that the media needed to quit presenting 'both sides' and calling it 'being objective'. (Be still my heart!) She went off at some length about what being objective really means – ie, reporting what people are actually saying and doing, reporting on what the likely impacts of their policies and proposals would be – as opposed to 'horse race journalism' (swoon!) She actually said (without attributing it to NYU professor Jay Rosen, unfortunately) "tell readers the stakes, not the odds" (triple swoon!!!)

And when the applause for that all-too-rare commentary died down, *not 15 seconds later*, the first words out of Emanuel's mouth were, "Well, first off, I don't think it'll actually be Biden vs Trump in 2024. Call me crazy, but we just saw a couple of folks dropping out of the race last month, and you can kind of see Nikki Haley catching fire a bit, and she's from South Carolina, and...South Carolina's kind of where Biden turned things around back in 2020, and...so...watch early next year but I don't really think it will be Biden vs Trump."

(For what it's worth, I've heard the same nonsense from my RWNJ dad a couple of times over the past year. It's sheer wishcasting to help them avoid any responsibility for enabling Trump, of course. And it's the opposite of reporting the stakes, of course).

Anyway, the second key exchange was near the end of the discussion, when both Barron' Lopez and Plott Calabro were talking about moving to a new phase of their careers (they've both recently moved up in the world). In addition to somewhat saner schedules and deadlines, I think it was Barron' Lopez who said it first: she didn't feel like she had to do "access journalism" anymore(!) I thought Woodruff was going to let it slide, but she asked her to explain to the crowd what access journalism was. Barron' Lopez explained (summarizing here) that early in your career, while you don't want to report falsehoods or rely on untrustworthy sources, you accept and regurgitate a little more 'spin' from your

sources early on, so that you can build those networks of sources and contacts. It's just how it works, it's all part of the game, you see.

And on one level, I get that. Not too many entry-level workers in any field have the power to resist how a boss, customer, co-worker, or competitor chooses to operate. We all navigate these systems and other players as best we can. I guess it's heartening that Barron' Lopez and Plott Calabro, at relatively young ages, are consciously shifting their approaches and flexing a bit, in their own way. (And talking publicly about it, too!) Emanuel, of course, was like, "what?" LOL. Woodruff thanked the audience, and we all shuffled out into the warm Charlottesville evening.

The other session that I really enjoyed was The Atlantic editor Jeffrey Goldberg's hour-long discussion with former Illinois Representative Adam Kinzinger, who has a new book coming out on October 31st. (Members of the audience got a free advance copy of the book, btw – political nerd swag for the win! ;)

Goldberg opened things by telling the audience about the time he, as a reporter, covered a GOP trade junket to the Far East and one of the Reps on the trip was Kinzinger. Unfortunately for Kinzinger, that rascal John McCain was heading the delegation, and McCain was having a ball "introducing" the other GOP reps by making shit up about them. So, as the various trade ministers are filing in to meet the GOP officials, McCain introduces Kinzinger to them as... "Henry Kissinger's bastard son"(!). Apparently this caused several of them to get angry with their staffers ("How come *you didn't tell me* we were going to meet Henry Kissinger's bastard son? You idiot!") until McCain intervened and explained he was kidding. So mavericky (eyeroll) but it was kinda funny.

Once the laughter died down, Goldberg immediately asked Kinzinger, "so...what happened?" And by this, he meant both with Graham, with the GOP, and with Kinzinger himself.

Kinzinger said that with Graham, that was easy: "the guy obviously needs a strong father figure-type in his life, and that was McCain, and then with McCain gone, Lindsey was easily co-opted by Trump." Trump, Kinzinger explained, is actually quite fun to be around. "He's like a crazy uncle who makes you laugh, at first. And he sees you. You feel *recognized*."

Kinzinger then went on to tell a story about how, post-2016-election, he and some other Reps were invited to the White House. Kinzinger had drawn some of Trump's fire before the election by refusing to endorse Trump, so he expected to get chewed out. But once they were all in the Oval Office, the first thing Trump said to him was, "You...you look good on TV". And then he proceeded to give Kinzinger about 2/3 of the attention during the meeting(!) Fortunately, Adam wasn't fooled.

Related to this, and talking almost psychologically about the party in general, Kinzinger said that "you have to understand: these people have been whipped up with fear for years

if not longer. [The GOP] did that, and I own my part of that. And when you're been told that some other group is on the rise, that you're losing power, you fight that loss of identity – you fear it more than death." The audience sat in complete silence, taking this in.

Kinzinger moved on, noting that for the GOP in general and the GOP elected officials who could have reined Trump in or refused to go along with his insanity, he tied the "you feel recognized" + "they're ramped up with fear" together and said that those feelings work together and make it easy for someone to excuse the lesser (but still offensive) things Trump does/says...and the next ones...and the next ones. And then you're faced with a very human choice: If I've gone this far with this guy but I break with him now, *am I stupid? Am I corrupt?* It's far easier to just keep going unless you have the strength of character to draw red lines and keep them.

And speaking of 'red lines', he is 190% mad – and correctly so – at Kevin McCarthy for re-empowering Trump by going down to Mar-a-Lago and making nice with him. Kinzinger said that post-J6, much of the House GOP was almost ready to move on from Trump and was looking for direction on how to do that. Kinzinger started thinking about how to reform the party; McCarthy flew to Florida and got his picture taken; and the rest is history. Adam, he big mad still.

The hour of discussion moved along quickly but I want to be sure to mention two things of his responses from the audience Q&A at the end.

Kinzinger was asked if the left and right media are essentially the same, and he quickly and clearly said 'no, not at all'. He said that while sometimes the left-leaning media rushes to judgement, they are usually sticking to the facts and should keep doing so. (He, like the Woodruff panel, is not a fan of 'both sides' journalism). In his view, the entirety of the right-leaning media is there to stoke fear and keep GOP voters at a fever pitch, and that's been a large part of the problem in our politics today. (Note: he also made a point to say that some of the worst rage-a-holics on the right were the *rich* ones, which was interesting!)

The other question that was noteworthy was when he was asked about his advice to Democrats going forward. Kinzinger said, "don't give in to the temptation to abandon democracy in order to fight the GOP. Election deniers are losing. Hardcore trumpies are losing. Stick to the system, reform the system, but don't adopt any of the GOP's methods in order to whip up your voters and/or to win."

(I thought we were already doing a pretty good job of that, but ok Adam – got it!)

And as a PS: he said he voted straight Dem in 2022 and will do it again in 2024. "There are only two parties right now: the party that's for democracy, and the party that's against it" – Adam Kinzinger.

So there you have it, Juicers: a few pearls of real insight (some intentional, some unintentional!) from the in-person presentations, plus lots of things to follow up on (reading about *More Perfect*, signing up for updates from the Karsh Institute, etc) and a free book to boot! I live and breathe all things politics, but seminars like those offered at Democracy360 make me want to shift how I invest that time and move towards a more action-oriented interest in steps I can take on a regular basis for democracy protection and renovation. I hope you'll take a look at your time and approach as well!

BONUS: In the past week, I read Kinzinger's book "Renegade: Defending Democracy and Liberty in Our Divided Country", which is officially being released on Tuesday. It covers a LOT of his bio (sometimes in excruciating detail) but it was interesting. He was kind of a political nerd from an early age, so hey, can relate! LOL. There are some choice quotes and moments there. Here's a few:

- "Operating like a drug pusher, Fox News was taking over viewers' minds and keeping a majority of people in my party hooked with increasingly powerful stuff."
- "With the red hat uprising still some months away, I tried to understand what was happening to people...these people harbored deep anger and resentments that made it seem that they were in the midst of a collective identity crisis. This made sense if you recognized that they were white, middle-class Evangelicals and felt like the country was dominated by coastal cities and suburbs which were ignoring them."
- [immediately after J6]: "I realized that the party that once held my loyalty was gone. It had been replaced by a fascist cult of personality built upon decades of ever more extreme partisan politics and cultural warfare."
- "In the House, increasing numbers of Republicans gave no fucks about Americans who disagreed with them on any issue – one was enough to disqualify you permanently – or about our international role, or the state of our democracy. Bigoted against those who are different in any way, fascist in their approach to domestic power, and vulnerable to conspiracy theories, they were direct descendants of fringe groups like the John Birch Society."
- "At this moment, the GOP can count on dominance of state legislatures that gerrymander congressional districts and on US Senate seats in "red" states to find some success in Congress. However, the results in presidential elections show a

national weakness...the problem is that minority rule via the Electoral College, court packing, and Senate filibuster rules that can thwart the majority are still available to the GOP...*the best thing we can do is conduct ourselves as if there were no one coming on a white horse to save us.*"