

Luke Mogelson

In conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew: Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly.

A key theme in our work is the future of democracy here in the UK and elsewhere, and we have a special interest in the United States, what has happened in the past decade, the election of Donald Trump and what followed.

To help us understand this and its implications for the United States and other democracies, I'm joined by Luke Mogelson. Luke has written for *The New Yorker* since 2013, covering the wars in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. During the pandemic he reported on the social tumult in the United States, including the uprising in Minneapolis following the murder of George Floyd and the January 6th attack on the Capitol. Previously, Mogelson was a contributing writer for the *New York Times Magazine*, based in Kabul. He's the author of the new book *The Storm Is Here: America on the Brink*. Luke, thanks for joining us.

Luke: Thank you for having me.

Andrew: Many of us here know and saw Senator Josh Hawley raising his clenched fist to the protesters and read Trump's incendiary tweets, including his 'standby' comments to the Proud Boys. And I watched open mouthed in horror, live, the invasion of the house, the attempts to get Nancy Pelosi, and the bravery of the police and of Eugene Goodman. I read as much of the hearings as I could, but it was really your book and the films you posted that brought home to me what it was like to be there in the crowd. Can you talk about this and your role as a journalist during this invasion of the Capitol?

Luke: I had gone to DC the day before, anticipating that something would happen because I'd been following some of these groups since the spring, and they had been mobilising even prior to the election against lockdown policies relating to the pandemic. And even in DC, there had been two previous rallies on November 14 and December 12, which were really

overlooked in the US by the press and also law enforcement and the public. But I had attended those as well and seen these same groups committing pretty shocking violence and hate crimes in DC. When Trump invited them to come back to the Capitol on January 6, there was not really much doubt in my mind that something would happen.

I started the day by attending Trump's speech at noon from the Ellipse, which is on the opposite end of the National Mall, from the US Capitol. And at the end of that speech, when he told everybody to march to the Capitol, I followed the crowd up the Mall and by the time I arrived at the base of the Capitol steps, there was already quite violent hand-to-hand combat taking place between the Trump supporters and the Capitol police and DC police, Metropolitan police. The end result of those skirmishes was that the mob was able to essentially break the security line, go up the steps, break a window that gave onto the second floor of the US Capitol building. And at that point, I followed the mob through the window into the building and spent the next hour or so inside the US Capitol following them around.

Andrew: In your book, you give the most vivid account of what happened as you entered the Capitol building. They didn't know you were a journalist, though, did they?

Luke: No, they didn't. I wasn't wearing my press pass on the outside of my winter coat, and though I had never lied to anybody or misrepresented myself, I also wasn't going around voluntarily announcing that I was a journalist with *The New Yorker* magazine, and nobody asked me. There were plenty of participants in the riot who were filming the events with their iPhones, which is all I was doing as well. So even while I was inside the Senate chamber, documenting what was happening with my iPhone, nobody looked askance at me or challenged me.

Andrew: I think if you had announced you were a journalist and you had announced you wrote for *The New Yorker*, that would have given you a serious problem.

Luke: Well, after we were expelled from the Capitol by the US Capitol Police and after a few more skirmishes on another wing of the building, when law enforcement was able to establish a perimeter around the premises, several groups of the rioters turned their attention to the journalists, in particular the TV journalists, who were covering the event from outside. A few different TV crews, including the AP and different international channels, had set up their cameras on a lawn near the Capitol. And once the rioters were flushed out of the building, some of them attacked those journalists and smashed all of their equipment and piled their cameras and tripods and so on into a pyre that they tried to light on fire. But they weren't too successful because it was mostly metal and plastic. I documented that as well, again with my iPhone. But those journalists who were openly identifying themselves as press were threatened and chased off, and some of them were physically attacked as well.

Andrew: We've had a few examples like that in this country when a journalist was chased, who was reporting on Brexit demonstrations. One of the things that we were always keen to learn from are warnings. And I was very much struck by the discussion you had in the book about the November and December demonstrations, that people didn't see these as warnings. Are we not very good at paying attention to these things, do you think?

Luke: I think in the US, at least, we have a tendency to stick our heads in the sand when it comes to domestic threats from segments of the population that we traditionally think of as native to our culture and history. In this case, right-wing extremism, which is largely comprised of white Christians. As opposed to, for example, the Islamic extremist threat that became an obsession in the US for decades after September 11. There is a lot of political pressure in the US on both sides of the aisle, not to even broach the subject of right-wing extremism.

Andrew: I thought it was interesting in the book how you compared those events of the 14 November and 12 December to the anti-fascist struggles that happened in, for example, London in the 1930s and in Spain.

Luke: The American anti-fascist leftist movement really emerged out of the British anti-fascist movement and the anti-racist skinhead culture in London, and in the US the origins date back to the '90s when you had punk rock groups that were opposing, sometimes physically, the neo-Nazi skinheads at the same time that were listening to the same music and frequenting the same venues. They were running street battles between these two subcultures in various American cities, including Minneapolis and Portland. And those tensions resurged in the wake of George Floyd's death and the anti-racist movement that it unleashed.

Andrew: I want to come back to January 6 and the context. You've been reporting from war zones for a decade or more. In Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, you've seen societies fracture, but you've also seen good examples of people working together. You give one example in the book of Liberia who were facing Ebola at the time. What general lessons have you learnt from societies falling apart or trying to work together better through your work?

Luke: The Ebola epidemic was very interesting to me because it was the first epidemic that I had ever covered. And unlike in the US, it happened in a part of the world that was extremely impoverished and lacked the resources necessary to deal with this overwhelming public health crisis. And, also, both of the countries that were hardest hit by Ebola, Sierra Leone and Liberia, had only recently emerged from years of pretty horrific civil strife and conflict. But what I found was that there was just an unbelievably moving and impressive grassroots mobilisation of West Africans to confront and deal with this emergency among themselves without the help of the government or other international agencies. And I found that in the slums of the capital cities, as well as in these very remote villages. They responded to this threat with a national solidarity that I had never witnessed before in the US. And it made me wonder, how would my own country react to a similar circumstance? When the pandemic began to hit the US in the spring of 2020, I was, needless to say, dismayed by the way that it almost immediately began to carve up the country into political factions.

Andrew: What you had there [in the US] was the pandemic response, you had the culture wars, and as part of those, but also above them, you had the attack on democracy. And all these things were coming together, weren't they? Which made the situation quite a volatile one.

Luke: You can't underestimate either the role that online conspiracy theorising played in that, and propaganda, misinformation, a lot of which was being pushed by political leaders, including the president and other groups with significant resources and money behind them.

Andrew: You also set it further in context. We can go back to Pizzagate; Trump's Mount Rushmore speech and the ignorance of the murders of Native American people. And you write about William Pierce's novel, *The Turner Diaries*, which was quite influential, wasn't it?

Luke: *The Turner Diaries*, especially throughout the '80s and '90s, was really a playbook and doctrine for the white power movement that emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War. I guess I should explain that it's a dystopian fiction, it's a novel that imagines a race war in America resulting in the triumph of white Christian supremacists who then go on to launch a genocidal global holocaust against Jews and people of colour around the world. And it was very galvanising for white supremacists in the '90s, including Timothy McVeigh, who sold this novel at gun shows across the US and went on to commit the Oklahoma City bombing.

Timothy McVeigh, prior to his terrorist attack on Oklahoma City, had been a member of and attended several meetings of the Michigan Militia. After this attack, there was somewhat of an effort among Americans, American politicians and also federal agencies to crack down on white supremacy and right-wing extremism. And the Michigan Militia, as a result, disbanded its leaders, decamped to Alaska. The militia movement that had emerged in the '90s kind of dissipated.

All of that changed during Obama's election in 2008 with the emergence of what we now call the Patriot Movement, with a capital P, that included groups like the Oath Keepers, but also numerous armed militias in Michigan for the first time since the Oklahoma City bombing. These

groups were really mobilising in reaction to the election of a Black man as president and were galvanised by the conspiracy theory that he was a) not an actual American citizen, and his birth certificate was falsified, and b), that he was a secret Muslim. And both of these theories were being pushed by Donald Trump as a civilian. And then when Trump became the nominee, even before he became the nominee, during the campaign, the Republican primaries, all of these same groups rallied around him and helped propel his candidacy and ultimately his presidency.

Andrew: Do you have any idea of the kind of numbers of people who belong to these groups? There's the people who would take active part in protests and demonstrations and assaults on the Capitol building and so on. Then there's the larger online membership or supporters that exist.

Luke: It's difficult to pin down numbers and it's also difficult to create a precise typology and categorise where different citizens on the right fall within that spectrum from ranging from 'moderate conservative' to right-wing extremists. The problem that we've had with Trump and Trumpism is that all of these different Americans with different ideological backgrounds share the same space now, whether it's online or physically at Trump rallies, at anti-lockdown rallies, at anti-vaccine rallies. And what we've seen is an accelerated radicalisation of Americans who may have formerly at some point just been fiscal Conservatives or voted Republican for different ethical or cultural reasons.

As the extremists become more and more normalised and are allowed increasingly to interact with 'moderate Republicans', it's become very difficult to distinguish one from the other. And that's obviously deliberate.

Andrew: You do help us in the book by writing about specific people that you come across. And I wanted to talk about a few of these to give us examples of some of the people involved. You start with Karl, the Michigan barber, and the resistance to the pandemic. But it was much wider than that, wasn't it, with someone like him?

Luke: Well, Karl is a good example. He was just a barber and he wasn't out waving an assault rifle on the State Capitol lawn or carrying a Confederate flag down Main Street or anything like that. But the people who ended up rallying around him and supporting him when he refused to close his business in accordance with the Governor's Covid public health policies were those folks. And as happens everywhere, you naturally develop an affinity for and sympathy with the groups that you identify as being on your side, especially if you're in a mindset of competition with or actually being threatened by another segment of the population. And that's very much the mentality that these folks have, they genuinely feel persecuted and see themselves as victims of a very dangerous and even evil oppressive authoritarian force in American politics.

Andrew: And then there's people who led these campaigns in some form. You write about Alex Jones and Roger Stone and Michael Flynn, and we know some of these people. What are they like, these people?

Luke: Well, it's tough to say, because the million-dollar question is to what extent the leaders of these movements and the propagators of these conspiracy theories and lies and misinformation actually believe it themselves. There's no question, as I just said, that their followers do. I think that all of the people I met over the course of 2020 were incredibly sincere in their beliefs and convictions and their worldview, however misguided they may have been. Now, is Trump, is somebody like Alex Jones or Nicholas Fuentes or Michael Flynn disingenuous, or do they actually believe it - or do they know themselves? It's very difficult to answer that question. And at the end of the day, I think it's a bit of a fool's errand and not necessarily relevant to the issue at hand because their internal psychology and self-awareness is less interesting to me and less urgent to me than what they're actually doing and saying. And the concrete effects that it's having on the country and on their followers.

Andrew: One you talk about in the book, you've just mentioned him there, Nicholas Fuentes, has been in the news lately because of his meeting with Donald Trump, hasn't he?

Luke: Yeah, well, not just this meeting. He had dinner with Donald Trump and this is somebody who is a virulent, explicit anti-Semite and racist. And I saw him and his followers on January 6, on December 12, on November 14 in DC, and they were spewing just the most vile, hateful garbage and openly identifying as fascist, by the way, and of revelling in the transgression of being fascist in America. They were also very supportive of Trump and very explicitly loyal to him and characterising him as their leader – as an idol and example. They carried signs up Pennsylvania Avenue with drawings of Trump as Caesar.

They call him their leader. And they also openly advocate for an end to the American constitutional system. They would prefer a dictatorship with somebody who has their interest as white, heterosexual Christians as a priority. And I saw them, I witnessed them.

The movement that Nicholas Fuentes leads is called America First, and his followers call themselves Groypers and, on December 12, I was following a group of Fuentes' Groypers followers around DC. They had the flag with the emblem of Fuentes' podcasts emblazoned on it as they were vandalising and attacking gay-owned businesses, screaming out 'Fuck the fags', attacking and vandalising historic Black-owned churches there. These aren't the kind of well-intentioned, confused victims of propaganda that you might meet at Karl Manke's barbershop in Michigan. These are bad folks and very committed to implementing their hateful ideology in the US. And it's incredibly distressing that a former president and the potential next Republican candidate is eating dinner with their leader and hasn't apologised for that.

I'll just add one other thing. It's not just this dinner between Fuentes and Trump. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Paul Gosar are both Republican representatives in Congress and have attended the last two annual meetings and summits that Fuentes and the Groypers have held and given speeches, shared a podium with Fuentes, and neither was sanctioned or rebuked by their caucus for doing so.

Andrew: One of the remarkable stories is how the Republican Party has gone to this extreme. Trump attacks the RINOs, the Republican in name

only [on his own side]. I think back to the Watergate period when I first became interested in American politics. Ever since then, that's been an obsession with me when it comes to political history. And I look back then, Republicans didn't all vote for impeachment or threatened to vote for impeachment, but enough did to help swing opinion against Nixon, which led to his resignation.

Luke: Yeah, well, things have changed. After the attack on the Capitol, obviously, Congress reconvened and Mike Pence, the vice president, Trump's vice president, gave this speech declaring that violence never wins and the people's house would carry on with its constitutional duty. But at the end of the day, 147 Republican members of Congress voted not to certify the election. A majority. And that was after a mob of white supremacists, Groypers, proud boys, Oath Keepers, one guy with an Auschwitz sweatshirt, others with neo-Nazi flags stormed their building and tried as hard as they could to kill them. So 147 of them after that sided with that same mob.

Andrew: I want to come back to that point and Republican beliefs in the stolen election. We talk mostly about men here, apart from Marjorie Taylor Greene. But one of the people you write about in the book is Ashli Babbitt, who was killed in the assault on the Capitol building. Where did she come from? What kind of person was she?

Luke: She was a veteran, Air Force veteran, who had served in Afghanistan and lived in California. She actually voted for Obama his first term. I don't want to speak too much about her because I don't know her. I haven't spent time with her family. But just from what I've read that's publicly available, she seems to have fallen into this spiralling alternate universe of conspiracy theories online during the pandemic, just like so many Americans did and seems to have fallen victim in particular to Q-Anon and the pro-Trump anti-democracy conspiracy theories that were being purveyed in those circles online.

Andrew: And just a final question on who was involved. I referred earlier to the bravery of some of the police and enforcement officers, but not all

law enforcement officers were fully engaged in stopping this invasion, were they?

Luke: No. It was a very complicated, messy, confusing dynamic throughout the day between the police and the rioters. I think probably the simplest way to describe it is to say that the rioters were behaving extremely violently, there's no doubt about that, towards any law enforcement officer who was in their way, who was trying to prevent them from getting inside the building or doing as they pleased once they were inside the building. But to those officers who stood down, the rioters were conferring the usual respect and deference that they claim to have for law enforcement in any other context, which is also not true. I had seen throughout the year plenty of right-wing rallies where Trump supporters were berating, castigating and even physically assaulting law enforcement agents going all the way back to the spring when many anti-lockdowners, as they called themselves, viewed law enforcement as agents of this oppressive, totalitarian state that was trampling on their rights and liberties.

Andrew: We have this position, don't we, where you've got these conspiracy theories about a stolen election, even the appearance of lizard-like creatures among some of them. There's fears about imagined apocalypse and there's racism and anti-Semitism. And you write about a continuum among some people for believing the mask mandates lead to concentration camps.

One of the issues that we've been looking at in our work is about trust and about if you don't trust, for example, that an election is fair, that votes have been counted fairly and that your vote is being counted in some way, that there's no peaceful transfer of power. This is a remarkable problem, isn't it when you consider that the current figures suggest that still a huge amount of people in the United States believes the election wasn't fair and an even a larger number of Republicans feel it wasn't fair. This bodes ill, doesn't it? Not just for the next election, but also for society generally.

Luke: I would say it bodes ill, absolutely. In the US, I'm not sure if it's similar in the UK, but in the US we have a history and a tradition of white Christian Conservatives viewing themselves and characterising themselves ironically as victims of persecution and oppression. And that tendency has been fuelled and exacerbated by politicians who capitalise on it for their own purposes, and also by conspiracists who profit financially from that feeling of victimhood that many people on the right have. In the '90s it was really focussed around gun control. And then, after Obama was elected, it was focussed around having an usurper, essentially, as their leader. One consistent theme is immigration, this notion that white Christians are being replaced by other demographics and populations. Now we have a situation where any time their candidate loses in an election, that loss can be incorporated into their personal narrative of dispossession. And so I think that it fits neatly into a cultural and psychological rewind that's only going to continue into the future.

Andrew: One of the things you write about is your experience of being in these war zones and reporting through them. And you say that 'When no place is immune from haphazard demolition, more abstract structures — the invisible schema that holds societies together — also become precarious...'. And I think that's the position we are in.

In Britain, we don't face such acute problems as the United States, but we have seen democracy undermined in recent years here. We've had our share of conspiracy theories. We've had the Brexit vote and the way that was handled in Parliament, particularly what was eventually the illegal prorogation of Parliament as judged by the Supreme Court. And we've currently got issues around voter ID planning to be used, which some people say favour the voters of one political party over another. So perhaps not as acute, but not dissimilar as well.

Luke: I guess the big difference is that in the US our system, our democratic system is so grossly undemocratic compared to others and in particular in Europe. We have a system in which the candidate who wins the most votes often loses the election. And our particular Supreme Court. And the fact that we have a Senate with 100 senators in which 50 Republican senators represent 40 million fewer Americans than 50

Democratic senators. It all adds up to a system in which it's much easier for Republicans to wield power with minority support and buy-in than it is for Democrats because of the rural urban divide.

But even there they continue to lose elections. And that's created a situation in which I think that they are much more willing to manipulate the system and to defy our traditional norms and democratic guardrails in order to preserve power. So I guess one thing I would say for the UK is that it's helpful – even if it's not as acute as we say as it is in the US – to imagine the worst and prepare for it because the problem we had in the US before Trump, or when Trump came to power, is that so many of the things that he did were so beyond the pale that it had never even occurred to Americans and American politicians to create preventative regulations, laws and guardrails to address.

Andrew: This is why we are keen to keep our work going on the state of democracy and the future of democracy and why we encourage people to read books like the one that you've written.

I want to talk a little bit about this notion of dispossession, because we've tried to understand what's been going on in this country through a similar lens. The idea here is that we've got what's called left behind areas which have suffered from changes in capitalism, in the economy and lost jobs, particularly manufacturing jobs. I've seen towns in particular decline and have seen the potential of their children in social mobility terms to be less, the opportunities less for them than they were maybe for their parents.

I grew up in a relatively poor area of the country and was socially mobile for a while [but] I don't see those opportunities available for people like me now. And when you look in the United States with things like the decline of manufacturing, even the decline of the traditional male breadwinner, the deaths of despair (we've done work around that as well). Do you think there's something underpinning this? Not necessarily in terms of those who invaded the Capitol building, but in terms of those who have underpinned that support for more radical changes in American politics?

Luke: Sure, and there's no doubt that plenty of Republicans and plenty of the people who took up arms and mobilised and took to the streets and even attacked the Capitol have legitimate grievances against the government and the way that the economy is managed. And there's a good faith, honest debate to be had over whether the Democratic Party or the Republican Party has more effective policies to mitigate those issues or to address those grievances.

I would argue that the Obama administration did much more for the working-class than the Trump administration did. And that in terms of economic inequality, there's no question in my mind that Republican policies are worse for working-class Americans than Democratic policies. But that's a debate to be had and I respect the other side's arguments therein.

The problem is that nobody taking to the streets or occupying State Capitols and [wearing] flak jackets and [carrying] assault rifles or attacking the Capitol, none of those people were talking about that stuff. And that's not what was really animating them and fuelling their rage. So it is much more about a sense of dispossession that has to do with fantastical invent, fabricated villains and forces that are coming after them, that have been invented whole cloth by politicians and propagandists in order to create a real base and well of rage in the US and grievance from which they can draw for their own political and financial ends. I really believe that. And I really witnessed first-hand and spent a lot of time with people all over the country who were experiencing that rage and genuinely took away from my conversations with them that it's not about economics. It's not about specific policy differences between Democrats and Republicans. Many of these people are quite religious and they really hew to a worldview in which political contests are part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil that transcends the United States, our Constitution etc. And I think that once you kind of position elections in that context, it enables extreme action. And that's something I've seen in other countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. Because why respect political norms? Why respect ideas as quaint as majority rule if you're contending with Satan? If that makes sense.

Andrew: The differences are not as acute as here at the moment. But one of the things that worries me is that there's a lot of rhetoric around what's called levelling up, between, say, the capital, London, and other places. But the rhetoric isn't being matched by the delivery. And I think once people start to see that they've had their Brexit vote, which was a reaction to some of those problems, it'll be...

Luke: Well, I guess one big difference is you don't have guns. And with guns comes a whole culture of violence. We have mass shootings now. We have massacres in the US weekly. And we've become completely inured to them. It's also a culture that's experiencing the after effects of 20 years of the war on terror. And many of the leaders of the Patriot movement spearheading these radical groups are veterans of Iraq, of Afghanistan. And just like in the '80s and even into the '90s, many of the leaders of the white power movement were Vietnam veterans. And I think it is a ricochet as well of those wars and a culture that has been immersed in gun violence, Islamophobia and enormous overseas destruction and killing since September 11.

Andrew: That is a huge difference between us.

Let's look at what happens next in the time we've got left. The midterms were a better election than some feared in terms of who was elected and peaceful transfer of seats between candidates. But the big test is yet to come, isn't it? If 40 per cent of Americans think the 2020 election was stolen and three quarters of Republicans think it was stolen, this looks bad to me for the next presidential election, especially if we've got another Biden/Trump election again. What's your thoughts on this?

Luke: Yeah, midterms. State level elections, of which the midterms are entirely comprised, don't trigger or mobilise or galvanise large national social movements in the same way that national elections do. So, I don't think that the relative calm in the wake of the midterms is necessarily a reason for complacency going into 2023 and 2024. And as we saw, the leading potential candidate for the Republican Party just had dinner with Nicholas Fuentes. I'm not yet optimistic.

Andrew: Throughout the last few years, we've seen a deliberate attempt in the United States to have electoral reform bills. You've had attacks on election officials and you've had election officials resigning who can't cope with this pressure.

Luke: Yeah. And also a lot of Democratic representatives and politicians have said that they're not going to run again. And that also raises the question of how many new, young, Americans that might have run for office for the first time or entered politics or begun a political career are just deciding that it's not worth it. I think probably a lot. I think it's cooled an entire generation of potential politicians. And that's where you really see the impact of the threat of violence, not just of actual violence.

William Pierce talks about this in *The Turner Diaries*. His narrator at one point in that novel - the white Christian revolutionaries attack the US Capitol, actually, and it's not a total success - goes on to say that their primary objective was nonetheless achieved because it was to demonstrate to the government that they weren't safe and that these extremists could reach out and touch them. I think that January 6 absolutely did that. There have been Republican politicians, including Pete Major from Michigan, who have said publicly that some of their colleagues voted against impeaching Trump a second time because they literally feared for their lives and for the safety and well-being of their family members.

When I was in Michigan in the spring, the State Capitol was occupied by militia members who approached the barred doors of the legislature and were chanting to be let in. And some of them went on to attack the US Capitol. Actually, I saw some of the same people in the mob on January 6. But that day, they weren't able to get into the legislature. They weren't able to hurt anybody. And most people saw the response of law enforcement that day as somewhat of a success. Disaster had been averted.

When those same groups organised a follow-up rally at the Capitol, it was a month later, the state legislature decided to suspend its vote. They

were going to hold a vote on Covid pandemic measures, and in order to avoid a confrontation with these armed groups they decided not to meet. There you had literally just the threat of armed men preventing a state government from conducting its constitutionally mandated democratic work. I think that this cloud of just the potential of violence hangs over all US politics now, from the national to the state, county to the local level. And it's very insidious. And I don't know how or when it'll be rooted out.

Andrew: We've had it in this country. Two MPs have been murdered in recent years during election campaigns and doing their business of working with their constituents. I think it was in Michigan where you write about State Representative Sarah Anthony, who gets a bullet-proof vest because of the attacks on her. She can't be the only one who's doing that.

Luke: No, and not just body armour. Liz Cheney, after she came out publicly against Trump in the wake of January 6, had to hire a whole entourage of personal security bodyguards. Other people have had to do that.

Andrew: Just two final questions, if I may. The first is about this move to extremes, particularly on the Republican side and how this eliminates the more moderates and more moderate participation. Can you see that changing at all?

Luke: Well, it would take a different kind of politics and a different kind of political calculation on the part of Republicans. But unfortunately, our system isn't really designed to incentivise that kind of politics because the way the voting districts are broken up, it's much more appealing for Republican candidates to appeal to the extreme right of their base during the primary election cycle, whether or not that helps them in the general election against Democrats, if that makes sense. So not to be too technical about it, but that highlights how a lot of our problems in the US at this point are really structural and built into a system that encourages extremism and de-incentivises bipartisanship.

Andrew: And the final question is, you've seen civil wars in other countries and what has led to those civil wars and you talked about the real grievances, real oppression and real violations that have caused those. And there's been some talk about, is America heading towards a new civil war? And this would be one for you that would be based on delusion, wouldn't it? Rather than any real grievance?

Luke: Sure. Because, again, the grievances that are animating the people who would bring us into a civil war, the people who are taking up arms, who are attacking Capitol buildings and who actually want a civil conflict, including Nicholas Fuentes, and want a revolution and want to do away with the constitutional system that we now have in order to lock in place minority power. Those people see themselves as fighting against threats and oppressed by forces that aren't real.

Andrew: And when it comes to democracy and the future of democracy, I always think it's the work of us all. Certainly, we've let democracy slip in this country. Are there any kind of practical steps you would point to that we can all do to help not just protect democracy, but extend democracy in the future?

Luke: Well again, I think that the US is probably a useful lesson for other democracies in that it shows how a lack of imagination can be lethal and can be exploited by people with sufficient ambition and lack of scruples like Donald Trump. There were so many things that we could have changed about our system or preventative measures we could have taken, but never thought to because we couldn't conceive of somebody like Trump coming along and taking advantage of all of the weaknesses and the loopholes that we have for his own cynical purposes.

Andrew: There's many lessons to learn from your work, Luke. Thank you so much for joining us. *The Storm is Here: America On the Brink* is published by Riverrun. It's highly recommended.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.