

MMITM Ep 018 - Super Tuesday, And Then There Were Two, Featuring E.J. Dionne Jr.

Announcer: From Curtco Media. So what are you gonna do about.

Bill Curtis: Welcome once again to Politics. Meet Me in the Middle. I'm Bill Curtis. Well, fortunately, I'm once again here with my co-host, the Pulitzer Prize winning historian, author, professor, worldwide lecturer and author of the new book, Franklin and Washington, The Founding Partnership. It just hit the bestseller list. And as of today, the very enthusiastic patriot, Ed, who's sees a path toward the healing of our country, has joined us once again. And he's a big part of our show. How you doing Ed?

Ed Larson: Great to be here again. Thanks, Bill.

Bill Curtis: Jane Albrecht, one of our favorite people to bounce issues off of, is an international trade attorney who represented U.S. interests in Washington and Europe and Russia and then some. She's worked with high level government officials in many countries on many international trade disputes. She's got a rare perspective that we're once again honored to have in our studio. Jane's been involved with several U.S. presidential campaigns. She's a busy woman. Jane, thanks so much for coming in.

Jane Albrecht: Thank you.

Bill Curtis: And our special guest from Washington, E.J. Dionne, is a columnist for The Washington Post. He hails from Boston. But we won't hold that against him. He graduated summa cum laude in social studies from Harvard. He's a senior fellow at the Brookings Institute. Professor at Georgetown, a visiting professor at Harvard. He's a co-author of the New York Times bestseller One Nation After Trump and author of Why the Right Went Wrong. Just weeks ago his new book called Code Red, How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save Our Country, hit the market hard with a bang at just the right time. We're very happy to have you with us today, E.J.

E.J.Dionne: Oh, thank you. Thank you for the very kind introduction. It's good to be with you.

Bill Curtis: So, Ed, I wonder if we could start with you as usual. I'd like to ask you to walk us through a time in the past when we could really say that progressives and moderates worked together to create an effective wave. Or have they always kept their respective corners?

Ed Larson: They have worked together in the past. Probably the best example that we all remember was during the Progressive era. So we're really talking there about maybe 1905 to nineteen-twenty where progressives and moderates worked together to create an incredible array of institutions from the transportation agencies to the national park system to conservation efforts to beefing up the Agriculture Department. It was a food and drug, protections of food and drug, the income tax, women's suffrage. These things came from a combination of progressives and moderates.

Bill Curtis: Now, to bring E.J. into our chat, because we've got this show called Meet Me in the Middle here. And of course, as it turns out, that the middle doesn't necessarily mean a place between Republicans and Democrats. Sometimes it's a place between progressives, let's say sometimes radical progressives and moderates within the Democratic Party. So this is a great time for us to chat with E.J.. So, E.J.. Here we are. We're left in a race between three old men, Biden, Sanders and Trump, with ideologies that couldn't be farther apart and seemingly lack all bridges. You've talked about your position of having moderates and progressive work together. So how do you see that playing out in this case?

E.J.Dionne: Well, I think of the three Biden is the one who most consciously talks all the time about building bridges. Indeed, he gets grief some time for saying he can work with the current Republican Party in Congress, which many people have doubts about. I have some doubts about it myself, and I believe in principle in building bridges. So I think that what you're going to see in the primaries going forward is that contrast drawn pretty strongly with Bernie Sanders. I think the really striking thing that's happened last week was the instant and it really was very close to instant consolidation of moderate liberals, moderates and those people who call themselves conservatives still left in the Democratic Party behind Joe Biden. I thought what he did was astonishing, but not

surprising. What's amazing about it is that he won this string of primaries, spending almost no money. That's unprecedented. No advertising, no ground game. It's because moderately liberal Democrats, moderates and Democrats who call themselves conservative. All decided almost in an instant after the South Carolina primary that after shopping around among Pete Buttigieg, Amy Klobuchar and taking a look for a while at all of Mike Bloomberg's ads, they decided Joe Biden is the guy. And there was just this shift to Biden at the last moment. I think that reflects primarily the hunger that Democrats have to defeat President Trump.

Bill Curtis: So your book is basically taking the position that a Biden and a Sanders could have kind of a kumbayah and find a way to work together. Do you see any way for those two guys to work together for the Democratic Party's desire to unseat Trump?

E.J.Dionne: I think it's possible. I mean, Sanders is, can be pretty tough on his opponents, but he is very careful, has been careful to talk about Joe Biden's decency, the fact that they've worked together and of course, they are part of the same generation. I think that one of the interesting tasks that Sanders has is to persuade many of his own supporters to back off some of their attacks online. And there is a danger, I think, on the Sanders side of playing into what Trump is trying to do to divide the Democratic Party. Trump tweeted the morning after the Super Tuesday primaries that the establishment was trying to crush Bernie Sanders and take the nomination away from him. The Sanders campaign has to figure out how it avoids playing into these Trump efforts at division. But I also think there's a burden on Biden, I think, going forward he really does need to reach out to more progressive Democrats and say, look, I want your energy, I need your energy. Maybe Biden should get on the phone with people like AOC and say I know you're going to be supporting Bernie till the end. But I need you. So I hope that people make these efforts. Last quick point, Sanders has to reach out to people in the Democratic Party who aren't with him because he's not going to win any of the contests going forward or he won't win many of the contests going forward if he doesn't broaden his own base. And the only direction he can broaden his base in is toward the more the middle part of the party.

Bill Curtis: So, E.J., tell us, what do you expect the convention to look like?

E.J.Dionne: Lord knows! I've said now for some years that I've given, I resigned my membership in the prognosticators union at around midnight on election night of 2016. Here's what I hope is that, I think looking back at the 2016 convention, it's very clear that divisions between the Clinton camp and the Sanders camp were very destructive to the party and hurt her in her efforts to pull the party together. Given that we've now had the experience of more than three years of Donald Trump in office. It's no longer theoretical what kind of president will he be? We know what kind of president he has been. And I hope that creates some pressure on all sides of the party to say whatever we do, we cannot create a spectacle that will make Democrats look divided or incompetent or at each other's throats.

Ed Larson: E.j., let me ask you a question following up on that. Do you think it be plausible, remember last time Trump got a lot of mileage out of announcing in advance who his Supreme Court nominees would be and it helped coalesce the Republicans to his side. Would there be a possibility that Biden could try to reach out by suggesting who his cabinet picks would be and including for domestic policy people that would appeal to the group of progressives?

E.J.Dionne: I actually am sympathetic to that idea. You've had this idea. Tom Friedman, also of The New York Times has talked about this. And we all know that when Abraham Lincoln won the Republican nomination in 1860, his agents at the convention talked to an awful lot of people about an awful lot of cabinet jobs. As he put together the votes he needed to win on that third ballot. I think it is plausible. And I think it would be. And I think, in fact, such a cabinet could be put together not simply to satisfy progressives. It might also include a Republican or two who were, who would be acceptable to broad opinion in the Democratic Party. There were a lot of moderate to even progressive Republicans who feel very homeless right now. So I think with at least some some clear sense of who might serve in a Biden government, if it is indeed Biden who gets the nomination, I think that could be very useful. I'm not sure I'm opposed either to the idea of doing the same with Supreme Court justices.

Jane Albrecht: I would agree that Bernie, one reason Bernie lost was that he hasn't shown the ability so far to build a broader coalition, even within the Democratic Party. And that's clearly one of his challenges. And he's going to have to see what he can do in the next months. And Biden, by the same token, Biden needs to be able to energize a

broader, he's got the appeal to the broader coalition, but he's got to energize the party and he's got to energize the progressive base. But in terms of how he does it, I wouldn't advise him if I were advising him to say who his cabinet was going to be in advance. And I wouldn't advise him to get into naming Supreme Court justices for the following reasons. One is I think he can reach out to the progressives by picking the right vice president. And secondly, when it comes to picking Supreme Court justices, you're likely to mobilize the Republicans as much as more so than the Democrats in naming your Supreme Court justices. The Democrats should take it more seriously. This, the importance of getting the president elected, who will appoint reasonable Supreme Court justices. But there's, Democrat constituents that are different than the evangelicals.

Ed Larson: Oh, I think you could bring a lot of people together if the Republicans still controlled the Senate. Imagine he says he's gonna run Merrick Garland again as the first replacement. My gosh, that would shut up the Republicans because they all voted for him originally and it would be a total coup and you could have Merrick Garland ahead of time, say, you know, before the terms out, he'll step down or whatever. But the point is, you could do a lot of. You could have a lot of fun with some of those people you name. But think, think, think of if you say you're gonna make Mitt Romney the secretary of state.

Jane Albrecht: Oh, my God. That would moat that would mobilize the arch right wing conservatives that are currently in power like you could imagine. They hate Mitt. They absolutely hate Mitt.

E.J.Dionne: I agree. This is not a slam dunk idea. I have I've entertained it more seriously than I would have before, because partly thinking about the book I've just written, because the book I've just written says that argues that progressives and moderates really have to sit down and realize what they have in common. And that requires conversations about what you do with power, what you're trying to do with power.

Bill Curtis: Whose conversations E.J.?

E.J.Dionne: You name at least some of the, it intrigues me to name some people in advance so people have a sense of what kind of government you want to put together.

And just in terms of the court, it's hard for me to see how conservatives could be more mobilized on the court than they are already. Maybe I'm wrong.

Bill Curtis: Guys, I want to. I wanted to take us back out of the comic books and back to reality for a minute, cause you know that these candidates are not going to name their cabinet ahead of time when they do get elected. They really enjoy that period of time where they're, they're naming their cabinet. E.J., do you expect Sanders and Biden to cooperate with each other in any way or like you've mentioned before, Hillary entered the 2016 race against Trump, limping from a difficult primary? Has anyone learned any lessons?

E.J.Dionne: Well, that's what I'd like to hope. I mean, if Trump doesn't teach people lessons, I don't know how they will ever learn them with the cost of division has been so high that, you know, I would, for example, like to see him begin every future debate by saying whoever however this turns out, we're going to support the other to defeat Trump. And here's why. I'd like to see the debates turning not simply on particular differences between Sanders and Biden, but also how both of them are so different from Trump. I'd like the debates to be an argument for not just that each one makes for himself as the nominee, but an argument about why Trump should be replaced.

Jane Albrecht: The question I'll put before you to at least start thinking about is we have talked about how we could bring progressives to the middle, but there's still a possibility that Bernie could end up to be the nominee. And if that's so, how do we get the moderates to come together with the progressives?

E.J.Dionne: The argument I make in the book goes both ways in that it seems to me at this moment in history, moderates need to recognize that they have far more in common with progressives than they do with the right wing. They have more in common with progressives because they believe that there were certain problems in which government has to act, that we can't leave it to the marketplace. Moderates believe in expanding health coverage so every American has health insurance. Moderates believe that we have to make it easier for people who go to college and to have the job training they need if they don't go to college. Moderates believe in a lot of the same, share a lot of the same goals that progressives do. It's an argument over means. If I believe, which I do, that Joe Biden needs to reach out to the left of the party starting now. I also think

that Bernie Sanders has to reach out to more moderate Democrats starting now. He likes to talk a lot about the FDR tradition. Both of his speeches defining socialism actually defined it as New Deal-ism. And he had a lot to say about what FDR did. I think that that kind of talk, as opposed to suggesting that anyone who is opposed to him is a corporate shill, would be far more effective in opening moderates minds to the idea that they may have more in common with Bernie than they want to realize.

Jane Albrecht: I agree with you on that.

Bill Curtis: So, E.J., we're gonna make you read the tea leaves one last time. If Biden is the candidate, what is the percentage chance of replacing Trump in the White House?

E.J.Dionne: I'd say 70 at least. I'm on the high side of voters wanting to replace Trump, my basic view is that a majority of Americans, including enough of them in the swing states, want to replace Donald Trump. The Democratic Party's job is to make it as easy as possible for them to make that choice. That really was the argument that Joe Biden has made in the last week.

Bill Curtis: So you've given a 70 percent chance to Biden to replace the guy in the White House. And so if Sanders is the candidate, what is the percentage chance that he'll replace Trump?

E.J.Dionne: And I go down, I go down about 50/50 with Sanders. I give him the 50 just because I think you start out with a very big base of opposition to Trump, the question is, could Sanders grow into a candidate not of a part of the Democratic Party, but of the whole Democratic Party? And could he find an inclusive language that would start bringing other people in? But that would be my, I would still, I'd still lift it up that high, because probably more than most, I am inclined to look at the numbers and say that the country was like all things being equal, to have a new president, a president, one of my favorite campaign promises was from Michael Bennett, who said it was, my promise to you is you won't have to think about me for two weeks at a time. I think a lot of people would like that. And I've argued that Joe Biden's core campaign promise is glorious tranquility.

Ed Larson: The way I like to say that, E.J, is I think America, the American people would rather have a president who sleeps at night than who tweets at night.

E.J.Dionne: Oh, I like that!

Bill Curtis: Okay. So Code Red, How Progressives and Moderates can Unite to Save Our Country. That's E.J. Dionne's book. I'd like to invite all of our listeners to buy one of those books. Put a paragraph on a letter that describes what we've just heard from E.J.. And send it to the two candidates on the Democratic side, Biden and Sanders, and suggest to them that they read the book, they read your letter, and let's see if we can get the two of them to work together. E.J. Dionne, we're left with a couple of old men competing for the Democratic nomination. In his book Code Red How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save Our Country lays out a philosophy that could certainly be helpful for us. E.J., thanks for joining.

E.J.Dionne: What a great joy. Thank you.

Bill Curtis: And we'll be right back.

Promo - Cars that Matter: Hi, I'm Robert Ross, host of Cars That Matter. You might be wondering what makes a car matter and I have a feeling you already know the answer. Some cars have changed history. Some you can hear a mile away. Some have lines that make your heart skip a beat. If a car's ever made you look twice, then I think you know the ones that matter. Join me as I speak with designers, collectors and market experts about the passions that drives us and the passions we drive, cars that matter. Wherever you get your podcasts. What are you gonna do about.

Bill Curtis: Ok, we're back. Thanks to E.J. Dionne and now, Jane, Ed, let's continue to chat with a couple or two of reality now. You know, doesn't it feel like the attributes that win a nomination actually fly in the face of what will actually win in November?

Jane Albrecht: Many people share the concern that Bernie could not win in November. If he wins majority of the delegates. It shows that there is a very strong swell of support for some of his ideas. And what we got with Trump is, is somewhat what Bernie addresses, which is a tremendous dissatisfaction on the part of the working class and

others, that the system isn't working for them, so that the challenge will be how do we get, we've all talked about, you know, sort of progressive coming along with the moderates like Biden and whatever. We haven't talked about how do you get moderates to not be so afraid and say, let's give Bernie a try?

Bill Curtis: We should probably be a little more theoretical than personal on a conversation like that.

Jane Albrecht: I would agree

Bill Curtis: You know, starting with.

Jane Albrecht: Well, Bernie's going to be the front runner if it's a progressive.

Bill Curtis: Well, OK. But let's just get back to the theory of the process as we know it right now nominates someone on one set of attributes and then it's a very different set of attributes that gets someone elected to the presidency.

Jane Albrecht: No, it's a somewhat different set of attributes in both parties. The candidates have to generally run towards the, not the center because your activists in both parties tend to be on more the left or more of the right. And then when they when they go into the general election, they've got to tack to the center without losing their base of support.

Ed Larson: But Trump didn't tack to the center.

Jane Albrecht: No, he did not. But the Republican Party is.

Ed Larson: And he won

Jane Albrecht: Yep. And he was a takeover of the Republican Party.

Ed Larson: But he won in the general election too.

Bill Curtis: There's so little we can learn from this last election. There are too many odd scenarios from this last election that I don't think, I'm worried if we write down everything we've learned, it's all going to be wrong. Whoever voted for Trump, I think, voted for what they thought Trump was, not what he said he was himself. And I think it was a unique set of characteristics.

Jane Albrecht: Well, I disagree with that, Bill. I think that there are things, there are plenty of things to learn from this this last election. I think there's things to learn and there's things not to learn, but to say there's nothing to learn from the last election is not true.

Bill Curtis: I just think it's difficult because there's so many moving parts, there's so many control groups that we don't have control over. And I think that we will think we've learned something

Jane Albrecht: What do you think we should not learn, what do you think we should not learn from the last election?

Bill Curtis: First of all, I think that the competition between Hillary and Trump was different than a normal competition. I think Hillary was, in fact, one of her lone greatest competitors.

Jane Albrecht: I think that's pretty, in some respects it was similar, it was not the same, to be sure there were different factors in play as Gore versus George W. Bush. George W. Bush was more of the one of the guys type things, somebody, whatever. And Gore was, as someone said, not the kind of guy that would get the girls. And you want to go out and have a beer with.

Bill Curtis: Gore beat himself,.

Jane Albrecht: Gore, as I've described it, I think he would've made a great president. And he wasn't a bad candidate, but he wasn't what I call an instinctively born politician. It was more learned. And so it was Hillary's,.

Ed Larson: But to use your example, George W. Bush tacked to the middle. He ran as a compassionate conservative. He said he'd have a humble foreign policy. He ran as a compassionate conservative. He was gonna make education his issue. He was. And he said, I want a humble foreign policy. That's what he said in the debates. That's what he ran on. So he tacked to the middle. Donald Trump did not tack to the middle. He kept feeding his radical base.

Bill Curtis: So help me understand the environment in the convention. Let's say that we go through the first vote and we don't have a candidate. Tell us a little about the process that goes on behind the scenes. And mostly what I'd like to know is who's in charge?

Ed Larson: If you end up going into a convention where you have either a majority or nearly a majority for Sanders, I think that the way the dynamics work is Sanders wins. They can't take it away from him.

Jane Albrecht: I wouldn't say that. I'm saying in terms of unifying the party, it depends upon how you get there.

Ed Larson: But if you've got a situation where Sanders comes in somewhat ahead, a narrow plurality, and I'm not conceding that will be the case. I think it could well be that Biden goes in with that plurality rather than Sanders. But let's say there's a narrow plurality. Let's say there's 35 percent or 40 percent to 35 percent very close. Then I think it's an entirely different dynamics. And we have had many situations such as Roosevelt all through our past, such as Adlai Stevenson. This has happened a lot of times and the result is it's worked out because that's how a democratic process works.

Bill Curtis: Is there an organizer, a mediator? I'm looking for this.

Jane Albrecht: So you're looking for

Bill Curtis: Back room here, smoke filled negotiation.

Jane Albrecht: You are looking for a Democratic Party that doesn't exist. I think it was E.J. said this, you don't have party bosses in the same way that you had. That's not to say that they can't play a role. But Tom Perez is not, you know, does not rule over the

Democratic Party like Mayor Daley ruled over Chicago. You know, it's not the same situation or should it be, really.

Bill Curtis: Which is why you have these, you know, mud wrestling debates. And it seems like, they are prepared soundbites that could undo a candidate for president.

Jane Albrecht: You know, I don't think the February 19th debate was as bad as as I was led to believe. I saw it. I could not watch it that night. I watched it afterwards. The February 25th debate was really unfortunate, but I don't particularly like it when the Democratic candidates go after each other. I really preferred the debates where they really talked policy and debated and highlighted policy. But the simple truth is, as E.J. said, the New Hampshire debate didn't do Elizabeth Warren any good. And what do we see the next debate, getting out the sharp edges. And she did a good job of showing the ,boy, she could really take somebody on in a debate. I think on the February 25th, she went to far.

Bill Curtis: She also did a good job in alienating people who found that to be going too far.

Ed Larson: But fortunately, we don't have to worry about that going forward. So we're looking back. The fear was looking back we have a circular firing squad, as they used to like to call it. We had all these candidates. But now that we're down to two, we're talking about a duel. It's Sanders Biden.

Bill Curtis: So let me ask the two of you slightly different questions each. Jane, I'm going to start with you. You are now in charge of Bernie, who is Bernie's vice president for Bernie.

Jane Albrecht: I would say he should choose a either a black vice president and or a woman vice president. And he's already said that he will not, one thing for sure, he will not have an old white man as his vice president. But in terms of specifics, I'd have to do some more thinking about it. I guess Ed has some ideas on that.

Bill Curtis: You think?

Jane Albrecht: He loves Amy Klobachar, I bet it's going to be Amy Klobachar.

Ed Larson: Jane Fonda.

Jane Albrecht: Okay.

Bill Curtis: Ed, I have a slightly different question for you. You are now in charge. Who is Biden's vice president?

Ed Larson: Amy Klobuchar.

Jane Albrecht: I disagree with that.

Bill Curtis: Well, first, why Amy? And then I'm going to ask you why you disagree.

Ed Larson: She is a similar thinking moderate. She is from the Midwest. She would help with Minnesota, help with Iowa, because I think Iowa's a potential Democratic state in for the presidency. She would help with Minnesota, help with Wisconsin, help with Michigan. And that's a critical collection. They would work well together. Now, I'm not saying that's who will be, but I think that that would be a very strong pick for him.

Jane Albrecht: I think Amy would be a better pick for Bernie. But with Biden, if he gets the nomination, he's squarely a moderate. I mean, he's just, he's got his moderate credentials. And his challenge will be to energize the progressive wing of the party. They've all got to pick someone who's younger and they've got to pick someone who has is really good to excite the progressive wing. I think Elizabeth Warren would be a better pick for Biden.

Bill Curtis: E.J.'s concept of bringing the two together, I don't think that it's possible. I mean, I don't think you can throw a punch at another guy and then ask him to participate shoulder to shoulder with you. I think that the Democrats have lost the ability to unite.

Jane Albrecht: I hope you're wrong. There's barbs and there's barbs. And I think that there's, without naming candidates, I think there's some barbs that been thrown that if

that person wins the president election, then they would pick that candidate. They would be a fool. But every race, Republican and Democrat, they throw barbs at each other. And if you're in it at that level, you've got to have somewhat of a tough skin.

Ed Larson: And I will agree with Jane here. Think of the Republicans four years ago. Think of the barbs that were thrown for and against Donald Trump. Think what Senator Cruz, think what Rubio said about Trump. And yet they pulled together as a team. They were shoulder to shoulder yoked in that election. And I think the same would have, I agree with Jane. I think the same would happen here.

Jane Albrecht: Well, I think this thing would happen here. But I was just in Washington. I was told consistently throughout Washington that 90 percent of the elected Republicans think Trump is a disgrace, but they are all afraid of him.

Bill Curtis: I like ending on the idea that you guys agree with each other.

Bill Curtis: Thanks for joining on Politics. Meet me in the Middle. And thank you, of course, to our co-host, Ed Larson, my other co-host, Jane Albrecht, and of course, E.J. Dionne. We'll see you again.

Bill Curtis: If you like what you hear, please tell your friends. And let us know how we're doing by leaving a comment. It really helps if you give us a five star rating and we really appreciate it. You can also subscribe to the show on Apple podcast, Stitcher or wherever you listen to your favorite podcast. This episode was produced and edited by Mike Thomas. Audio Engineering by Michael Kennedy. And the theme music was composed and performed by Celeste and Eric Dick. Thanks for listening.

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