

RICHARD: Two young men, one Liberal, one Conservative jumped in a Volvo and drove across America several times along nearly 20,000 miles of roads and highways, an ex-Marine and businessman and his friend, a writer and former intern at the Obama White House from Berkeley, California. What did they discover about dealing with their own differences and our divided nation?

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: Chris Haugh and Jordan Blashek are our guests. They first set out in 2016 and then several more times in the next three years to get a better understanding of America and themselves. Their new book is called Union: A Democrat, A Republican, and a Search for Common Ground.

RICHARD: It's a great story. So let's get started, first with Chris, the Liberal in this duo.

CHRIS: We went on six road trips across nearly 20,000 miles, 44 states. We talked to countless people hailing from all sorts of different backgrounds, and our honest takeaway was that we are not as far apart as you'd imagine. In fact, we're quite close together. There are serious and real divisions in this country, but the way we articulate our desires, the way we articulate what is good about this country, the values that underwrite all of our expressions of political aspiration or future planning are the same. They really are, and we found that over and over again, whether it was in Tulsa or Detroit or New York City or California. I think, ultimately, underneath a sort of patina of difference and division, there is a common language, and we really felt that.

RICHARD: Jordan, you're the Conservative. Chris is the Liberal. Do you see it the same way? Because, boy, in our media, we're incredibly divided as a country.

JORDAN: I do. I saw the same exact thing as Chris, and I think that was one of the most heartening parts of our road trip. When we first started this, we were new friends. We were from different sides of the aisle. We weren't sure that we were going to see the same things on the road, and our first experience with that was at a Trump rally in Phoenix. We experienced the rally from inside with Trump supporters and then outside with the protesters. And we believe that we saw, over and over again with the people we met, this common feeling towards the country and this sense of who we are that's shared. While the media and social media do thrive on division, and it seems like that's all there is, we believe that that's actually the small minority and that, for most of the country, there's this desire to move away from the constant state of division, to reunite with the better angels of themselves and their community, and to have better politics.

ASHLEY: Talk for a minute about why you embarked on this journey together in the first place? Okay, one of you is a former Marine from L.A. The other is from Berkeley, California, writer, former speechwriter in the Obama administration. You met at Yale

Law School, but you didn't know each other all that well. I think you hadn't even known each other for even a year when you decided to go on a road trip together. So what drove that decision?

JORDAN: Well, it was something I immediately regretted. I asked Chris on a whim. We were at a bar at night, and I was going to drive home to L.A. for the summer for a summer job. And I just had this moment of, "You know, it would be nice to have a friend out on the road." And so I tapped him on the chest and said, "Hey, man, do you want to go on a road trip?" and then immediately realized that I was going to have to spend seven days in a car with this hippie with long hair and became a little nervous about it.

CHRIS: I didn't end up regretting the road trip until it was 4:00 in the morning on the first night, and we were still driving. That's when I started to regret our road trip.

ASHLEY: What were your worldviews, though? Give people a sense of, as you set out... Jordan, what was your worldview? How would you describe it?

JORDAN: I had just spent five years in the Marine Corps. I thought that the ideas and ideals embodied by the United States were noble and worthy and things that were worth fighting for. And that kind of infused how I saw the world. Second, Chris came to know that I like to describe myself as a Burkean after Edmund Burke, and the defining feature of that is this idea that progress is important and, in many ways, vital for holding a society together. But progress is best achieved if done slowly, temperately, and with a lot of respect for what came before because you never know what you're going to throw out in the process of progress. And it led me to be an optimist about what we were going to see across the country. My experience in the Marines made me feel that, wherever we went, we were going to find signs that America was good, strong, and healthy everywhere we went. I think it was a little different from Chris's worldview.

CHRIS: Yeah. I grew up in a pretty radical milieu in Berkeley. I remember going to protests, taking the subway to San Francisco to protest the Iraq War when I was quite young. One of the first books I intentionally picked up and read on my own in high school was *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver. I was fascinated by the Black Panthers, and through time, I kind of started to become a little bit more of an institutionalist. I'd spent time in D.C. I interned at the White House, the Obama White House. I have to specify now. Then, at the State Department, I had come to a new fascination and appreciation for our government institutions outside of that more radical vision of the world that I'd grown up with. And one of the reasons I think I was open to a friendship like this was, at the State Department, in diplomacy, we were writing speeches where we'd quote Kennedy and Reagan. There's a sort of post-partisan, larger message to what we were trying to achieve.

RICHARD: That said, you must've had some arguments. You must've had, even, perhaps, some verbal fights, some jousting between you.

CHRIS: No, never, not once. No, absolutely. We fought like cats and dogs. In those early days, we would get into these battles. Jordan's a little bit more of a pugilist than I am. He enjoys the back and forth, and so he would start it, and I would engage. Then I would try to pivot out of it. We write in the book that new friends have a way of inoculating one another against the worst of combat, of verbal combat, because you don't want to lose that friendship. So we would start, but then we often wouldn't finish those arguments. We were able to sort of avoid them until the election got going in full swing, and then it almost became oppressive. You couldn't avoid politics.

ASHLEY: Yeah. I'm thinking about one particular fight that you write about. It's post-the Trump rally that you attended. I think you came this close to thinking, "Gosh, can we continue doing this? Have we really got it in us to really stay with each other in this car?" Can you talk about that?

JORDAN: The fight that you're talking about happened as we were driving through Nevada, through these long, open stretches of highways. And it started sort of innocently enough, where both of us were trading remarks about the night before, from the Trump rally. At some point, I said to Chris that it really bothers me that the President is always characterized in the worst possible light for whatever he says, and then that characterization is used to tar all of his supporters. That started us down this path of discussing the President's remarks about undocumented immigrants and the wall and how those may or may not have been racist. And it led to this brutal, all-out fight where we moved from the issues to ad hominem and started questioning each other's underlying values and motives and ended with us in silence, steaming about the other person and unable to continue talking. We didn't say a word to each other for quite some time, probably about an hour, until finally, Chris was able to break the silence and say that he was still angry, he needed to time to heal, but he still loved me. That began the process of reconciling.

RICHARD: What did you learn from that? What did you learn from your disagreements in terms of how to disagree?

CHRIS: What I learned is the importance of coming back to the table. You don't solve all your issues in one conversation. I didn't convince Jordan of my perspective in that 45-minute battle we had, and he didn't convince me. But what matters is summoning the desire to keep going, the grace to say, "Look, I love you, man. You're one of my closest friends. I'm angry, but I want to come back to the table. I want to try again," because the honest truth is that common ground is hard. It's not easy, and it takes so many conversations. It takes making mistakes. We wrote *Union* very intentionally to show those mistakes. We wanted to show that battle, that fight because we wanted people to know that we're not experts. We had to figure it out as we went, as well.

JORDAN: Yeah. I think two that come to mind for me are... There's a way of arguing where the way we frame things draws a line and says, "If you're on this side of the line, you're on my side. If you're on that side of the line, you must be evil," or, "you must be my opponent." And I think, in that conversation, we definitely did that, where we would say things, whether implicitly or explicitly said that, "If you disagree with me, there must be something repellent or morally repugnant about your views." And that makes people very defensive. I think a second thing we learned from that fight was that we might be arguing rationally and using words and ideas to communicate, but there's this underlying emotion beneath it that's the real engagement. In that conversation, some things were said on both sides that carried a lot of emotion, and we rushed over those because we were each just waiting to make our next point. So we didn't hear the emotion in the other side. And I realized, "Well, I said something that hurt Chris," because he had an experience earlier in his life that this triggered, and vice versa. And in ignoring that emotion underneath it, it led us to just get even angrier and feel misunderstood and unheard. We've learned to ask questions to bring those out as opposed to just trying to argue based on reason and facts.

ASHLEY: I'd love to hear from each of you how that played out with some of the people you met. I bet that each of you met at least one person that you thought, "Ooh, am I going to be able to find common ground with this person?" And then you were. I'd love to hear an example from each of you. Chris, do you want to start?

CHRIS: We wrote a chapter about our time with Peter Mylen, who's a 57-year-old truck driver from Daytona Beach, Florida who picked us up in Las Vegas and drove us all the way to Slidell, Louisiana. And I remember when we first arrived in Las Vegas, we were in the truck stop looking for him. We hear this big honk, and he jumps down and goes to introduce himself. And he opens his arms, and he's wearing this Make America Great Again. At this point in our road trips, we had been trying to get away from politics, and when I saw that shirt, I said, "Oh, my god, it's going to be impossible to get away from politics." Fast-forward a couple days, and we found Pete to be one of the more complicated, interesting thinkers we met on the road. One of the first things he said about politics was that the president, Donald Trump, didn't talk enough about climate change. He said this, of course, driving a diesel engine long-haul truck down the highway at 80 miles an hour. I think that was really important to me, to realize that we're more than just the party we vote for. Our thinking is often not just towing the line of a party. It's complicated. It's informed by so many different life experiences and beliefs and what books we've read. It's so hard to look at someone and say, "I know exactly who that person is."

RICHARD: Jordan, as the Conservative, was there a flaming Liberal who you approached and thought, "Uh-oh"?

JORDAN: I think the experience I had that I wondered if we would be able to connect with these people was when we went to Parnall Prison. We got to spend a day with a Shakespeare in Prison group of inmates at Parnall who were meeting once a week to

discuss Shakespeare. Before going in, I was a little nervous. I had no idea what we were going to talk to these men about or find any way to reach each other. And we were watching them perform King Lear, and it was so inspiring to watch these men engage over the text and talk about these deeper ideas and emotions that were coming up for them as they were reading the passage that they were performing. And we got to witness this, and I think Chris and I were sort of in awe of these men and how they engaged on the topics. Then, afterwards, we were able to ask them questions, and again, we were very nervous about asking these men what we wanted to ask, which was about the idea of redemption. Yet, they approached it with so much humility and emotion and insight. We struck up this great communion with them as we talked for a couple hours. It was deeply meaningful for both of us.

ASHLEY: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard. We're speaking with Chris Haugh, a Liberal writer from Berkeley, and Jordan Blashek, a Conservative military vet, about what they learned during a series of road trips across the country.

ASHLEY: Before we hear more from Jordan and Chris, a word about other episodes of Let's Find Common Ground. If you like this one, listen to more at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: And we'd like to hear from you, especially teachers and others who are now discussing civics with their students. Who should we talk to? What subjects would you like us to discuss?

ASHLEY: This podcast is part of the Common Ground Committee's drive to shed light, not heat, on public discourse.

RICHARD: Subscribe to our newsletter at commongroundcommittee.org, and find out about our videos and events. Now more of our interview with Jordan and Chris.

It sounds like both of you have come away from this series of road trips believing that many people are a lot more interesting and nuanced than they first appear.

CHRIS: Absolutely, but I didn't realize how interesting these sort of conversations can be: Pete, the men at Parnall. We thought we were going to come back with one story, and we always came back with another one. In fact, that kind of became our reporting ethos where we were out there, was, "Okay, we're headed to Portland to write about the lobstering industry. What's the against-the-grain story here?" It always emerged that way. A story about a Trump-supporting truck driver suddenly becomes about climate change and how to interpret one's faith and what the Bible really means. It's always more interesting than you expect.

ASHLEY: Yeah, actually, it reminds me of somebody that Richard and I have talked about recently. There's this quite well-known journalist and teacher, Tom Rosensteel, who said something recently that was very similar to what you said, "The more reporting you do, the less sure you should be about what you went in thinking," and that's exactly what you two discovered.

CHRIS: That'll resonate with Jordan, the budding young journalist he is.

JORDAN: Oh, I totally agree. Chris has been prodding me along into the journalistic ethos since we started these trips. I think I came in with this very clear sense of right and wrong, and this is how the country is and how it's going to be. And ever step of the way, every person we met convinced me more and more that, actually, things are just very complex. It's hard to spend so much time on the road meeting Americans and seeing the American landscape and not come away with just this deep sense of love for who we are and the mosaic of this country.

ASHLEY: The story you told about the truck driver, Pete, reminds us that slogans... I know they're catchy, but they can also be very reductive. Whether it's that or Black Lives Matter, which might invoke a similar reaction in somebody else, the person who's wearing that T-shirt isn't necessarily everything you would think from the slogan.

JORDAN: Yeah, I think that's right, and I think those slogans are also overloaded. They have so much additional meaning beyond just whatever the phrase is. We're being asked to say whether we agree with it or not. There's probably many parts of it I agree with and many parts of it I don't agree with when it comes to slogan after slogan, and yet you can't get to that nuance when all we're doing is shouting slogans back and forth at each other.

RICHARD: There's a quote in your book, *Union*, about common ground. You say, "Finding common ground isn't about being right." It's about laying a foundation to argue passionately while respecting the other side. It's not about getting to agreement but getting to the point where disagreement isn't reason to pull away." Jordan?

JORDAN: Yes. What we realized was we were never going to convince each other that I was right and Chris was wrong, even though I am right and Chris is usually wrong. We were never going to convince each other or fully change each other's mind. But what we wanted to get to was the point where we could have these deeper conversations and wrestle over issues and voice disagreements completely honestly and not feel like that was going to pull us apart. So we came to the view that common ground actually has nothing to do with finding the areas we agree. It's about being able to disagree and not have reason to end the friendship over it. Chris, what would you add to that?

CHRIS: Yeah, I think there's a responsibility to that, too, because if we're going to disagree, we have to be able to listen. But coming to that realization, and

especially with someone who you know and you trust... It's easy for me to say that now about Jordan because I've literally put my life in his hands before. So I know, if I get angry about a political perspective of his, I know that underneath it all is the guy who helped drag me away from tear gas canisters in Arizona or drove through the night when I was too tired to take the wheel. I think it's really important to be able to say, "I'm not going to convince Jordan of every last point I have," but that's okay.

ASHLEY: Now that you're back, or now that you've stopped your final trip, unless you're going to plan a whole other load of them in coming months when you can, but now that your trip is over and you've written about it, would you say that your worldviews have changed at all? Did they change through the time that you spent with each other and talking to other people with whom you might not speak usually, Jordan?

JORDAN: Well, this is a bit of a spoiler alert, but Chris is still a Democrat, and I'm still a Republican. So our worldviews, I think, have largely stayed the same. I think what we do believe is that we've made each other better. Chris has made me a better Republican, and hopefully I've done something for him. But for me, Chris has helped me realize where there were holes in my worldview and where there were blindspots.

RICHARD: Have you found a receptive audience for what you're doing, or are people determined to be divided?

CHRIS: We find a very receptive audience pretty much everywhere we go. Whenever we tell people what our project is, they go, "Oh, my god. That sounds fascinating." I remember talking to a guy in Berkeley who I work out with, and he said, "You know I come from a Conservative family, and I spend all this time in liberal Berkeley. I can't wait for this book." But pretty much everyone we talk to is intrigued by it.

JORDAN: Yeah, and I think there are certain people who do just want to pick fights, and they want to kind of use these very partisan set of talking points. We've never heard that in person. So there's something about the anonymity of doing this online and having no consequence that brings that out in some people. But everyone we engage with in person and talk to has had the reaction that Chris described. It's almost this longing for something better.

ASHLEY: Ultimately, would you say that this series of road trips has taught you more about America or more about your own relationship with each other?

CHRIS: That's a really good question. Wow. I'll be curious to hear what Jordan says. I would say more about the relationship. I think what was most amazing is just getting to know each other and letting the relationship grow. We went from fighting almost... Half of our road trips were some sort of heated conversation about an issue of the day. We rarely fight now. We disagree, but we are able to understand one another. We have this shared language that sometimes we worry that, when we open the door of the Volvo

and walk out into society, that it might sort of start to dissolve, but at least the two of us have been able to build this amazing way of getting ideas across and sharing where we came from.

RICHARD: Jordan, you get the final word.

JORDAN: It pains me to say this, but Chris nailed it. He's exactly right.

CHRIS: Thanks, buddy.

JORDAN: Yeah, I think that's right. I think we saw pieces of the country that, if we weaved them all together, to us, paints this beautiful picture of who we are and who we can be together, moving forward, and it left us hopeful. It doesn't mean we didn't see all the dark spots and the structural challenges we face going forward. But we saw so many wonderful people working so hard to make life better that it's hard not to walk away hopeful from these trips. But we also know that that was a tiny glimpse of America. We could spend a lifetime out on the road and still not see it all. So, in the end, what we're left with is that our own friendship was strengthened and deepened and made us better people. This book is, in part, a reflection on how our relationship changed, as much as it is... I've been using this phrase lately, and Chris laughs at me for it, but a love letter to the country. It's us saying, "Here's the beautiful things we saw out on the road, and we hope other people can experience this, too."

RICHARD: Jordan Blashek, Chris Haugh, thank you for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

JORDAN: Thank you both so much. This was so much fun.

CHRIS: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Yeah, this was great. It's such an interesting book.

RICHARD: So a hopeful ending and a fascinating story.

ASHLEY: Jordan and Chris's new book is *Union: A Democrat, A Republican, and a Search for Common Ground*. There's a link to more about it on our website commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: Let's Find Common Ground is a production of Common Ground Committee. Thanks for listening.