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RICHARD: Your response will really help us. We'd like to know how Ashley and I can make this podcast even better. The survey is easy to fill out. Just go to commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts, and thanks.

ASHLEY: We live in a world of political extremes with the far right and far left denigrating each other on a regular basis. But could the future lie with politicians who appeal to everyone else?

RICHARD: Our guest in this week's podcast says yes. Former CIA agent and Republican congressman Will Hurd of San Antonio won three terms in the 23rd Congressional District in Texas, a place that he was told he could never win because it was bright blue while he was red. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Will Hurd says he succeeded by engaging with everyone, not just voters who shared all his beliefs, and he says others like him can do the same. In his book, *American Reboot*, he outlines how to get big things done by focusing on policy, not politics. We spoke with Will just before a bipartisan compromise deal was announced on guns and also as the January 6th hearings in Congress were about to get underway.

ASHLEY: Diving right in with current events, Will, obviously the whole country is shaken by the recent mass shootings, especially the one in Uvalde, Texas, which was part of your congressional district for years. Do you mind sharing your thoughts about what happened there?

WILL: It starts with you still have families that are having to bury their children, and Uvalde is a community where everybody knows each other. So it's not just families that are grieving. It's the entire community that is grieving because somebody coached those kids in Little League, and others drove them to school in the morning. So the pain is just unbearable. There's a lot of questions about what happened still, weeks later. One, understanding what happened is important for closure for the families, but it's also important to understand how we deal with these kinds of threats going into the future. We don't have a full accounting of what did happen.

So I don't want to get ahead of that, but it seems like there were some decisions that were made that shouldn't have been made and could've potentially prevented loss of life. Understanding that is important, and then how is this going to drive the conversation in Washington, D.C. about things that we can do about this. And those that think nothing can be done against mass shooting, I disagree with them. I think there's many things we can do. We have to attack this problem at every part of the problem. This is a cycle that starts before an individual thinks about conducting a mass shooting. So I hope that this tragedy leads to some action.

RICHARD: Recently, you wrote an opinion piece for The New York Times, and the headline was "I'm a Republican Who Represented Uvalde in Congress. I Want More than Thoughts and Prayers." Is the very polarized nature of our debate over gun rights versus gun control part of what you're talking about, that very often it's the extremes that grab the headline, that get the attention. Yet, there is a potential for some form of compromise or at least common sense legislation.

WILL: There is, and here's the fundamental problem that drives a lot of this. The extremes of both parties drive, oftentimes, the conversation, and on this debate, on this question, the extremes are, "Ban all weapons," and then the other side is, "Do nothing." There's a whole lot in the middle. Universal background check -- I got an A rating from the NRA when I was in Congress. They supported me on my elections. I've been around guns for most of my adult life, depended on one when I was an undercover officer in the CIA. I do not know of any gun owners, responsible gun owners who have not done a background check.

Something as simple as universal background checks, there's actually a lot of support for that when the rhetoric gets thrown in, "You're taking away the rights of responsible gun owners." No, you're not. You're saying, from this day forward, everybody has to go through a background check, and any 18-year-old should not be able to go get a semi-automatic firearm. Now, here's where some of the compromise can come in. Okay, if we want to say we want 18, 19, and 20-year-olds to be able to buy, then guess what, they have to do some additional training similar to what you have to do when you get a hunting license here in Texas. So that's a place where there's some wiggle room to have a conversation around this topic.

ASHLEY: You alluded to your CIA career a couple of minutes ago, and you clearly had a very exciting time in the CIA before you entered politics. You tell a story in your book about what could've been a really scary situation that could've gone quite badly for you. Actually, it didn't. Can you tell that story?

WILL: I open the book with a story early in my career. My job was to recruit spies and steal secrets, best job on the planet. And when you're going to meet somebody who's giving you secrets, you have to conduct a surveillance detection route, an SDR. You basically drive around a city to determine if someone's following you, and I thought I was getting ready to turn down an alley that was devoid of people, but I made a rookie mistake. I had staked this location in the morning that I was using in the afternoon. In the morning, there was nobody there, but when I turned down there in my Toyota Tercel, it was like a parade. There was a couple thousand people in this alley, pack animals, you name it.

I'm driving about four miles an hour. And this woman walks in front of my car, and I roll over her flipflop, and I mash on my brake, drag her foot across the concrete, bust her toe wide open. It's bleeding everywhere, and she realizes I'm not from around there and starts screaming bloody murder. This was a neighborhood that polite society would've said was rough. I have a couple hundred people banging on my car, shaking my car. Now, our standard operating

procedure, the second lesson you learn in the CIA is get off the X. The X is the location where something's going down, and the last place you want to be when it's going down is where it's going down. But I wasn't going to be able to make it very far. I had a weapon but not enough ammunition for this situation.

So I did what was least expected. I got out of the car. I knew some of the local language but not good enough for this situation, and I said, "Does anybody speak English?" And I will remember this kid's face for the rest of my life. He raises his hand in the air, and he said, "I speak the English." I ask where a hospital was, and I asked him to fetch me a rickshaw. The woman gets in the rickshaw, I give her some money, and I say, "Take her to the hospital immediately," and they drive away.

And the crowd starts clapping. They're patting me on the back. I'm 6'4". One dude even helps pack my 6'4" frame in this little car, and I drive away. And I'm looking in the rearview mirror, and everybody's waving at me. I begin with this story in the book because, to me, the reason, in an instant, a crowd, a mob went from wanting to rip me out of the car and tear me apart to... and it switched in an instant because there was a sign, a show of warmheartedness. I tried to show some empathy and compassion to the problem I created and that I was trying to solve it, and it changed in a moment.

I actually think that's where we are as a country. There's a lot of vitriol. There's a lot of people upset. There's a lot of people angry. There's a lot of people banging on cars. There's elected officials at every level in both parties stuck in the cars. Some are encouraging the drama outside. Some are trying to ignore it. But I think that, just like I saw in that alley in South Asia, that a show of warmheartedness, a show of compassion, a show of trying to solve the problems for all Americans is going to see a change in our country. That's why I started the book off with that story.

RICHARD: So, after or perhaps during this exciting career in the CIA, you decided to go into politics. What on earth made you switch careers, especially when you had such a dim view of politicians?

WILL: Well, look, the short answer, and apologize for my language, is I got pissed about what I was seeing and decided... My mama said, "You're either part of the problem or part of the solution," and that's why I just tried to do something about it. In addition to recruiting spies and stealing secrets, and I got to do it in a lot of exotic and exciting places in the world, I also had to brief members of Congress when they came overseas and were at our embassies and our station. A station is the CIA facility in a country. And I was shocked by the caliber of our elected officials.

I tell a story in the book about a member of Congress that was on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence not knowing the difference between a Sunni and a Shia, that difference in Islam. For me, it's okay for my brother not to know that because he sells cable here in San Antonio, Texas. But for a member of the Intelligence Committee to not know that is

just unacceptable to me, and there's a number of other stories like that. So I decided to run. Left a job I was really good at, moved back to my hometown, and ran for Congress and lost a runoff by 700 votes, which is not a lot of votes. But then I'm glad I don't tell that story anymore, but the opportunity came a few years later, and I ran and won.

RICHARD: You served three terms in Congress for your district in southern Texas. Do you still have the same view of politicians that you had before you ran? Are there a huge number of members of Congress who are neither qualified nor curious enough to be elected representatives?

WILL: Sure, of course, but there's also a lot that are really great. John Cornyn, he is super conservative. He's working on some of this legislation now. I've gotten to know Chris Coons from the Northeast. He's great; Pete Aguilar in California in the House, Democrat; John Katko from New York, a Republican. There was a guy who recently retired. He was a senior leader on the House Armed Services Committee, Mac Thornberry. Mac Thornberry is a guy that everybody should try to grow up to be like.

I always told Mac, had I met Mac when I was in the CIA, I probably wouldn't have left because I'd have been like, "I'm glad that dude is making our laws." Robin Kelly from Illinois is, again, Democrat... so there are many that I got to know and respect, and I think are great legislators and are great models for people to be like. But there are some that are more interested in entertainment. There are some that are more interested in growing their social media footprint than actually solving and addressing and doing the hard things that are required in a democracy.

ASHLEY: You talk a lot about extremes in the book, and I think most people would consider you a moderate Republican. But you say you really can't stand the word "moderate." Why is that?

WILL: I hate labels, anyway. That started at a young age. My dad is Black. My mom is white. The phrase multiracial or biracial didn't really exist when I was growing up. So I didn't fit in with the white kids. I didn't fit in with the Black kids. So that started my opposition to moderates. But a lot of time, the phrase moderate used in the media and Washington, D.C. specifically means squishy, right? It means kind of middle-of-the-road, but moderates are the ones that do the hard work and get things done because they're the ones that are having to take a philosophy to people that may not identify with this.

In my old district, if every Republican voted for me, I would still lose. I had to get Independents. I had to get Democrats to vote for me. So I had to take a conservative message to communities that didn't identify with me or with the little letter after my name. But to me, a lot of folks use that as a derogatory term. You work harder, to be frank. That's why I get a little annoyed with that phrase when it's used in a negative way.

RICHARD: You grew up as a multiracial kid in Texas. Has that affected how you think about the potential for Americans to come together and understand that they really do have stuff in common?

WILL: A hundred percent. I also got bullied a lot as a kid. My head has been this size since I was four years old. I wore a size 13 shoe when I was in fifth grade.

RICHARD: Wow, that is something.

WILL: And this is back when the only size 13 shoe you can buy at Mervyn's was red, and it wasn't cool to wear red shoes back in the '80s and '90s. So all of those things influenced my experiences at a very young age, but it also taught me, one, you shouldn't care about what other people think except for the people that you love, and that gave me a thick skin to take and deal with the negativity that some are going to direct at you for whatever reason. But it also taught me what it's like to be in a situation where you're unlike everyone else.

But here's what I learned representing a truly 50 district, meaning 50% Republican, 50% Democrat, way more unites us than divides us. There's no question about that. Whether I would be in ruby red districts in San Antonio or deep blue districts in El Paso, I got asked the exact same questions. People brought up the exact same issues. They cared about the exact same things. They were worried about putting food on the table, a roof over their head, and making sure that the people they love were healthy, happy, and safe.

ASHLEY: Obviously, at all these events and town halls and stuff, sometimes you got people who were really angry. What happened once when you opted to not stay on the stage and be shouted at but actually move towards the person that was shouting at you? Can you tell that story?

WILL: Sure. I literally held records for the number of town halls that I did. So I spent a lot of time in the district. This is people's lives, and when something is impacting their life, they're going to get emotional, and it's okay. But here's what I've learned. It's hard for people to yell at you up close. I was in West Texas, and I was unaware of a major issue that was impacting the community. It was about a gas pipeline, and when I expressed lack of knowing it, the community, everybody erupted. So I said, "Look, I'll come back. Y'all brief me on this. Let me get some information." It was probably the biggest packed auditorium that I had ever had in West Texas, and everybody was upset.

The first speaker is yelling, upset, and you know what I started doing? I started getting closer to the mic where they were speaking from, and by, like, the fourth person, I'm standing there close enough to where we can shake hands. So, when somebody would come up to the mic, I would shake their hand. Everybody's temperature decreased. Then we started having an honest conversation. So I was able to understand the issue. I was able to show some outrage and empathy and then say, "Hey, okay, here are three or four things that I'm going to try to go do,

and I'll be back in a couple weeks to brief you all on what I was able to find and do." It just completely changed the tenor of the conversation.

ASHLEY: Will Hurd on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Common Ground Committee produces a lot more than this podcast. Check out our blog via the homepage, commongroundcommittee.org, and you will find a recent statement there from our cofounders on reducing gun violence with the title, "Stop the Posturing and Do the Hard Work."

ASHLEY: And we'd love you to take part in our survey, which you can find on the Podcast page. That's commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts. Now back to our interview with former Republican Congressman Will Hurd.

RICHARD: Let's talk about your party, Republicans. Many people, and not just Democrats, are concerned about a move towards an authoritarian perspective. There have been reports that in meetings with local activists, Republican Party operatives have even worked on plans to install trained recruits as regular election poll workers and put them in direct contact with party attorneys. Now, election workers are supposed to be nonpartisan. What do you think of this move that's been going on?

WILL: It's bad for the country. It's bad for the party. When it comes to the Republican Party, this authoritarian wing... And I appreciate that term better than saying Trumpism. I think Trumpism is too narrow in talking about this phenomenon that existed prior to Donald Trump and is going to exist after Donald Trump. So the only way that we're going to ultimately solve problems is by not having a one-size-fits-all solution to a lot of these issues. We should be the party that is seen not enforcing groupthink because ultimately, authoritarianism is about concentrating power into an individual and ultimately, over the long term, stripping away people's rights in order to ensure that a particular individual stays in power for much longer, and that's a dangerous precedent.

Now, I would also say that there's examples of the authoritarian wing of the party winning and losing. I think, at the end of 2022, you're going to have some victories, some losses, and if this was a tug-of-war, the flag is probably going to stay somewhere in the middle, between those two camps. But here what's going to ultimately be the problem. Republicans are taking back the House, period, full stop. Even with all the latest issues that have popped up, Republicans are still taking back the House, and they're going to win with some authoritarians winning and some non, but the party is going to govern from the authoritarian wing. And if they do that, there will be tons of losses in 2024. The lesson of the 2022 election is going to be... and unfortunately Republicans are going to take it as, "The American public loves us." That's the wrong lesson.

The American public is completely dissatisfied with the incompetence of the other side. That's why they're voting for other people, and if we don't provide solutions to challenges, we're

possibly going to be dealing with a recession in Q1 of 2023. We're going to still be dealing with the issue of inflation. We're still going to be dealing with countries like Russia trying to impose their will on our allies, all of these issues that the current administration is being criticized for. If we show no willingness to deal with some of those, all of those problems become our problems, and we're going to see a loss in 2024. So, ultimately, I think those are some of the trends that are going to cause the authoritarian wing to lose some of its power and some of its gas over time.

ASHLEY: Reportedly, a majority of Republicans don't believe that Joe Biden rightfully won the presidency. What do you do about that?

WILL: I'm not questioning those numbers, but I, personally, in my interactions, this is not an issue that comes up. People are like, "Joe Biden's the president." If Republicans continue this big lie, if we continue to fuel disinformation, misinformation, straight out lies, then we're going to miss an opportunity for long-term electoral successes, and this is eroding trust at every level of our society. My argument: if Donald Trump would have won, if he would've equaled what down-ballot Republicans got in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and Michigan, he would've won. He underperformed. Donald Trump got less votes than the other Republicans on those ballots in those states that he lost. That wasn't a theft. That was the public saying, "We are sick and tired of jerks, and we want something different."

I still believe that that is the majority of where people are, and, yeah, it's a challenge, but here's what needs to happen. The January 6th Commission, they need to complete their work. They need to get that information out there so that the public can stop having this drips and drabs of information and say, "Hey, clearly this is what happened. This is what led to this. Here are some things that we didn't know about that was going on behind the scenes," so that we can have some finality so we can talk about how to prevent this from happening in the future.

Oh, and by the way, we need more people voting in primaries. When you look at Texas, we had primary elections in March. Three million people voted out of 30 million: 1.2 million Democrats, 1.8 million Republicans. That's terrible turnout. We need more people that are concerned with these issues to step up and vote in primaries.

RICHARD: How long is it going to take for a politician like Will Hurd -- I hate to use this word, but a moderate -- to be elected? If you seek higher office, it's going to be tough. Your own party has moved to the right or at least to an authoritarian position, and Democrats have moved to the left. How do you get elected, as someone who's not an extremist?

WILL: Well, I did it. Nobody thought I was going to win when I ran in the 2010 election. I hadn't lived in Texas in 15 years. It was still my home. I had been back and forth. That was my place of residence. I spent a lot of time in Texas. I was a Black Republican running in an 71% Latino district, and everybody was endorsing my other opponents. I won the first round by 900 votes, and I lost the runoff because I made a mistake. I make a mistake counter to the advice of all my people. But I won in 2014 in a primary, Black Republican, and this was a time when everyone

was like, "It takes a Latino to beat a Latino." Ted Cruz had endorsed my opponent. He was at the height of his power. The Tea Party was still a thing. They were endorsing my opponent. He was a former member of Congress. So he had more name ID, more money than I did.

I know how to do this. It's hard. It takes a little more effort, but it's not rocket science. It just takes a level of effort and being able to talk about things people care about. We talk to the same people over and over because that's the easy path. And why does all this matter? Why should Republicans care? Why should Democrats care? Why should Independents care? Because America staying the global superpower is no longer a fait accompli. The American economy staying the most important economy is not guaranteed, and we are in a new cold war with the Chinese government, and if we don't start addressing some of these generation-defining challenges that our country is facing, it is going to have an impact on our society at every level.

ASHLEY: You just mentioned the new cold war with China and other things that are threatening America's place in the world. Talk about some of the things Americans should be worrying about, in your opinion, that we're not right now.

WILL: One of the things that we should be worried about, and there's some kind of conversation around this, but it's ultimately around Taiwan. And I always try to be very clear. It's the Chinese government. It's not the Chinese people. It's definitely not Asian Americans. The hate that my Asian American brothers and sisters have been seeing in this country the last couple of years is unacceptable. So, when I talk, I talk about the Chinese government specifically.

They are going to invade Taiwan, period, full stop. Why are they going to invade Taiwan? Partly because the Chinese president believes that to reestablish a Chinese dynasty, Taiwan is part of it. But also, it's because Taiwan's responsible for about 60% of semiconductor manufacturing in the world, adds 10% to what the Chinese government already does. That's 70% control on the building blocks of every single electronic device that is in this country and the world. So the Chinese government -- this is their statement in English in their own publications -- they're trying to surpass the United States of America as the global superpower, and they're going to do that by being a leader in advanced technologies like 5G, quantum computing, artificial intelligence. These are the issues we should be talking about.

People hear about Huawei. They make all the equipment to do 5G. Why does 5G matter? Because all future technology is going to be built upon 5G. The Chinese own, right now, 30% of global 5G infrastructure. That means they're going to ultimately control everything that runs on top of that. Look, artificial intelligence... What should be a data policy and information that someone's able to collect online about you? And how should that power these tools?

Artificial intelligence is like nuclear fission. Controlled, nuclear fission gives you nuclear energy, clean energy that can last forever. Nuclear fission uncontrolled gives you nuclear weapons, which can end life as we know it. AI has that same level of power. So we need to be talking

about how does our values drive this? Because guess what, we know what values the Chinese government are instituting in this. How are they able to control their population? We're seeing it in places like Xinjiang Province where the Uighurs, the Chinese ethnic minorities, have been basically put in internment camps. You talk about authoritarianism. They're exporting that all over the world. So these technologies and how we work with our allies and our friends to develop it is the only way we're going to be able to counter what the Chinese government is trying to do, and it's going to impact every facet of our life. There's a lot of questions behind how we should answer some of these issues, and these are some of the debates that we should be having.

RICHARD: Final question, what do you mean by "American reboot"?

WILL: It's a lesson I learned in my first job in college working at a computer lab. When I didn't know how to fix a computer, what did I do? I rebooted it. I didn't change the operating system. I didn't put new stuff on it. I got back to a fresh operating system, and this is what our country needs to do. We need to get back to those values and principles that have gotten us, over 247 years, to be the most powerful country on the planet, have the most important economy on the planet, and to help uplift humanity all over the world.

Let's get back to those values of freedom leads to opportunity, opportunity leads to growth, growth leads to progress. Let's get back to majority rule with minority rights and an appreciation of federalism, where local control matters, and if you want to do something different in Texas than you do in California, you should be able to do that. These are the principles that have made our country great, and these are the principles we've got to get back to, and that's what I mean by a reboot.

ASHLEY: Thank you so much for coming on Let's Find Common Ground, Will.

WILL: It's my pleasure, and I appreciate what y'all are doing because there's a lot of common ground. We can find it. We've just got to be talking about it more and recognize that it's out there.

RICHARD: Well, that's music to our ears. Will Hurd's book is American Reboot: An Idealist's Guide to Getting Big Things Done.

ASHLEY: And if you enjoy the podcast, please give us a review. Reviews help other people find this show, and the more people listen, the bigger the common ground movement can become. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

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