

**McNally(00:00:08):**

Hello, I'm Terrence McNally. Welcome to Free Forum, A World that Just Might Work. And I'll be speaking today with journalist and bestselling author George Packer. And we previously talked about his National Book Award-winning THE UNWINDING, his 2021 book, LAST BEST HOPE, in which he offers his take on four narratives of America that motivate and divide us. And today our jumping off point will be his recent cover story in *The Atlantic* on Phoenix, Arizona, WHAT WILL BECOME OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION?

The show streams weekly on the Progressive Voices Network on TuneIn. Podcasts are available anytime, anywhere on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, most major podcast sites, and at my site, [terrencemcnally.net](http://terrencemcnally.net).

Now to today's conversation -

As soon as I saw George Packer's cover story in the current issue of *The Atlantic* - and the subtitle, by the way is *Conspiracism and Hyper-Partisanship in the Nation's Fastest Growing City* - (00:01:14) I contacted him and said, "Let's have a conversation." George and I, as I said, have spoken several times in the past, and I find there's always a good sense of give-and-take, and I learn something new about the story or about what I think of the story.

I also just enjoy the opportunity - as I have with a few folks - of catching up with them every now and then as their thinking and their point of view evolves. And I'm going to make sure we take a little time at the top to talk about his last book, LAST BEST HOPE, the one in which he sets out for narratives that he feels dominate America's consciousness and conversations and see how he thinks those have held up over the past three years.

In this new article, WHAT WILL BECOME OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION, George goes out to Phoenix last summer, in which heat records are being broken. (00:02:02) I believe they had 110 or more degrees for 51 straight days, a total of 55 days, over the course of the summer. He talks to a lot of folks. There's not a lot of "I, George Packer, think this..." Rather we hear what this farmer, this environmental lawyer, this university president, this office holder, this Trump supporter, this very purple Democrat - we hear what they have to say. George is our tour guide. He's choosing the characters and making the introductions. But the voices in this piece are the voices of the people of Phoenix and the surrounding area.

Phoenix is and has been for maybe a couple of decades, one of, if not the fastest-growing city in America. And yet at that same time, over those same decades, persistent drought and loss of groundwater has made things more and more challenging for that growth about which it is so proud. (00:02:58)

Also, Arizona, the land of Barry Goldwater, long a conservative bastion, has evolved politically - with the right getting further and further out there - the Q'anon Shaman

is a resident and shows up in George's story - but also as the demographics have changed. And as the drought has made life tougher and climate change harder to deny, the state has become one of the most purple. It is one of the most critical in terms of national elections, both in terms of the Senate and the presidency, and also one that I feel has become one of the more volatile.

GEORGE PACKER is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of 10 books including *THE UNWINDING: An Inner History of the New America* (a winner of the 2013 National Book Award) *OUR MAN: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (the winner of the 2019 Hitchens Prize and *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize) and most recently *LAST BEST HOPE* in which he lays out four narratives that divide us. Before joining *The Atlantic* in 2018 he was a staff writer at *The New Yorker* for 15 years. So 15 years at *The New Yorker*, six years at *The Atlantic*.

Welcome again, GEORGE PACKER to FREE FORUM: A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK

**Packer** ([00:04:18](#))

Thank you for having me, Terrance.

**McNally**([00:04:20](#))

Okay, let me tell listeners we're recording this conversation Thursday, July 11th.

So first, just quickly, any responses to my introduction?

**Packer** ([00:04:29](#)):

I think you've got it. The one character you didn't mention among the people I talked to in Phoenix was Rusty Bowers,

**McNally:**

...who was an office holder...

**Packer:**

Yeah. Oh, maybe you mentioned him as an office holder.

**McNally:**

Yeah, he was, and we should talk about him.

**Packer:**

I think he's, we'll, the most important figure. But for your listeners, he was a pretty hardcore conservative Republican, became speaker of the Arizona House after a long career as a legislator, and then blew himself up in Arizona politics by refusing to do Trump's bidding and overturn the results of the 2020 election in Arizona.

**McNally**([00:05:16](#)):

And as we can imagine, got the death threats, all of that sort of thing, and was drummed out of office.

**Packer (00:05:27):**

It was ugly Terrnce, I mean caravans of video panel trucks with loudspeakers made their way up the road to his house and parked outside and blasted to his neighbors that he was a pedophile and a corrupt traitor. A guy with a pistol on his hip got out and started screaming at him. It's a hair trigger atmosphere in Arizona around elections. And I think it's a bit of a miracle that there has been no real violence in Arizona in 2020 or 2022 and fingers crossed for this year, but it always feels like it's just going to take one incident, one enraged, lunatic, drunk on rhetoric from cable TV or the internet to think he's doing God's bidding.

**McNally(00:06:30):**

That's right. He may not be a lone wolf, but he may be the craziest wolf in the pack.

**Packer (00:06:36):**

Yeah, a crazy wolf with a lot of lies and hatred in his head that pours out of the websites and social media accounts and speeches and rallies of some organizations, one of which I got a very close look at while I was in Phoenix, Turning Point USA, which is headquartered there.

**McNally(00:06:57):**

Right. I'll tell you what, we'll come back to Phoenix, but let's talk, as I suggested a little bit about LAST BEST HOPE. It was your pandemic book, one you wrote when you were unable to get out in the field and do the reporting that usually marks your nonfiction work.

And I will tell you, I have found myself referring to your ideas and your narratives over the years. So let's look back at that a little bit. First of all, how did you fasten on this notion of four Americas or four narratives? And can you briefly, and I'll bet by now you can lay them out for folks.

**Packer (00:07:41):**

I am not a brander. I don't come up with rubrics and formulas that stick. I'm much more a narrative journalist, and I like to talk to people and tell stories, but I was stuck at home like many people. And 2020 was one of those years, like 1968 when it seems as if the whole country is on the edge of some apocalypse. And I was trying to make sense of it actually. I'd already, I think, given a talk a year or two earlier about different approaches to what America means, what is the idea of America about? And I came up with four, and this is just based on thinking about this, reading about it.

This is what goes on in my head all the time. And so I already had the idea of four, but I hadn't come up with the catchy phrases that I think were important in making them stick in LAST BEST HOPE.

**Packer (00:08:51):**

I did that in LAST BEST HOPE. And to go through them very quickly, they are Free America, Smart America, Real America and Just America.

Free America is Reagan's America. It's the shining city on the hill, get government out of our lives, turn the American people loose, cut their taxes, deregulate their businesses, and they will create a prosperous and great society or a great country. And there will be blessings for everyone. And it's an open one.

Reagan talked often about if it's a walled city, that wall has to have a gate. So immigration was welcome, trade was welcome, globalization was welcome. This is the America that I think led to the gross inequalities that we've been living with for decades and the sense that whole areas of the country and whole classes of people have been left behind by what prosperity has come from the successful industries of these years, technology and finance. So Free America is Libertarian America,

**McNally(00:10:08):**

It still lives well in the Silicon Valley.

**Packer (00:10:11):**

It's in Silicon Valley, it's in some parts of the Republican Party. I'd say Mitch McConnell's America is Free America. The Reagan dogma became a kind of zombie philosophy that never died that just kept on giving speeches on the floor of Congress even after it had ceased to be successful or even to motivate rank and file voters. It kept on existing in this afterlife and it's still there. Tax cuts are still an automatic Republican talking point, so is deregulation. If you read Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's attempt to sketch out a second Trump term. It reads a lot like Free America except with some extra stuff that we can then get to.

**McNally(00:11:07):**

That's right. That's right. Reagan's Free America and the Libertarian Free America, which has persisted, was not as invested in culture wars. And so what we see now is this amalgamation of Free America plus culture wars, which ends up being your quote Real America.

**Packer (00:11:28):**

And before, these are sort of chronological. So I'll go next to Smart America because that I associate with Democrats in the Clinton and Obama years, the professional class Democrats who really became the base of the party during those years.

The working class base of the Democratic Party began to defect to the Republican side in the early seventies and has continued up till today so that the Democrats have become the party of the college educated. And the narrative of the college educated professionals is somewhat not unlike Free America. They want a robust economy. They

want globalization, they want trade, they want immigration, they want it in a softer way. They still believe government has a role. They think that it has to cushion the blows of capitalism. They love cosmopolitan life of lots of different ethnic restaurants in the city. It's a kind of metropolitan narrative and it really puts the emphasis on education. (00:12:38)

The key to a happy life is a college degree and really more than that, a college degree from one of the right colleges that's going to get you into one of the right professions and then we'll get your kids. And this is crucial. This is a sort of generational family business called success. It will get your kids into that college as well and into that profession as well. And eventually the meritocracy, which is kind of one of the beliefs of Smart America, becomes kind of an inherited aristocracy, even though it continues to be based on grades and test scores, et cetera. So Smart America, sort of Democrats, but not old-fashioned Democrats. The Democrats of the Clinton and Obama variety.

**McNally(00:13:29):**

Right. Let me just bounce off that a little bit. So there's a book I appreciate by Gary Gerstle called *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order*.

**Packer (00:13:41):**

I know that book.

**McNally(00:13:42):**

And he talks about that - up until the civil rights laws and the demographic political changes that brought about taking the South from conservative segregationist Democrats to conservative segregationist Republicans, we were in the New Deal order and it kind of overpowered everything, and so on. And then it began to break down, as he points out. And then we end up with the neoliberal order, which includes Reagan's Free America and Smart America. And when you pointed out that it's from the Free America that we end up with the divisions we have now, and the angry grievance-filled left-behind, as you said that I thought, well, it wouldn't have worked just Smart America. It's the mix of those two, right?

**Packer (00:14:46):**

Yeah, exactly. They both embraced a form of neoliberalism. One of them was hard-edged, the other was softer. One of them was more nationalistic. The other didn't really like flag waving and displays of patriotism and was more about diversity and cosmopolitanism. Yeah...

**McNally(00:15:07):**

One of the things I really remember from our conversation and from that book was that cosmopolitanism... Global trade was part of the Reagan Free America vision, but it didn't cost them their patriotism. Whereas you point out, the characters in Smart

America begin to lose the nationalism and the patriotism, because they see a bigger world out there,

**Packer** ([00:15:40](#)):

Right, they don't have that sense as much of commitment to a community of the nation. They feel more like maybe citizens of the world. Their causes are global ones like climate change, which is obviously a crucial cause, and maybe even a commitment to their neighborhood and to their city or to their college, to their class, even though they don't like to talk about it that way. But not to the nation so much.

**McNally**([00:16:17](#)):

That's right. More compatriots of people of similar "merit" quote and similar education and so on in other countries.

**Packer** ([00:16:26](#)):

And it's interesting, Terrence, I've been looking into the Chicago '68 convention a little bit because we're about to have another...

**McNally**([00:16:36](#)):

Chicago convention...

**Packer** ([00:16:38](#)):

... fraught Chicago convention. And what happened in Chicago in '68, was the anti-war delegates rightly saw party bosses essentially locking up the delegates for Hubert Humphrey, even though he hadn't run in a single primary.

**McNally:**

That's right.

**Packer:**

...and giving him the nomination and defeating the anti-war plank of the party platform. And there was so much resentment and sense of the party having lost whatever democratic life it had, that they passed another resolution that was like a sop to the McCarthy and Kennedy delegates that allowed for the rules to be changed in the selection of future democratic nominees. And this led to a commission chaired by George McGovern that changed those rules and essentially began the process of taking the party out of the hands of the Richard Daley and the George Meanies, the old bosses, and turning it...

**McNally**([00:17:48](#)):

George Meany, for those who don't remember - AFL-CIO.

**Packer:**

Yes.

**McNally:**

And then you could have Walter Reuther at the UAW...

**Packer (00:17:54):**

Walter Reuther who was more on the liberal end of the trade union movement...and giving that power more and more to activists, to cause-oriented activists, whether it's civil rights or women's rights or environmentalism. It kind of began, and in '72, those delegates nominated George McGovern, who was exactly that kind of political figure. That began this transformation of the Democratic Party. I think it also had obviously deep economic and sociological causes, but the change of rules really did change the character of who the party's activists were.

**McNally(00:18:38):**

And I would say, and I assume you will agree with me, that it also changed the Republican party, that the Republicans followed suit with primaries. And what seemed like what was well-intentioned at the time, to add more democracy has led, when you look at its unfolding, to the primaries that are basically run by the extremist bases of each party. And led, one could say, as much as anything - as much as doing away with the fairness doctrine, as much as Fox News - led to the extreme polarization that candidates who now run have to win the votes of their most extreme players to get the nomination. And this has changed everything.

**Packer (00:19:40):**

I think you're absolutely right. And in a way, making it more democratic has had the perverse effect of making it less democratic, because I know it seems as though fewer and fewer, but more and more committed people have the control of both parties. And this leads to the third narrative...

**McNally:**

Very good.

**Packer:**

Which is Real America. That's America First. I think it started its first appearance in the national firmament was Sarah Palin in 2008, John the Baptist to Donald Trump. Trump has been its dominant figure. It's the anti-immigrant in some ways, anti-modern, anti-trade, anti minority, anti-woman, it's the reactionary Republican party that wants to return to some tradition that probably never was all that much. And that in the end is anti-democratic... that is a threat to democracy. But it's become - this gets back to what we were just talking about - Its foot soldiers are those working class Republicans, white working class Republicans who began defecting from the Democratic Party in the sixties and seventies...

**McNally(00:21:02):**

Yeah. Lemme just -

**Packer (00:21:03):**

...Whose parents...

**McNally(00:21:04):**

A statistic from that book: among white people, 38% of college graduates voted for Trump compared with 64% without college degrees. And I've read, I think you but certainly others, who say that more than race, more than anything, the division now is level of education.

**Packer (00:21:33):**

That's how you can predict voting behavior better than with any other factor. And I would say Real America has taken over the Republican party so completely that no one can speak publicly against either the ideology or the leader without risking their career.

**McNally(00:21:57):**

But isn't either you or one of the folks you're talking to who says that it's really more wedded to Trump - the people who feel that and are the foot soldiers - more wedded to Trump than to the Republican party?

**Packer (00:22:18):**

Yeah, the party itself, I think both parties have really become hollow structures. We're seeing it every day right now with the Democratic Party...

**McNally(00:22:27):**

Oh my God. Yes.

**Packer (00:22:28):**

...which is unable to translate the wishes of the vast majority of its voters into a change at the top because the party structure doesn't really exist to do it. It's just all a little coterie of presidential aides, family members, and a few members of Congress that -

**McNally(00:22:47):**

What was possible in '68 because of the way things were structured and the way authority ran is much tougher. It really is up to Jill and Joe.

**Packer (00:22:59):**

Yeah, exactly. And on the Republican side, it is a cult. It's the cult of Trump. No other Republican has earned anything like the devotion that he has.



**McNally(00:23:12):**

They come out with the same policies, the same rhetoric, and it doesn't matter.

**Packer (00:23:16):**

JD Vance who has essentially turned himself into a clone of Trump against his own nature and values. Is JD Vance ever going to be a wildly popular figure in the Republican party? I mean, it seems like the closest you're going to get is if you're a media celebrity, if you're Tucker Carlson, because this is not a narrative or an ideology that really is driven by policies. It's driven by feeling, by passion, by a kind of desire to blow things up, by a hatred of the establishment, of the "elites" as we are called.

**McNally(00:24:05):**

And by an identification, an identification with Trump just as there were an identification with Peron or an identification with authoritarian elites

**Packer (00:24:17):**

And this is why liberals are wrong to say, "How can you think of him as a populist? He's a rich real estate magnate." Well, that doesn't matter. What matters is that he's full of resentment. He's willing to say ugly things that other people think but don't want to say. And that liberates his followers to identify with him. So it doesn't matter how much net worth is.

**McNally(00:24:46):**

Their basest impulses were not allowed before and now they are.

**Packer (00:24:52):**

Right. And once you start knocking over those taboos, it's really hard to get them back up. And in fact, people start chasing after you and trying to do it more. You see the language of members of Congress, I know I sound like a bit of a prig, but it's pretty appalling. It's become normal to hear the F-word from a member of Congress in public.

So the last narrative is Just America and that is on the Left, Free and Real are the competing narratives on the Right, Smart and Just are the competing narratives on the Left. And they're generational as well between Smart and Just. I think of it as a kind of quarrel between parents and children, Just America I began to become aware of around 2014 with Black Lives Matter. And it is a vision of the country as a set of oppressed and oppressive groups who have always been locked in a struggle for power with the oppressors having the power, the oppressed being denied it. (00:26:11)

And it's a dark and pessimistic vision. It doesn't think of "this shining city on the hill" or Obama's "more perfect union". It's a picture of a country that was sort of poisoned at the root and has always been founded on injustice and perpetuated injustice. And although the younger protestors, activists, writers, cultural figures - and it's largely a

cultural movement - who I think of as believing in Just America, in this vision, they don't seem to have a lot of faith that these problems can be solved.

So it has a sort of fatalistic quality to it. It's really become dominant in cultural realms like the media, academia, the arts, philanthropy. I see it everywhere in my world, the world I live in. And I see the older people in that world yielding to it because they're afraid...They're afraid of the passion and the power of the young to push them aside.

**McNally(00:27:30):**

Lemme give one very little personal experience with that. And then I want to quote a couple of things you said about Just America in the book and in earlier conversation.

When the George Floyd/Black Lives Matter protests began and what seemed to have emerged - besides "I Can't Breathe" and those sorts of things - was "Defund the police." And I put out on social media - and I'm not a big social media maven, but that one got me going. I put out on social media how this was a wrongheaded name and that what we really meant was re-imagining public safety and blah, blah, blah, and that this was going to alienate people.

And that post got more response, more positive response than anything I'd ever put out. And it was from people - it was interesting. George, it was from people whose opinion I respect. In other words, it wasn't my high school classmate, it was the head of this organization and the folks I'd worked with. But the backlash that happened about a day later was, "They know better. This is their slogan and they've been at this for, as you point out, since 2014, and you get where I'm going... " ...and we have to trust that get out of their way." And to me, that's a microcosm of what you're talking about.

**Packer (00:29:10):**

Yeah, no, there's so many examples. I saw it in journalism, and organizations, in journalistic outlets I was part of, I've seen it in writer's organizations like Pen America.

**McNally:**

Sure.

**Packer:**

The Screenwriter's Guild has some of the same tensions, and college campuses, of course. And it's... basically Just America, I think, ran into a dead end because it wanted to change consciousness. Its ambitions were huge. It wanted to change the

way we think, the way we talk, the way we conceive of huge subjects like sex and gender, race, the history of colonialism. But in the end, it felt to many people, censorious, repressive, and intolerant of dissenting views, and sort of unable to really change anything.

**McNally(00:30:15):**

Right. Well, as you and other people I've spoken with say its successes, if you will, are mostly in the arena of language and not on the streets.

**Packer (00:30:29):**

And in the arena of the professional world and not the working class. And this gets to the last part of LAST BEST HOPE, which I wrote in the fraught weeks between the election of 2020 and the inauguration of Joe Biden, when I laid out what I thought would be a more capacious and attractive narrative than any of those four, all of which have their appealing parts and all of which I think are failures, and my narrative...

**McNally(00:31:04):**

As I would say, they have their appealing impulses and their tragic flaws.

**Packer (00:31:08):**

That's a better way to put it.

My narrative was called Equal America, and it kind of went back to some of the origins of the country and what Tocqueville called "the American passion for equality", which is the dominant drive he saw in 19th century America. Obviously not the fact of equality, but the desire of people to be the equal of others.

And I had a bunch of ideas for how both government and media and society could break down the class barriers, the inequalities, bring more people into to the world of prosperity, and believing that America actually had a future for them and their children, which fewer and fewer people do.

And to minimize culture war issues, which... I think some of them are inevitable, but almost all of them end up consuming our attention, benefiting a few elites in politics and media who either get elected or get rich off them and don't solve people's basic problems. So that was my shot. I felt I had to give it my shot. And I also thought Biden is the guy who might actually be able to begin to make this happen because he's a throwback. He's from the Roosevelt, Truman...

**McNally(00:32:39):**

He's from the New Deal order.

**Packer (00:32:40):**

He is! He's not any of those. He does not follow any of the four. He hates Smart America. He feels they look down on him. He hates Real America because that's Trump. Just America, he's a bit afraid of. It's some of his young staff and some of his young supporters, but that's not his impulse. He is something like a throwback to the post-war Democratic Party. And I think he actually has done a number of things to move in that direction.

**McNally(00:33:10):**  
Absolutely.

**Packer (00:33:12):**  
He's had, these are the great successes, the unsung successes of his presidency, the microchip bill, the infrastructure bill, the climate bill, and just the way in which he's lowered the temperature of the culture wars while making it clear that whether they vote for him or not, he wants for working class Americans to be part of a good life and to have a shot whether or not they have a college degree. That's huge.

But it just hasn't translated into political success. When I was in Phoenix, Terrence, no one was talking about those things. Even though those very bills I just mentioned we're bringing billions of dollars to the Phoenix area, no one was talking about, "Yeah, Biden Did these good things."

**McNally(00:33:57):**  
In other words, here you have Phoenix addicted to growth and the growth has gotten this enormous boost from Biden's accomplishments, and they don't know it. They don't talk about... and as someone says, you don't even hear - and this was, of course, before the heat of this election campaign - but someone says, "You don't hear about those bills. You don't even hear about Biden."

**Packer (00:34:21):**  
Right. This was a state representative, a Democrat in a heavily Democratic and mostly Latino district who goes door-to-door in her reelection campaign and just his name doesn't come up. And why is that? Well, it may be partly that people are more consumed with local issues or with just making sure there's food on the table. But I think it's also because Biden can't talk.

**McNally(00:34:47):**  
That's right. In other words, if his resume could run, if his accomplishments could run, but that's not the way it works.

**Packer (00:34:56):**  
It's not the way it works. Because people, what...

**McNally(00:34:58):**

That question we were all asking - "Why don't people know about this stuff?" - has become clear in the last few weeks.

**Packer (00:35:07):**

Yeah. Because Biden can't tell them, because Biden has been hidden from us by his family and his staff. And if he were out in front talking about these things in a way that went beyond scripted remarks, people would know that he is losing his grip on a clear mind.

And it's... One politician out there, Ruben Gallego, a Congressman who's running for Senate against Kari Lake. And...

**Packer (00:35:40):**

When I was writing the piece, I spent some time with Gallego and I said to him, why can't the Democratic party win back the working class when Biden has done all these things? And this is something that he really cares about because Gallego grew up in the working class. These are his voters.

He really thinks about this. And he said, because people have gotten so cynical that they don't believe it until they see a change in their own life, and it's probably too soon and maybe too narrowly targeted for a lot of people to see a change, since Biden passed those bills, what the change they've seen has been inflation, which has killed him. So he was basically saying, "It's not enough to offer the American people a new deal and have them vote for you." That's just not going to fly. You have to prove it and prove it again, and then tell them you've done it. And Biden can't do it.

**McNally(00:36:40):**

Right. So one handicap is obviously, there's always a time lag, right in these kinds of bills. In other words, you do a Roe v Wade and there's no time lag. Reality has changed for the better previously and

**Packer (00:36:56):**

Overnight

**McNally(00:36:56):**

... and for the darker in 2022. But an infrastructure bill, a chip stimulus bill won't show up in people's pockets, in family conversations, for a few years.

We're a little past the halfway mark. Let's leave this conversation all the way. Really, I wanted to get back into it cause I think it is helpful for people to know about this. And so let me ask you just one other question about this, how has these notions weathered the last three years for you?

**Packer (00:37:45):**

I mean, as a guide to understanding the last 40 years of American politics, I think they've held up pretty well. They still make sense to me. People still refer to them a

lot as a “trap to escape from, as “a kind of obviously divisive, polarized politics that we need to leave behind.” It’s been a terrible failure.

I mean, my thought about Equal America has not come about. We may become a little more equal economically. Wages are going up.

**McNally(00:38:34):**

Unions...The labor movement has had the best three years probably since this book came out.

**Packer:**

Yup.

**McNally:**

It’s probably had the best three years in decades.

**Packer (00:38:41):**

Exactly. And I talk about labor in my book, but people don’t feel it, believe it, vote on it. It doesn’t begin to lower the temperature and minimize some of the divisive issues that divide us.

And so I’m more pessimistic than I was in 2021. Much more pessimistic because I’ve seen good things happen and they haven’t made a bit of difference. In fact, if anything, they’ve led to the return of the worst president in American history.

**McNally(00:39:14):**

And let me say one other thing, which is that, and it’s akin to what you just said, my whole (00:39:25), I don’t know what to call it, a career, but everything that I’ve done in working with nonprofits and in radio and podcast has always been kind of premised on the notion, George, that if we could get the information out there, if the majority could be moved to take climate change seriously, to take various and sundry things, healthcare, to realize universal healthcare would be a good thing, that if we could get, as I say, just that policies that serve the common good could get majority favor in the country. That was our task.

And it turns out that while I was doing that, and I’d say you were doing that, the minority rule of the Republican Party, the McConnell’s and all of that has - Fox News and so on - the Minority Rule - and the Supreme Court, the Federalist Society, Leonard Leo and so on, has actually meant that isn’t what happens. The majority do favor policies that serve the common good. It doesn’t matter.

**Packer (00:40:37):**

Yeah,

**McNally(00:40:38):**

I'm speaking to your pessimism.

**Packer (00:40:40):**

That's a bleak, but I think basically true statement. To think that if you show people facts and policies that benefit them, that have actually benefited them, they will then vote on that basis. Maybe that's partly true. Maybe that's true of some people. It's basically not the way people behave. People line up with their tribe, with their team, and how do you know which tribe or team you're on by the language they use, by their style, by their enemies, by their -

**McNally(00:41:24):**

Grievances,

**Packer (00:41:25):**

Their region, their grievances, their accent. And we are irrational troops of baboons attacking each other all the time. We are not Tocqueville's New England town meeting...

**McNally(00:41:42):**

Oh my God.

**Packer (00:41:44):**

There may be elements, I don't want to say that as a bald statement. I don't quite believe that. I'm not that pessimistic. But I do think I've had to give up some of my high-minded liberal assumptions about how people behave.

**McNally(00:42:00):**

... and you have a lot of conversations in the article, really searching around these issues around these questions of, as you said, as you did with Gallego, why hasn't that penetrated? (00:42:14) And you speak to a number of people on a continuum from MAGA people to purple folks and so on. And this notion, lemme just say, first of all...

Let me just tell people this is Free Forum: A World That Just Might Work. I'm Terrence McNally. I am speaking with journalist and bestselling author, George Packer. We've talked over the years, and you can find them wherever you find my archived podcast. We've talked about THE UNWINDING. We've talked about his LAST BEST HOPE as we've continued today. And we're going to begin now to move into his recent cover story in the Atlantic on Phoenix, Arizona, WHAT WILL BECOME OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION? And you can learn more and see all of George's work with *The Atlantic* at [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com).

If you'll pardon the cliché. I was going to say, what are your takeaways from your article?

Let me just say that it seems to me that one that runs through it and has resonance far beyond Phoenix or water is that the cultivation of partisan polarization by political

parties and players and the media to their benefits in terms of power, influence, dollars is the roadblock that chokes our ability to talk to each other and even begin to solve any of the critical problems we face. Is that...

**Packer (00:43:38):**

That's perfectly put. You picked up my recurring theme, which as you said is not there in easy-to-digest nut graphs. It's something that keeps coming up in my conversations. But basically this piece is a kind of updating of my book, THE UNWINDING, which is a portrait of half a dozen Americans of totally different backgrounds and walks of life over the course of many decades.

This piece is a portrait of a region, the Phoenix Valley, and a bunch of people who live there. And what I found was in almost every conversation I had, people wanted less division. They wanted less ugly rhetoric, they wanted water, they wanted jobs, they wanted a good education for their children. They did not hate the other side. They didn't mock the idiocy of the other side. They didn't see the other side as a threat to everything they cared about. They were capable of seeing the country whole and seeing the salvation of the country, not of their tribe, as the most important thing. (00:45:05 So that gave me hope, and I kept running into that without trying prompting people. I kept running into that.

But I also ran into a tremendous amount of distrust of institutions and of leaders. Some of it going back to covid, some of it for people on the Right, going back to January 6th, which they regarded as a fed-surrection, a government-inspired, police-inspired riot that landed innocent people in jail, et cetera.

So it's not as though the rhetoric and the memes, the ugly memes of groups like Turning Point USA, are having no effect. They're having a lot of effect, but I don't think that they are the normal way people think. I think people's minds are being constantly polluted by what they read, by what they watch, because that's...and they're to blame. They're the ones reading it and watching it. That's what they're attracted to. We all want the addictive thrill of the fight and of the killing the other team.

**McNally(00:46:14):**

It's interesting. I was going to say exactly about the addictive algorithms of social media. And there you came out with addictive just before I was about to say it, but it seems to me that beyond social media, and that's what you were saying, you weren't pointing just to social media. You were saying that humans kind of are addicted to sensation, to irritation, to excitement. That's what gets the neurotransmitters going. And even though in a one-to-one conversation with you, they would - from either side and either, for the most part, from either extreme - share, that wasn't really the way they wanted it to be taken together. It's the way they make it.

**Packer (00:47:04):**



It's the way they make it. And especially when they're either in a large group, like a 14,000 person Turning Point rally at the Phoenix Convention Center with Charlie Kirk on stage throwing a hateful rhetoric at them, or when they're online and no one is real, we're all dehumanized, then it's easy to laugh at Nancy Pelosi's husband nearly being bludgeoned to death.

The other takeaway, Terrence, is the issue of water. So basically the piece is about two lines of tension. One of them is political extremism, which we've been talking about. The other is climate change, drought, heat, and disappearing water. And the basic question I had for myself and for the people I talked to was, are we capable as a democracy of solving the second problem or is our political culture so far gone that we can't save ourselves even as we watch the most basic life sustaining thing, water, disappear. ([00:48:20](#))

And the answer isn't all one thing or another. I heard of and saw people fighting over water. There was this dictum I heard hundreds of times in the valley.

**McNally:**

Yes, yes, I know

**Packer:**

"Whiskeys for drinking, waters for fighting." I'd never heard that before. It's true. There's a town northwest of Scottsdale, Rio Verde where they got their water cut off by Scottsdale. And it led to a pitch battle among people in this little tiny, unincorporated community. But there's also a story of a rural county Cochise, south of Phoenix, where water is not regulated.

Phoenix has done a very good job of regulating water and having enough of it. There's hundreds of trillions of gallons of water in reserve in the big Phoenix water systems, even though the Colorado River is drying up. But in the rural areas, there's no regulation. That's because of a loophole in the law. ([00:49:20](#))

And in those areas, people's wells, because they depend on wells, are drying up. And the reason is: without regulation, giant agribusinesses from out of state and even out of the country are coming in and sinking deep wells, sucking up all the groundwater. And people's wells are dropping further and further until they can no longer reach water.

And that is having an effect in this one county of forcing people who might not like government regulation, people who are conservative, maybe even MAGA people, to think, we need the state to come in here and regulate water. This is a disaster for us.

And that's where I saw a kind of basic fact, my well is dry. There's nothing that Charlie Kirk can tell me that's going to convince me otherwise. He's not even going to be able to convince me that my well is dry because of liberals. It's not going to work. And if

our politics were a little more connected to those kinds of common issues, issues of the common good, as you said, I do think we could be more sane and we could actually begin to solve some of these long-term problems that we've ignored.

**McNally(00:50:39):**

Yeah, I mean, you say at one point the convergence of these two extremes - micropolitics and disappearing water - made for unusual alignments in rural Arizona. And you conclude, "I sometimes thought the problem could be solved as long as Turning Point never hears about it."

Turning Point is, for those who don't know about it, you can look it up, Turning Point USA. It's MAGA for the young, right?

**Packer (00:51:10):**

And it's also, I think beyond MAGA, it is pure Christian nationalism for the young, I don't like the analogy, I've avoided the thirties analogy throughout the Trump years, but when I sat through the Turning Point convention in December in Phoenix on one of my five trips, I had this shudder of Nuremberg because I saw the power of hate and hot rhetoric with a large crowd of true believers and an unscrupulous grifter who runs the organization, Charlie Kirk. It was pretty scary. But I didn't hear anything about water because water is too boring, too complicated,

**McNally(00:51:58):**

And too local.

**Packer (00:51:59):**

Too local. It doesn't... You heard a lot about "transing" our kids. You didn't hear about water, which seems more basic to me. And that gave me this little tiny glimmer of hope that as long as water remains what it is, a necessity that affects people in the most local and personal way, this can be solved. It's not insoluble. There's amazing human ingenuity in the Phoenix Valley. They've done incredible things to preserve the water they have. So don't give up on our poor fallen species. We may be able to do some things yet.

**McNally(00:52:41):**

Yeah, Phoenix and its area actually wrestled with this problem in, was it 1980?

**Packer (00:52:51):**

Yes.

**McNally(00:52:52):**

And actually back then, polarization was not at all what it is today. You had farmers, you had miners, you had developers, you had politicians, you had environmental scientists. But it wasn't like cultural polarization. They had their stakes,

**Packer (00:53:16):**

They had their interests, they fought it out over their interests. And there were some winners and losers. And there were things about the 1980 law, which was passed by a Republican legislature and signed by a Democratic governor that led to more problems. For example, the failure to regulate rural groundwater.

**McNally(00:53:36):**

Yes, that was a compromise.

**Packer (00:53:38):**

Right, it was a compromise. So was cutting out loopholes for small subdivisions that didn't have to observe the assured water supply rule of a hundred year supply. But it was a good bill.

And one of the architects of it, a woman named Kathleen Ferris, who told me that two things happened to start to undermine the good effects of the 1980 law. One was a once a millennium drought, which started in the nineties and continues to this day. And the other was the weakening of bipartisanship and the polarization of Arizona politics so that the state legislature stopped being able to act on water, which is true up till this day.

**McNally(00:54:36):**

In other words, what you're saying is that as conditions changed, that kind of political reality that existed in 1980 might've been able to change with it. But the polarization made, keeping up with what nature was doing impossible, right?

**Packer (00:54:57):**

I mean, you had wholesale denial that climate change existed on the part of the Republican party. You had a sense among more moderate Republicans that the Democratic party had been captured by extreme environmentalists who didn't want dams built and didn't want infrastructure built because of wildlife. So there was a sense that both parties had become less able to come together in the middle and solve the problem.

I mean, I put much more of the blame on the climate denialism and the Republicans who, regardless of their views of climate change, simply were unwilling to allow government to regulate. And this is Free America. This is not just Trump's America. This is Reagan's America, the America that says, "Government's not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem." That belief continues to haunt our politics and to make people suspicious of any effort by, for example, the state of Arizona to control how groundwater is pumped in rural areas.

**McNally(00:56:11):**

So this is basically the last question, but I'll allow you to broaden out as you answer it, which is, I mean, it's difficult to read this story without feeling gloomy about the future.

**Packer (00:56:25):**

So I'm told,

**McNally(00:56:30):**

We've talked about pessimism on the broader scale, and I'm sure on this more local scale. What do you think needs to happen for the Valley to continue to survive environmentally and politically? And do you see a way forward? And if you want to broaden that out, go right ahead.

**Packer (00:56:49):**

Well, we're at a moment of true crisis. It's perhaps overused, but so I don't think anything hopeful is going to happen if the election goes to Trump. I think we will see a period of growing power in one man's hands, of a party that's really lost its way and in some ways lost its mind. He will have more power than he's ever had. And the Democratic party is going to be divided at each other's throats for losing a winnable election if it comes to that...

**McNally(00:57:30):**

...a winnable election with phenomenally high stakes.

**Packer (00:57:34):**

Yes, phenomenally.

I mean, look, we could go through the stakes. They go way beyond Arizona. Ukraine and NATO are one of the stakes for me, one of the most important. So is a fair tax system. I just read that the IRS has been able to recoup over a billion dollars in unpaid taxes from millionaires because the Biden administration has put some money into the IRS so that it can actually do what it needs to do in order to prevent rich people from cheating. That'll be out the window.

So will so many, I mean, abortion, the 10% tariff, that's going to create a huge burden on ordinary people, and immigration - we haven't talked about it. It's big. It's a big issue. In Arizona, I went to the border,

**McNally(00:58:32):**

Let me just say for folks - immigration, the border, and homelessness are big themes in this article as well. And we just didn't get a chance to talk about it.

**Packer (00:58:43):**

And immigration has two faces in Arizona. One is immigrants, some legal, some illegal who have been in the Phoenix area for decades and are a deep part of that community. The other is the wall at the border where I went down.

Yes, lots of people continue to cross and to ask for asylum who, some of them don't seem to have much of an asylum claim. So there's a system that is being exploited, and at the same time, it's going to cost those immigrants who have thrown down their

lot with America a great deal. If the Republican party makes good on its threats to deport them all, to deport them all. That's what the Arizona Republican party wants to do.

So we're talking about enormous stakes, enormously divisive things that will tear apart the social fabric, tear apart America's involvement in crucial foreign issues, and concentrate power in the hands of an authoritarian.

This is beyond most people's imagination. We've never been here, so we can't imagine it. But things happen that have not happened before, even though you can't imagine them. So I'd say I can't talk about the future in any way without saying everything depends on the election in November.

**McNally(01:00:15):**

My God. I know. I know, I know. Well, we'll bring it to a close. And...

**Packer (01:00:23):**

If that doesn't motivate people, I don't know what will.

**McNally(01:00:27):**

And maybe let's make a point to chat again after the election.

**Packer (01:00:33):**

I'd be happy to. I enjoyed our conversation today.

**McNally(01:00:37):**

So again, the *Atlantic* article is **WHAT WILL BECOME OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION? Conspiracism and hyper-partisanship in the nation's fastest-growing city**. I think you got a sense of the terrain it covers. It's about 25,000 words, which would be a hundred-page book. Am I correct?

**Packer (01:00:55):**

It's long. It's a mini-book. It's a long read. But I'm told by unbiased readers that it reads quickly and well - that the writing carried them and that it doesn't feel like a burden. So I hope your listeners will give it a look.

**McNally(01:01:10):**

And as I said, it's not "I, George Packer think this and..." That you got on the show, but this is what these people are telling him. I was really surprised by how little you step back and put on a pundit hat.

So you can find all of Packer's *Atlantic* articles at [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com)

For this conversation and many other interviews and articles, and to join me in pursuit of a world that just might work go to [terrencemcnally.net](http://terrencemcnally.net) or a [worldthatjustmightwork.com](http://worldthatjustmightwork.com) - the same website. If you want to receive my weekly

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And thank you, George Packer, keep up your good work.

**Packer** ([01:02:43](#)):

Thanks a lot. I enjoyed it.