



WTH is going on with freedom in the world? Is democracy in decline?

Episode #53 | May 26, 2020 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Michael Abramowitz

Marc Thiessen: Hi, I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: And I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On? So Dany, what the hell is going on?

Danielle Pletka: Well, Marc, per our new tradition, we want to reach out to you, our listeners, and remind you that one of the ways that we know we're doing a good job is if you subscribe, if you rate us, if you listen, and of course, if you recommend us to your good friends, your family, your pets and anybody else who has an account.

Marc Thiessen: So Dany, what the hell is actually going on?

Danielle Pletka: So Marc, what the hell is actually going on is we're going to talk today about freedom in the world, whether it's declining, whether it's growing, whether democracies are doing well, or whether they are in fact in retreat.

Marc Thiessen: Whether Donald Trump is to blame.

Danielle Pletka: That's right. And per usual, of course, it'll all come back to it's all Donald Trump's fault.

Marc Thiessen: Not if I can help it.

Danielle Pletka: That's Marc's job here. So what we're going to be doing is talking about [the report](#) that Freedom House, a Washington institution, puts out every year called Freedom in the World.

Marc Thiessen: One of the takeaways from the report is that the not free world is getting not freer.

Danielle Pletka: I think that's the right way to say it. But I mean, I think anybody who actually puts their mind to it, as Freedom House does as a matter of their profession, anyone who puts their mind to it would say, "Yeah. Russia, not getting more democratic. China, not getting more democratic."

Marc Thiessen: The opposite.

Danielle Pletka: Right, exactly, that in fact, places that are bad are getting badder. The axis of evil-er.

Marc Thiessen: We use big words here on the podcast like badder and worser.

Danielle Pletka: I know. What can I say? We're not too bright here. But I think it's interesting to see this because if you think about the post-World War II era, it really was a pretty straight line of going from really egregiously horrible to better. With the apogee—excuse me, people. Marc, do you know what the word apogee means?

Marc Thiessen: Throw an apogee in there because you started badder, and you had to make up for badder.

Danielle Pletka: The apogee, the pinnacle was the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. I think a lot of us thought, Frank Fukuyama, first among us, the one who wrote just in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall, wrote a now infamous book called "The End of History," thought that good news was going to break out all over and that this was a moment in which democracy would continue to expand and that authoritarianism would continue to retreat, especially without the Soviet Union as a sponsor. And the answer is that's not right.

Marc Thiessen: What they find is countries that suffered setbacks in 2019 outnumbered those making gains by nearly two to one, marking the 14th consecutive year of a deterioration in global freedom. During this period, 25 of the world's 41 established democracies experienced net losses. What they do is they're measuring press freedom and-

Danielle Pletka: Political freedom.

Marc Thiessen: Political freedom, institutions. I get what they're trying to do. I think it has some flaws. I think it doesn't measure economic freedom. Heritage actually puts out a report on economic freedom.

Danielle Pletka: The Heritage Foundation, a think tank here in Washington.

Marc Thiessen: And I think they started that because they saw this as a deficit in the Freedom House report, and so they wanted to fill that gap so that we would take a look at both reports and have a more full picture. They're looking down in a very micro way at each of these countries at whether they're regressing, progressing, versus a large overall trend. I think the overall trend in the world is without a doubt better.

Danielle Pletka: You have at least two or three times in this podcast, quoted that great Brookings study, which says that basically if there was any time to be born in the world, coronavirus notwithstanding, that now is the time when people are richest, healthiest, most prosperous, most safe, most secure, most without war. Those are all great things.

Marc Thiessen: And that's because of the expansion of political freedom around the world. In 1989, there were just 51 democracies and 105 autocracies in the world. In 2018, there were 99 democracies and just 80 autocracies. And people living in democracies have nearly doubled from 2.3 billion to 4.1 billion. And that now makes up more than half of the people in the world. And of those remaining in autocracy, four out of five live in China.

Marc Thiessen: The advance of economic freedom, the advance of prosperity, the fact that for the

first time in 2018 in the history of mankind, there were more people who were middle class or rich than there were people who were poor or on the verge of abject poverty. The overall picture when we go up 20,000 feet to look at it, and it's good to go down lower and look at the details and where things are working. But if you look at the overall picture, things are getting a lot better.

Danielle Pletka:

But I think there are factors here that are a little bit, I'm going to use another big word just because you challenged me, that are a little bit more inchoate. So yes, it's absolutely true. And I think that this really underscores the comment you made upfront, which is that you cannot assess people's freedom without understanding their economic freedom because it's to be able to elect your leader, but if you can't go out and start a business, if you can't expect accountability, if you can't hope to prosper and do better than your parents have done, then you're really not getting a full picture.

Danielle Pletka:

But I also think that some of these metrics don't appreciate the new leverage that the modern era has given to bad guys. So even as you rightly say that rogue leaders, that the anti-Democrats, are more isolated than they ever were, that there are more people who are free, at the same time, the entry points into our systems are so much greater for them

Marc Thiessen:

Yes, I agree. And also the reality is, is that the global information age, the advance of technology, the fact that everyone has a computer in their hand, even in some of the poorest countries in the world, means that people have more access to information. The way totalitarian regimes in the Soviet model used to keep control of their populations and stay in power is they would create monopolies over different sectors of society. So they had a monopoly on information. You could only get your information from Pravda or whatever the communist party paper is. They had a monopoly on the economy. You could only get a job from the state. They had a monopoly on culture, so if you wanted to go to the theater, or the movies, whatever it was, that was all through state approved. And they had a monopoly on the use of force. Right?

Marc Thiessen:

And so those different monopolies over time, the internet and the access to information, we've now broken the monopoly on information. But at the same time, the same technologies that give people freedom to information also allow China to have facial recognition for every single person in the country.

Danielle Pletka:

Right. And to exploit our first amendment in order to insert what the President likes to call fake news into our system. I mean, I bet that if we polled all of our listeners, every single person would be able to point to the fact that they saw something that was actually demonstrably a lie in the last 24 hours. I know I have.

Marc Thiessen:

Sure.

Danielle Pletka:

Anyway, we've totally gotten off topic. So anyway, we're talking about this. I think the one thing that you all are going to hear that's stuck in our craw is that somehow populism has become in the sort of popular, liberal definitions that are used by Freedom House, populism has become anti-democratic.

Marc Thiessen:

Not just Freedom House, I think. I think that's a-

Danielle Pletka: Right. Right. And of course, the truth is that while populism has become a dirty word.

Marc Thiessen: For some.

Danielle Pletka: It still represents in many ways the will of the people. I do think one of the big flaws is this notion that somehow everything about populism is anti-democratic.

Marc Thiessen: Well, it's the opposite. It's ultra-democratic.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, in some cases, mob rule.

Marc Thiessen: Well, okay. But I mean, what we're seeing, let's take the United States. We had a system where we had two establishments, the Democratic and Republican establishments, who were ignoring a large segment of the population, taking them for granted, telling them, "So I know you're losing all your manufacturing jobs and your communities are stuck in opioid abuse."

Danielle Pletka: But NAFTA.

Marc Thiessen: But NAFTA, yeah exactly. But free trade. Free trade's going to make everything better. And we'd say things like, "Well, there's no net job loss." Well, yeah, if you're living in Lordstown, Ohio, there's a net job loss for you.

Danielle Pletka: There's a net job loss. That's exactly right.

Marc Thiessen: And so that's a testament to our democracy that these people were able to rise up, organize, and that a candidate came out and spoke.

Danielle Pletka: And I would say, by the way, 100% exactly the same about the Bernie bros.

Marc Thiessen: And then in Europe, you have the same thing where you have a lot of populist parties rising up. Well, why are these parties rising up? Because they have over the last four decades, they've consolidated power in the European Union, which is a fundamentally undemocratic institution because the power's all held by bureaucrats who don't answer to anybody. They would force these countries to join by having the same referendum over and over again until they got it right. Decisions that had been made locally about what kind of cheese you can make, and what kind of ... All these things about traditions and cultures going back hundreds of years, they're suddenly told you can't have that mold in your cheese anymore. It's like, "Well, sorry."

Danielle Pletka: I want that mold.

Marc Thiessen: Exactly. And so quite frankly, that's what happened with Brexit, is that Brexit was a populist rebellion against centralized power. Milton Friedman had a great quote in "Capitalism and Freedom" that has always been a touchstone for me, which is that, "Decisions should be made at the most local level because if I don't like the laws in my town, I can move to another town. If I don't like the laws in my state, I can move to another state. But if I don't like the laws in my country, where do I go in this world of jealous nations?" And now when you take it to supernational, where do I go if I

don't like the laws of the supernational government? So what's happening is they concentrated too much power. And people have pushed back. And I think that's actually a sign of the vibrancy of democracy.

Danielle Pletka: Well, but there's been some overcorrection as well. And this is something we're going to get into in the conversation about the report.

Danielle Pletka: For example, the elements of xenophobia. What is the right line to draw between a responsible system of immigration, which you and I both support, and not just support but are really enthusiastic about, and an irresponsible system of immigration in which people storm your borders, whether it's from Turkey and Greece, or it's from Mexico, or wherever it's from? There's a line there, and it certainly has been crossed. And this is one of the factors that the folks at Freedom House look at. And I think you and I both think that they got that a little bit wrong. But we'll talk it through and allow a little bit of pushback.

Danielle Pletka: But at the end of the day, the reason that I know you and I both love having this conversation is because this is the right thing to talk about. Democracy in the world is what we want. This is what the United States stands for. And even when we get the judgment wrong, and we do sometimes, I like the fact that we prioritize it. Our European friends and allies like to sneer at us, but the reality is that the United States has cared more and put more into democratizing the world than they have, hands down.

Marc Thiessen: Including them.

Danielle Pletka: Right. Including them, including them, for sure.

Marc Thiessen: They'd all be speaking German if it wasn't for us.

Danielle Pletka: There you go. Never heard that phrase before, Grandpa. Anyway, which brings us to our guest, Michael Abramowitz is the president of Freedom House. Before he joined Freedom House in February of 2017, he was the director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Levine Institute for Holocaust Education. And he actually led the museum's genocide prevention efforts and oversaw a lot of its public education programs, which were just terrific. I know that I saw a lot of them. Prior to that, he was the national editor and the White House correspondent for the Washington Post. But we won't hold that against him. It's a pleasure to have him here to talk about the Freedom in the World 2020 Report.

Marc Thiessen: Here's our interview.

Danielle Pletka: So Mike Abramowitz, welcome to the show.

Michael Abramow...: Thanks for having me. I really appreciate it.

Danielle Pletka: Well, we're really delighted, and we are eager to hear all about your annual report, detailing freedom in the world. Tell us, start really simple. What is Freedom House?

Michael Abramow...: First, I'm really happy to be here with you guys and appreciate the opportunity to come talk about Freedom House, which is my favorite subject. Freedom House is an 80 year old organization. We were founded in 1941. We were one of the only

American organizations that was really about confronting the America First movement of the late 1930s and '40s. We were about trying to urge the United States to get into the war against fascism. And we had bipartisan support for that.

Michael Abramow...: And one of the cardinal elements of Freedom House is that we are both nonpartisan and we draw support from across the political aisle. We essentially do three things at Freedom House. One is we advocate for human rights and democracy with policy makers in the US Congress, the Executive Branch, the UN and other places. We support human rights defenders and activists around the world with various kinds of assistance and support in countries like Venezuela, Russia, other places. And then the thing that we're probably best known for is our annual survey of political rights and civil liberties. We've been doing this since the early 1970s.

Michael Abramow...: We rank every country in the world on a score of zero to 100. And we group the countries into the free countries, green, the unfree countries that are purple, and the partially free countries, who are yellow. And we've been tracking freedom for close to 50 years.

Marc Thiessen: Before you get into the specifics of the report, you've been tracking this for 50 years. How's freedom doing over the last 50 years?

Michael Abramow...: It's a great question. The basic story of our reports over the last 50 years is very simple. For the first 30 or 35 years, freedom was doing very well. Our report started in 1973. There was a communist block. You had Russia under communist tyranny. You had Eastern Europe.

Michael Abramow...: And in 1974, starting with the democratization of Portugal, there was the so-called third wave of democratization, which Samuel Huntington identified. And really, over the next 35 years or so, there's a tremendous growth in the number of world's democracies, and going up to about 120 or so. There's tremendous democratization. And the biggest inflection point was the fall of the Berlin Wall, which ushered in democracy in Eastern Europe, and we thought perhaps eventually in Russia, although it hasn't quite turned out that way.

Michael Abramow...: So that was the first part of the story. And then the last 10 to 15 years has been what we call a democracy recession, that every year for the last 14 years, there have been more countries that have had declines in their political rights and civil liberties than those that have had improvements. And that is happening all over the world. It's happening in every continent. We're still ahead of where we were 50 years ago, but we are definitely in a declining moment. And democracy is really on its back heels everywhere in the world.

Danielle Pletka: So let me ask you a really, really basic question. And you and Marc and I have actually known each other a really long time. I don't think I've ever asked you this question. How does Freedom House define freedom? I mean, it's one of those things that in so many ways must be in the eyes of the beholder. And yet, you have somehow managed to put it with a metric.

Michael Abramow...: Right. We look, the fundamental thing that we measure is political rights and civil liberties. The one thing that our scores do not capture, which we get some criticism from time to time, is kind of economic freedom. Of course, economic freedom is kind of in the eyes of the beholder. Right? There's some people who think economic freedom is businesses being free of the government regulation. Others think it's like

Bernie Sanders, everyone should have a right to a guaranteed income or something like that.

Michael Abramow...: So obviously, the hallmark of that is having free and fair elections. You can't have a democracy without elections that are free and fair. But that's not the only metric that's important. You have to have freedom of expression. You have to have an independent press to hold the government accountable. You have to have freedom of association so that civil society can hold government to account.

Michael Abramow...: So we look at 24 different indicators. We put them up on our website so everyone can see what they are. We rate how every country is doing against each of those metrics, and we come up with a score. That's basically how we look at freedom.

Danielle Pletka: Let's talk about this year's report. There were a couple of headlines. One of the things that when Marc and I were just discussing our impressions before we got on air, was China, which you guys have talked about, and which we should cover a little more because I think the way I described it was that China was moving away from authoritarianism towards totalitarianism. And we've really seen that with the coronavirus and how that's been treated as well. But the other one that I think a lot of people will be shocked by and that weirdly just doesn't get a lot of attention in the United States, despite its unbelievable size, is India. So tell us. What's the headline there?

Michael Abramow...: Well, I think there are a couple of big themes of the report this year. First of all, I think one theme that has not been quite captured in the report is that this is a year of hope in some ways. There were protests all over the world, three million people in Hong Kong, protests in Iraq and Iran.

Danielle Pletka: Lebanon.

Michael Abramow...: Lebanon, Bolivia. Also the country that I really think a lot about with this respect was Sudan.

Danielle Pletka: Right, amazing.

Michael Abramow...: Which for 30 years had been ruled by a brutal dictator, who in fact had been indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide in Darfur, and I never thought that things that would be good would happen in Sudan. But in fact, there was a relatively peaceful revolt in Sudan and Bashir may be off to the International Criminal Court.

Michael Abramow...: So I do think that the first thing I think about with respect to 2019 is that it was a year of hope, that it really said to me that there are people around the world who believe in freedom and human rights. This is not just a Western implant or a US implant, that people generally want to live in a free society with free rights.

Danielle Pletka: That's a great headline, by the way, Mike, because one of the things that I hated most about the aftermath of the Iraq War was the suggestion that people really were better off living under a dictator like Saddam Hussein and that whether you thought the Iraq War was a good thing or a bad thing, that the liberation of 25 million people was probably a good thing. And now to see that after half a million people have been, more than half a million people have been murdered in Syria, they stood up to

the regime. So many have paid the ultimate price, and yet people are still willing to stand up to the selfsame oppressors that are on the ground in Syria.

Michael Abramow...: Absolutely. And I think it's very dangerous for people to say that people don't want freedom because people do want freedom. And I think, again, in the Chinese context, we're talking about China. You look at two countries there, both Hong Kong, three million people hit the streets to insist on freedom, and in fact, waving the American flag, some of them and singing the Star Spangled Banner. That's inspiring to me as an American. Also, Taiwan. Taiwan, 30 years ago was a dictatorship. People didn't think that democracy could take root in kind of an Asian context. It's now one of the most vibrant democracies in the world. And the Taiwanese resisted really a campaign of intimidation by Beijing to try to influence their election a few months ago.

Michael Abramow...: You've seen in some countries like Iran, where there's just an incredible push by the ruling theocracy to repress people there. In Hong Kong it's going to be interesting how that happens. I suspect that Xi Jinping, well, he has his hands full now with the coronavirus, but he may be kind of biding his time. I'm not terrifically hopeful there. So it's going to take a while for this to play out. But I think that's a really important element of this year. I think a second element of this year that I think is kind of interesting is the fact that there's been kind of an attack on pluralism and an attack on vulnerable groups, and two big cases come to mind here.

Michael Abramow...: China, which has packed off a million or so Uighurs to concentration camps. And sadly, to come back to your point, Dany, is India. India, the world's most populous democracy, still a free country, in the green according to Freedom House, but there have been a number of steps taken by the Modi government to attack Muslims.

Michael Abramow...: So that would be a second theme. And then I think the third theme, and again, India would be a case of this, is that we know that authoritarians, Russia, China, these countries are getting worse. But then you also have a situation in which established democracies also see their democratic norms and institutions in our view weakening. And it's an interesting stat, if I could give to you. Out of the 41 strongest democracies that we've covered over this last 14 years of democratic recession, at least 25 of them have had setbacks in political rights and civil liberties of some kind, in rule of law, in freedom of expression, academic freedom. In the different things that we measure, there's been a setback in democratic governments. That's sort of the third theme of this year's report.

Marc Thiessen: I want to challenge you on that in a moment.

Michael Abramow...: Sure.

Marc Thiessen: But I want to start more with an area where I think we agree, which is one of the things that struck me about the report, is how in the not free world, it's becoming more not free. That China, as you pointed out earlier, there seemed to be a move from totalitarianism to authoritarianism, we're not slipping into authoritarian cult of personality, ala Mao Zedong with Xi Jinping. Russia is backsliding. Talk a little bit about how the not free world is going in the wrong direction because that's a problem.

Michael Abramow...: Right. Well, the not free world is definitely going in the wrong direction. And I think the theme of the not free world is that they are also seeing that it's in their interest to

undermine democracies beyond their borders. That's been a theme in general that we've seen in Freedom House reports over the last couple years, that countries like Russia and China are trying to provide the tools of repression to other countries. They're trying to undermine democratic norms and institutions in other countries. So think about the Russian interference in our election in 2016. They did that in Ukraine. They're doing that in other countries as well.

Danielle Pletka: Throughout Europe.

Michael Abramow...: Throughout Europe. So I think the belligerence of the authoritarian countries I think is a notable theme of this year's. And I think they really ... I mean, I think Putin in particular, and Dany, you're a real expert on this, but it seems to me that Putin is-

Danielle Pletka: Marc, did you hear that?

Marc Thiessen: Well-

Danielle Pletka: He just said I was a real expert on something. Marc is always questioning my knowledge and expertise.

Marc Thiessen: Now I question his.

Michael Abramow...: Putin has really positioned himself as an enemy of democracy. And he really sees, he wants to sow chaos. And I think that's part of his foreign policy.

Danielle Pletka: I want to pull on that thread a little bit because first of all, I think that's a very astute observation. And I think it's something that we ought to be paying more attention to. It is that Russia and China and others are trying to actually besmirch the good name of democracy. So you actually have Chinese making the argument that democracy is actually a bad thing in and of itself, unstable, unpredictable.

Marc Thiessen: I want to talk about America in a minute and your assessment of the United States. But before we do that, I want to go back to this, the backsliding within democracies. So one of the pieces of evidence you give for that is the rise of populist parties across Europe. Right? In Austria, in Spain.

Danielle Pletka: Hungary.

Marc Thiessen: Hungary, et cetera, et cetera. I don't know that I agree with you that is a sign of democratic backsliding. So one of the issues in Europe has been problems that they have, is that they, in adopting this supernational pan-European government, it's very unresponsive to popular will. The elected parliament has no power. It's all bureaucrats in Brussels who make all these decisions. And so as a result of that, there's been a lot of people who felt that their voices weren't being heard and that they're not being taken into account democratically in decisions that are being made that affect their lives. And so you had Brexit, and you've had the rise of these parties. Isn't this a sign of the strength of democracy, that democracy is reasserting itself in the face of sort of this supernational-

Danielle Pletka: Bureaucracy.

Marc Thiessen: Bureaucracy.

Michael Abramow...: Well, I would certainly agree with you, Marc, that populism per se is in some ways a sign of the dynamism of democracy. And I would never say at root people have to have elections, and elections have consequences. And I think there are a variety of different reasons which you can talk about that populist politicians have come into power. And a lot of it has to do with the failure of kind of traditional parties to deliver economic growth in places. So I agree with you that there is some reason that populists have gotten stronger.

Michael Abramow...: I think the problem is that in certain countries, and I think Hungary's a good example, populists have gotten into power and have really attacked strong, important institutions of democracy, whether it's having a strong independent press, whether it's having an independent judiciary. I would never say, at Freedom House, we don't take a position on the policy preferences of politicians. But we do strongly defend the indicators and the principles that are embedded in the things that we measure. That's the kind of difference that I would say.

Danielle Pletka: I guess I would push back a little bit in the sense that the examples that were all given were right wing populists. In fact, I think I happen to agree that I think that a lot of the populist parties that have arisen in Europe are actually ones that would like to roll back democratic gains. Cinque Stelle in Italy, I think of as a particularly loathsome example. La Lega, the same. But there are plenty of them. But then there's the communist party that has had a real resurgence also in Central Europe in the former Soviet block, where you've seen former communist officials also rising back up. And yet, none of those get a mention. Is that an oversight?

Michael Abramow...: I think if you look at our reports over the years, we call out left wing populists, like Venezuela. Venezuela, we haven't talked about. That's one of the worst countries in the world in terms of the erosion of democratic standards.

Danielle Pletka: Right. There's just no debate about it.

Michael Abramow...: We are one of the strongest critics of Venezuela. We've been a strong critic of them for many years. We've been a strong critic of Cuba, of China. And then we're also a critic of the actions, not of right wing populists. So I think if you look at the way that we've approached this, we've really tried to be even handed on this. We are not an organization that only calls out certain forms of attacks on freedom. We call it across the board. People may not like it when we go after their particular favorite dictator, but we really do-

Danielle Pletka: And we all have one, don't we?

Michael Abramow...: But we do try to look at it across the board.

Danielle Pletka: I want to ask you a question to get into the issue where I'm going to preclude Marc from leaping upon you and beating you about the head and shoulders. Wouldn't you?

Marc Thiessen: No, I wouldn't.

Danielle Pletka: He's so nice. He's such a nice person. So I want to ask you about the America

section a little bit.

Michael Abramow...: About the US?

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. Everybody who listens to our podcast knows that Marc and I don't agree always, particularly about the Trump administration. But one area where I suspect the three of us all agree is our country is stronger for immigration. Our country is stronger because it has been enriched by immigrants. But one of the things that you note in the report as a sign of a democratic attrition is our asylum policy.

Danielle Pletka: I am second to no one in my belief that this is the right thing for America to do. But that system has been abused beyond compare by human traffickers mostly coming through Central America, who are exploiting children, women, families and our system. And I really don't think that standing up to those people is a sign of democratic attrition in our country. Why do you say it is?

Michael Abramow...: Okay. Number one, America's a free country. It's one of the strongest democracies in the world. It has a robust free press. It has a robust rule of law tradition. There's just a lot that's strong from a democracy point of view in the United States. So just think our critiques, I'll get to, but I do think that's the context. We're not putting the United States next to some of these countries that we've been talking about. That's point number one. Point number two is that we have been concerned about declines in the US for some time. And one thing that I think your listeners should know is that we're not rating a government. That's not what we're doing.

Michael Abramow...: We're looking at what we believe is the level of freedom that's experienced by people who live within a country or territory. And so we have downgraded the US for things that happened under Bush, under Obama, under Trump. But we have been concerned about the general trajectory of things going in the wrong direction. And just on the immigration issue, Dany, that I would say, is that it is obviously up to the President of the United States and the US Congress to set the immigration levels and have the immigration policy that they think are appropriate. But they have to do it in respecting human rights and the rights of people. And that's where we think in that particular area, it's not the only thing, but that's why we knocked the United States down in the area of asylum. And by the way, we knocked down other countries as well in that area. We're not picking on the United States.

Marc Thiessen: Okay. I want to talk about-

Danielle Pletka: Marc wants his shot too.

Marc Thiessen: I'm not going to take a shot.

Michael Abramow...: Go for it.

Marc Thiessen: You are going to be criticized from the right in this report for some of the examples that you've chosen, and I think justifiably. Dany raised the asylum issue. The fact is the vast majority of the people who are applying for asylum on the southern border, their claims are found not to be, when objectively asserted, not actually to be a proper asylum seekers. You've got a net number of people who are doing asylum claims, so other real refugees are getting screwed over because of this assault on the border. You cite the fact that the president redirected funds from the Defense

Department to construct the wall on the southern border as a sign of backsliding. I'm sorry, I don't think that open borders are a necessary prerequisite for freedom.

Marc Thiessen: And then one other, you talk about how in the administration during the impeachment probe, ordered current and former administration officials to defy Congressional subpoenas and documents for testimony. And their action threatened an important component of American democracy, including Congressional oversight of the executive branch and the fairness of the integrity of the electoral competition. The President of the United States has a right to invoke executive privilege. And the Congress can then go and take him to the court and adjudicate it. It's not a sign of democratic backsliding for the President to appeal to article three of the judiciary. So why did you choose those as examples of democratic backsliding? It just opens you up to unnecessary criticism.

Michael Abramow...: This is an overview of, I think in general, I would urge your listeners to go to what you're quoting from is ... And I'm not trying to evade your question because I'll come to it. But just again, contextually, this is an overview essay. And we also have for each country in the world, the United States included, we have an essay that looks at how the United States did against each one of the indicators that I mentioned earlier, the 24 different indicators. The fact of the matter is that for the last two years, the overall US score has stayed the same. So we've not declined the United States.

Danielle Pletka: We're at number 86. Is that?

Michael Abramow...: No, no, no. We have a score of 86 out of 100.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah.

Michael Abramow...: And we are roughly number 50. And we're basically a little bit ... What's happened over the last eight or nine years, again, this predicated Trump, is that we are lower than some of the peers to which we're often compared, whether it's Germany, Great Britain. But the fact of the matter is that we always try to give some sense of what's going on here. But at the end of the day, we did not decline the United States.

Danielle Pletka: I've got to say, just looking at the neighborhood that we're in, when we look at how the United States matches up ... By the way, the graphics in this are really helpful, where you look at sort of see who's clustered, who's declined the most. So I really commend the actual report to everybody, not just this conversation. You should go and read it. It's a real education. And even if you don't agree with some bits of it, it's still very well done. So we are at number ... We are scored at 86, so not number 86. We're scored at 86. But Italy is at number 89. You guys can't see my face.

Danielle Pletka: Let me just say that as somebody who pays attention to Italian politics with some enjoyment. What the hell? We rank lower than Italy.

Michael Abramow...: I would encourage you and your listeners to go look at ... We're very transparent about every one of the indicators, why we score countries. You can always have fun looking at specific countries. But the fact is, we have a very rigorous and methodical process. We consult with hundreds of experts around the world. We really try hard to get it right. We do not willy nilly make major changes in scores without real

reasons for that. And we are very transparent about the reason that we score things the way they are. So I would encourage people to go look at the US score in terms of some of these issues of asylum, and they'll explain why we do it that way.

Danielle Pletka: When I guess Marc and I first met you, you were a reporter at the Washington Post, but you then went to the Holocaust Museum. So you've really committed your life to these issues of openness and freedom, and did amazing work at the Holocaust Museum, that I for one was a huge fan of. If you had to pick, sit back for a second, and digest your report, and you had to pick a piece of counsel that you could give as a policy matter, to the President of the United States, what would it be?

Michael Abramow...: Sure. I would say that's a great question, Dany. So a couple things, just big picture things that I think about. I think that people do pay close attention to what happens in the United States. And the United States has outsized influence in the world because of who we are and our tradition. And what happens in the United States, even if you say that we are still a strong democracy, but when politicians, I'm not going to point out the individuals, but when politicians use words like enemy of the people-

Marc Thiessen: No one specific.

Michael Abramow...: By the way, last year we found with Freedom of the Net, which is another report we do, that almost 20 other countries had passed laws cracking down on press freedom and internet rights in the name of fighting "fake news." So I just think that I understand why things happen in a political context here, but people outside do pay attention to us. That's just one point. I think politicians of all kinds need to watch their words with that respect because I think people do pay attention to that. I think the second thing that I think is kind of interesting is that one of the major I think drivers of all this is corruption.

Danielle Pletka: Couldn't agree more.

Michael Abramow...: And really, the looting of public coffers by politicians, both in authoritarian settings and in democracies. I think this is something that fuels erosion of confidence in public institutions. And I think it's often a leading indicator of where a country is going to be headed. I think it's not a surprise that when Russia actually in the mid '90s was a country that was partly free. It was not unfree. It was partly free. And we thought it could be moving under Yeltsin into a more open situation. But the oligarchs looted the country. Putin allowed that. And I think that was a sign of worse to come in Russia. So I think paying attention to corruption is really important. I think it's a fact that both drives declining confidence in democracy, and also is the Achilles heel for autocrats. Right?

Danielle Pletka: Totally.

Michael Abramow...: These protests that we're talking about around the world, part of this is happening because autocrats are seen to be corrupt.

Danielle Pletka: I mean, I couldn't agree with you more.

Marc Thiessen: On the press side, I mean, you're right. I don't agree with the President using the phrase enemy of the people to describe the press. But there's on the other hand,

the press has a responsibility not to publish fake news. And there's been a lot of bias in the press against Donald Trump.

Marc Thiessen: So I mean, one of the things Erik Wemple has been doing right now is going back, and he's got a 12 part series now going back on all the people who promoted the Steele Dossier as being something credible. And the media has just egg all over its face because they've reported the stuff as fact. They reported all these allegations against the president that he was a Russian agent, and he was a traitor, and he'd done all these things, as real news. And then the Mueller Report comes out and there was no conspiracy. And so I get that the President shouldn't be calling the press the enemy of the people. But if we're going to have, in part of the measure of freedom in this country is responsible journalists, who don't create openings for politicians to say those sorts of things. Isn't that a measure of how of our freedom is the responsibility of the press to actually be objective?

Michael Abramow...: Well, I would put it a different way, Marc. First of all, I'm a former journalist for 25 years. And so I fiercely defend the rights of the journalists to report the facts. Let me come to bias in a second. I do think that one of the problems in our country is that I think the way things are supposed to work is that I do think, maybe this is a little bit Pollyannaish, but I do think that the press plays an important role in a functioning democracy, that it is a check on official power. And even though the press can make mistakes and the wrong things, in the end, if you don't have a free press, then government is really going to be in danger.

Michael Abramow...: And I will say that while we've been critical of different elements of US democracy over the last 10 years, I do think that one thing that I'm very pleased about is I do think that the US press system is very robust. As much as you complain about things, or one complains about things, we're not throwing journalists in jail. Journalists are not being murdered. You can pretty much have a range of opinions about anything you want, whether right to left, and so forth.

Danielle Pletka: You're right. But there was an era that we went through in America when we had what was called the yellow press. And while, again, I am probably harder on Donald Trump because I think he has demeaned and coarsened our discourse, although, I think there are plenty of other people who hopped on very happily. Now again, you don't want to get in the middle of this fight. That in and of itself, I don't want to call it a too free press because that's a weird construct. But that step over from what you call reporting and we believe is reporting into editorializing is a thing that I think also can erode democracy.

Marc Thiessen: If you look at the polls, the credibility of the press is at a very low point.

Michael Abramow...: Absolutely.

Marc Thiessen: And it's not because Donald Trump calls them the enemy of the people.

Danielle Pletka: He helped.

Marc Thiessen: They brought a lot of this on themselves. But they've brought a lot of this on themselves.

Danielle Pletka: But he helped.

Marc Thiessen: I agree with you. Free press, a credible press, is vital to a free society.

Michael Abramow...: By the way, what everyone thinks about Donald Trump, these attacks on the press and the effort to kind of de-legitimize the press as an effect, this has been going on for quite some time, going back. I always think this is a tactic of Newt Gingrich, I think of. He really ... And by the way, the good old days were not always the good old days for the press. There were a handful of major news outlets, and people couldn't break in outside those handful of ... And so I think one good thing about the last 10 years is proliferation of outlets and opportunities. But there is a sincere danger of fake news, not the kind of fake news the President talks about, where news that he doesn't like is fake news. But there is fake news, there's authentic disinformation that's planted by people. There's people putting false information out there. And I think one of the great challenges for democracy going forward is us being able to not infringe upon our first amendment, which is so critical to the life of our country, but also try to avoid this.

Danielle Pletka: That's a perfect place to end because I think we both agree with you, is that you don't want our freedom to be used against us. And that is one of the things that we have seen and that is a real risk for us as we keep our doors open to Russian bots and North Korean influences. Mike, thank you so much for taking the time. We're really honored. And congratulations.

Michael Abramow...: I'm really appreciative of being on the podcast. I admire both of you, and thank you for letting me be here.

Marc Thiessen: Thank you.

Marc Thiessen: So first of all, I'm glad that Freedom House does this report. I think it's really important for us to measure these things. And I give them a little bit of a pass on their assessment of the United States because in fact, they did not reduce our score. But I was really concerned reading the narrative that they put out. They counted the fact that we've reached agreements with Mexico and other countries to have asylum seekers stay out of country while they make their claims. They criticized Trump for building a border wall, these are not declines in freedom. I mean, open borders are not a requirement for democracy. And then they needlessly waded into the whole impeachment situation by saying that basically Trump's denial of Congressional subpoenas was somehow a sign that democracy was declining.

Danielle Pletka: That was weird. That was weird.

Marc Thiessen: Just unnecessary.

Danielle Pletka: We'll put the link up with the transcript of this podcast so that you guys can look at it yourselves. But one of the things they have here is a picture of the Trump Zelensky call. Now I actually think, and you and I disagree about this, Marc, since we have already argued about it today, I think that the Trump Zelensky call is in fact a predation against an attack on our democracy. I think that Trump shouldn't have done that. I think it was wrong. Again, you and I went back and forth on whether it was impeachable. And I think that was the question.

Marc Thiessen: We both agree it was wrong.

Danielle Pletka:

Okay. So we agree it was wrong. And I also think, I don't think it's right for the president of our democracy to behave in that way. On the other hand, for Freedom House to weigh in on the question of subpoenas and whether an executive privilege just seems ridiculously sort of nitpicky and strange. And again, you guys are going to say, "What do you mean? It was a huge issue." No, what I mean is it's an internal issue that was being adjudicated according to our Constitution. And as far as I'm concerned, our democracy is working when something is being adjudicated according to our Constitution.

Marc Thiessen:

Absolutely. And all these things, if you care about refugees like Freedom House does, like you do, like I do, the fact is that there's only so many people in the bureaucracy that can adjudicate these refugee cases. And so if you have thousands of people coming over the border with false refugee claims, and those false asylum claims, we both agree that we should be taking more refugees from other places. We want more refugees, but we want legitimate refugees who are actually qualified.

Danielle Pletka:

I don't know why the community that cares about this, the human rights community, is not more outraged about the manipulation of our asylum laws.

Marc Thiessen:

Because then they'd be siding with Trump, and they can't side with Trump on anything.

Danielle Pletka:

And they are wrong because this is destroying it for people who actually need asylum, for Syrians who need our help, for Chinese, for Uighurs, for North Koreans, for people who are genuinely fleeing, whether it's from Africa, from Latin America, wherever it's from, those people are being crowded out by traffickers. It's disgusting. And so no, I think that was a big misstep on their part. We didn't talk enough about India. And we're at the end, and I know this is not the first thing on everybody's mind. But we talk a ton about China on this podcast. We talk a ton about China in our news. India is a country almost as large as China, 1.3 billion people. The decline in Indian democracy is real.

Danielle Pletka:

Our colleague, Sadanand Dhume, who has a column in the Wall Street Journal, has written repeatedly about this. Denying rights to Indian Muslims, suggesting that they are somehow lesser citizens. People need to remember that India is one of the largest Muslim countries in the world by virtue of being one of the largest countries in the world. To treat Muslims as if they're second class citizens is in fact a reversal of India's truly secular democratic norms.

Marc Thiessen:

Yeah. I mean, the overall, I don't disagree with that at all. And look, the overall trend is pretty good. And I think we can close on this, is that they found 195 countries assessed, 83 or 43% were rated free, and 63, 32% were rated partly free. And then 49, 25% were not free. So that's basically a 75% free or partly free versus a quarter that are not free. The not free-

Danielle Pletka:

We've done worse in the past.

Marc Thiessen:

Yeah. Absolutely. If you look at the course of history, that's pretty good. We should be careful to watch for backsliding and trends that are troubling. But overall, I stand by my earlier assessment on previous podcasts. If you had a choice of when to be born, in all of the human history from the swamp to reaching the stars, and you didn't choose now, you'd be insane.

Danielle Pletka: Well, I vote now.

Marc Thiessen: Until the coronavirus kills us all.

Danielle Pletka: Thank you for that erudite closing note, Marc. Thank you guys for listening. We'll see you next week.

Marc Thiessen: Talk to you soon.