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INTERVIEWER: "We the people"-- at this moment in American history, you could be forgiven for asking, who do you mean by "we"? Yet according to Michael Steele, those are our country's three most important words. Steele, who served as the seventh lieutenant governor of Maryland and is the former Republican National Committee chairman, joined us in the studio to discuss the state of American politics-- from tax reform to Trump tweets, from voting to the importance of bipartisan friendships.

I've been thinking about the state of the Republican Party. I think about the state of the Democratic Party as well.

MICHAEL I've been thinking about that too.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: I bet. And I was wondering if you-- this is an obvious question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. If you were chair of the RNC today, what would you recommend, exhort? Do you have a vision for what the Republican Party could become?

MICHAEL Yeah.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: Or is there a need for a second Republican Party that sort of embraces the more extreme?

MICHAEL I haven't bought into this concept that we need to spin off and create another party or that
STEELE: there will be a spin-off of sorts. I know that's what some folks in the Bannon world are looking to do. But I don't subscribe to that. If I were running the party today, there'd be one of two things that would have to go down. Either, one, we get out of the spiral of crazy, or I resign.

I'm not going to do stupid. I'm not going to do crazy. Because politics is too important. And I think what we've done is trivialized it to the point where it has become a circus act. It's become something to watch. We don't take it seriously.

Our political leaders-- and that's an oxymoronic term these days-- they're more political than they are leaders. And they tend to be more focused on very basic things like oh, I need to get reelected. And so the reality for me, as I have done since I first became a county chairman in

1994 in Prince George's County, is to figure out the appropriate level of discipline and apply it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by "discipline"?

MICHAEL STEELE: Well, look. They're candidates and incumbents. Well, you have to sit down with them and say, look, we're just not doing this. This is stupid. This is wrong. It's hurting the party. I don't care if you are the President of the United States. You can't do this.

Because you have to recognize the fact that candidates come and go. The party is the constant-- its ideals, its philosophy, its platform. So it's not about one individual candidate or group of candidates or about this sort of amorphous term "party." It really is about bringing all of these disparate pieces together under this one house, very much like the country.

I mean, 50 states decide, OK, we're going to be the United States. The same is true in politics. Everyone sort of comes up under this banner-- the GOP banner, the Democratic banner. And the challenge for the party chairman and the leaders is to hold that up like a flame and say, hey folks, this way.

And then you had a candidate who would stand before the country and talk about building a wall and disparaging the ethnicity of individuals. And so forth. And there was no discipline. This is what we are. This is what we believe. You get on this page, or you're not in the game with us. And that never happened. And so here we are.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think people just didn't believe it could happen?

MICHAEL STEELE: That's exactly what they thought. And I think people sort of blinded themselves with this idea that this would never happen. Well, it happens. And it happens more frequently than you think.

If you don't understand the pulse of the people-- if you don't have a sense of where they are, what they're feeling-- you are more apt than not to make the kind of mistakes that were made by 15 of my cohorts standing on that presidential stage back in 2015, who looked at the guy at the end and just kind of laughed at him and said, well this is a clown show. The country will get tired of this very quickly.

Well, no. He tapped into that bloodstream. He had his finger on that pulse. And what everyone failed to understand-- which some of us knew and tried to warn against-- is the very clear distinction that Donald Trump's viewers were also his voters. So those who'd been watching him say "You're fired," and enjoying his Miss America pageants or Miss USA pageants, and

going out there and being Donald Trump for the last 15 or 20 years suddenly, now, were his voters. And if you miss that, you wind up nominating him.

INTERVIEWER: Well, I have an idea.

MICHAEL What's that?

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: You're a straight talker. You're super smart. You're pretty lucid. Why don't you run for office for president?

MICHAEL Because I'm lucid.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: That's not a thing that would tempt you?

MICHAEL No, you know--

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: Because you really do seem to have a vision, and you have a sense of civility that we've lost.

MICHAEL Yeah, that's flattering. And it's a little bit awkward. But that's a big step. And it's something that
STEELE: you think about and you say, look. It's not a question you can do the job because I don't-- it's not that simple, as we see. We now know it's not that simple, because I think a lot of people go oh, if a businessman's president, then he'll run the country like a business. No, don't do that.

INTERVIEWER: I remember that.

MICHAEL Don't do that, no. No, because we get the kind of crazy tax plan that we've got floating through
STEELE: the House and the Senate right now. When it all becomes focused on, oh gee, what will make businesses great?

INTERVIEWER: Is that why you say it's crazy?

MICHAEL Yeah, because it doesn't do what it's supposed to do. It is not a conservative tax plan. It's not
STEELE: anything remotely close to tax reform. So let's not fool ourselves there. We can have a big and important philosophical discussion about what that plan, what a conservative tax plan would look like.

I'm not a fan of absolute trickle-down because you continue to spend. And that's how you

create the debt and deficits. You have to look at spending. You have to look at what you're cutting. You have to look at how you pay for it. So there are a lot of different things that I think a traditional conservative like myself will sit down and go, we can do this.

It's going to require a little bit of give and a little bit of take. And we've kind of lost that in our politics. For me, the three most important words about America are "We, the people." And whether you run for higher office or whether you decide just to remain active, whether you communicate a vision or whatever that is, that has to be the centerpiece of that.

INTERVIEWER: The "We the people."

MICHAEL Yeah, "We the people."

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: And the sense of unity--

MICHAEL Yeah.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: --despite--

MICHAEL Yeah. And so it's not about building walls. It's not about favoring one group or another. It's not about preying on our fears. It is about helping us get past our fears and helping us get past the things that, for a lot of communities, have been roadblocks and, in fact, shackles. When you look at the African-American community, yes, you're freed of the shackles of slavery. But you, in some sense, get re-enslaved when your community's redlined or when you are not afforded the same educational opportunities.

INTERVIEWER: Or all your guys are incarcerated.

MICHAEL Or when-- exactly, when you still live in fear of the men who are supposed to serve and protect your community. So there's a lot of those things that, certainly, the current occupant of the White House is less inclined towards appreciating. And so for me, the idea of pushing back on that is that much more important. Now, I don't know if it'll ever lead to running for president. But it is important that you push back on it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that your party's with you, that there are enough people who are-- And I don't mean this sort of--

MICHAEL STEELE: I'll be honest. You know, yes and no. I mean, you get the people who will quietly say, I agree with what you said today on TV. I'm like, well, can you raise your hand and put a flag up here, and you say it too? I remember saying to some of Senator Flake's and Senator Corker's supporters and some of his people, look, it's great to draw that line with President Trump because a line needs to be drawn.

Any parent to his child, at some point, you've got to say, I'm taking your toys. You're on time out.

INTERVIEWER: I saw your tweet this morning. Somebody take him off his Twitter crack.

MICHAEL STEELE: Yeah, please take him off the Twitter crack. Let's have a national intervention.

INTERVIEWER: Hashtag #intervention.

MICHAEL STEELE: Hashtag #intervention. Get the man off the Twitter crack, cause clearly, the people around him are enablers. So it's going to require somebody to just say, you know what? Stop it. So to the media, I tell my friends in the media, stop chasing the bright shining objects and going down those rabbit holes that he wants you to go down. Stay focused on the matter that right now, we are the closest we have been in a generation to a nuclear conflict with North Korea.

INTERVIEWER: Well, that brings up my next question. And that is, do you think he's impeachable?

MICHAEL STEELE: No he's not, to be honest, because it's not going to happen. Look, you can't get Republicans to agree on a health care plan. So they're not, certainly, going to go-- I mean, when you have Orrin Hatch, as someone who I've long admired and respected, and will walk on hot coals for, because the man has been there for me in the past, and he's one of those stalwarts of the party. But even he, the other day, comes out and said, Donald Trump is the best president I've ever served under. I'm like, OK. Clearly someone's passing the crack pipe because--

INTERVIEWER: Crack and Kool-Aid.

MICHAEL STEELE: --that makes no sense. This idea of impeaching the president is just not going to go anywhere. As I like to tell my Democrat friends, that's just one of those dreams you like to have. But it's not going to come true. The fact of the matter is that scenario creates more of a problem than it solves.

INTERVIEWER: How so?

MICHAEL STEELE: Because you're going to be left with about 38% of the American voting population out there who are not going to swallow that well. And so all the animus, all the anger, all the hatred, all the infected groups that have arisen up because of his taunting and his tweets and his this, will now use that as a cudgel to go after the very institutions-- media, academia, political leaders-- who whether they are down with that or not, but they will use that as a weapon in a way that I think further disintegrates the relationship we have one to the other in the community.

INTERVIEWER: Well, so let's think about a peaceful transition.

MICHAEL STEELE: It's called re-election.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: You're here at Brown, so you're talking to 20-year-olds.

MICHAEL STEELE: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And I worry that they don't have the memory that you have of a more civil time, and they don't have the model of when--

MICHAEL STEELE: That's true because they didn't see that play out during the Obama administration because Republicans acted like three-year-olds and wouldn't play with them in the sandbox, exactly.

INTERVIEWER: And so I worry a bit that there is no model.

MICHAEL STEELE: The most powerful gift that our forefathers and mothers-- because I believe a lot of what inspired our forefathers was late-night conversations with their wives--

INTERVIEWER: Thank you.

MICHAEL STEELE: --who said, no, dude. That's not-- that's not-- no. That's not going to work. Don't do that. We know how this goes. We know how this goes. But the fact of the matter is the most powerful gift that they've given us in all the documents, and it goes back to the three words, "We the people," tied to the one thing that really sets us apart from the rest of the world, and that's the vote.

We have this gift to access the ballot box. Now, we can get into-- and it's not a side discussion. I think it's an important discussion-- about how political institutions, both Democrat and Republican, left and right, have played around with that access. But at the end of the day, it still remains true that if you want to change the nation, the nature of this country, the direction this country, then you got to get off your behind, to be polite, and vote. That's where it's done. That's how it's done.

So as much as folks want to complain and groan and moan about Donald Trump, understand this one lesson from what he did in 2015 and 2016. He took a voting population of individuals who had not been engaged in the political process for almost 30 years. We know them affectionately as the Reagan Democrats. These were the folks who came out at the time of Reagan-- former Democrats, not just Southerners, but from across the country-- who got engaged because they liked his vision.

They liked what he's talked about. We were coming out of the malaise of the Carter years. That's how the president termed it-- not my term. And he talked about an America that would do better. We were dealing with a hostage crisis in Iran. So there was a lot of international and domestic turmoil. So he talked about the country in terms of connecting all of us to this vision.

After his time, those folks didn't feel any connection to any of the political leadership. They voted for Bill Clinton. I always call that 1992 election is when Bubba went back home because [INAUDIBLE]. That's exactly what happened. They turned away from Republicans and went back and voted Democratic. That's how Bill Clinton won.

But by the time his re-election came up, you had all the scandals and everything else. They became disillusioned. By the time you get to 2020-- 2000, rather-- the election process had become stigmatized, had become infected with this us versus them mindset. Again, they stayed on the couch.

But along comes Donald Trump in 2015. And he starts talking to them. He sounds like them. He appeals to that inner frustration that they have. And he pulls them off their couch, gets them to his rally, and ultimately got them to the ballot box. It's how he won.

When you're looking at this process of elections, you realize just how important they are. He understood that for good or bad. What happens afterwards is a whole different conversation. But you need to understand what he did beforehand. And so let me encourage and inspire, I

guess, with an example.

So after the inauguration of the president, what happened? That Saturday, you had hundreds of thousands of women show up on the mall. Everyone pooh poohed it-- said oh yeah. And I'm a native Washingtonian. So having big mall events are a dime a dozen. People come and go. It's like, can you speed it up folks? Cause I got to get downtown for, you know. So fine. Everyone joked about it-- didn't think it was going to come to anything.

But here's what happened. Those women organically organize themselves. They did. They weren't advertising them on the news every day. But what they did was they said, let's look around the country and see where we can find women who are ready to run. And if you want a good example of what that organization and that ballot box initiative did was look to Virginia. When you look at the majority of the seats that were won--

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

MICHAEL STEELE: --at the state legislative that led to the takeover of the Democrats of the state house, out of those 16 seats, 13 of them were won by women.

INTERVIEWER: That's right.

MICHAEL STEELE: Won by a transgendered individual woman who, by the way, ran against the guy who vilified her-- ran against her sexuality, ran against her personal story. She ran because she wanted to bring better transportation to the community. She won. But trust me. Those women are not beholden to what they see going on inside the Democratic Party right now because they, like many other Americans, are just as frustrated with the political process.

And on the heels of everything that we see now going on with women saying me too, hashtag #MeToo, that is going to be another layer added on top of this national conversation, where women are going to assert themselves, I believe, in a way that will shake the roots of both political parties. And I applaud it. I'm so excited for it because it means now, maybe we can get back to getting something done.

So these are the dynamics of why the ballot box is so important. And so yes, you're frustrated with Donald Trump. There's nothing you can do about it until 2020. But if you bitch, moan, and complain, and you groan, and you whine, and then--

INTERVIEWER: You don't vote.

MICHAEL STEELE: --November of 2020, you're sitting on your behind in your room playing video games--

INTERVIEWER: Or 2018.

MICHAEL STEELE: Or 2018, you're hanging out with your friends somewhere, having a good time, and when someone asks you, you're going to vote, it's like, ah, I'm not going to do that. Please just shut the hell up. I don't hear your mouth. But if you get out, and you organize your friends, you get out and you vote-- and again, I've always been an advocate for this level of civic participation.

I'm right now the interim chair of the US Vote Foundation, which is all about getting people focused on their civic responsibility to vote. I don't really care if you vote Republican or Democrat as long as you vote. Now, when I put my Republican hat on, and I come in, and I'm going to lay out a platform, or a plan, or a candidate, that's a different conversation. It's incumbent on me, then, to convince you to vote for this idea or this candidate.

INTERVIEWER: Can I ask you a question about that?

MICHAEL STEELE: Sure.

INTERVIEWER: My father was a, let's say, *New Yorker* reading Republican. And he brought me up insisting that one exercise one's right to vote and insisting on the secrecy of the ballot being sort of sacred. And you never ask, and you never tell. Or you should never feel you need to tell.

MICHAEL STEELE: Compelled.

INTERVIEWER: And I know you said you would not vote for Clinton or Trump, but did you vote?

MICHAEL STEELE: I absolutely voted.

INTERVIEWER: OK, good answer.

MICHAEL STEELE: No, I put a name on the ballot, someone that I thought would make a good president, and voted. The script has flipped for Republicans. Democrats are in a better position than we are now, as we were in a better position than they were then in 2010. So understanding this

landscape and recognizing the power of the vote, particularly when it is now animated and energized in a way that we've not seen before.

And I think the number of successes that women have had in the most recent election-- and then we'll wait to see how many are running for Congress, how many are running for governor, how many are running for Senate, how many are running for state legislatures-- the rest of those legislative races across the country in 2018. That day afterward is going to be very telling about where the country's headed and who's prepared, now, to lead it.

INTERVIEWER: We'll keep telling the young people to vote. I love that message.

MICHAEL STEELE: No, absolutely. If you pay taxes, you should be voting. So you got a part-time job. You look at that paycheck. And where it says federal, FICA, state, and all those are zeros, OK, I get it. You don't have to play. But if there's a number there, you'd better get your behind out and get engaged because you're now part of the decision-making process of this country as a taxpayer. If you have a parent or family member who is in need of government assistance, you have to exercise your right to vote.

INTERVIEWER: It's a responsibility.

MICHAEL STEELE: If you have a sibling who has special needs, you have to exercise your right to vote, because you have men and women in your state legislature and in your Congress and sitting in the White House who are making decisions that will fundamentally change their lives for the better or the worse.

INTERVIEWER: I have two more questions. One is quick. Have you ever been on the bad end of a Trump tweet?

MICHAEL STEELE: No, but I look forward to it.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

MICHAEL STEELE: Because I'm ready to engage--

INTERVIEWER: I sense that you are.

MICHAEL STEELE: --as Captain Picard would say.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: And you don't hold back in your tweets.

MICHAEL No. I mean, just like he tweeted out after the Virginia election.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: I saw, yeah. Your tweet was great.

MICHAEL And he gets this crazy tweet where he goes after my buddy Ed Gillespie. Now, the man just

STEELE: lost an election. I have been in that space. It's not fun to lose an election, particularly one when everybody's looking at you. It's a national election. And he tweets out, well, you know, it's like, basically, he was a lousy candidate.

INTERVIEWER: And your tweet was awesome.

MICHAEL And my tweet was--

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: Did you win?

MICHAEL --did you win Virginia?

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: It's great. It was great. So he doesn't respond when you do that.

MICHAEL No.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting.

MICHAEL He's not going to. I've worked with the man. I think he knows me well enough to know.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: My last question for you is about something that I brought up before. We had Jenny Backus and Brian Jones on the show a couple weeks ago. And I'm just fascinated by bipartisan friendship, which is sort of increasingly exotic-seeming to me. And it is, sadly.

MICHAEL (LAUGHING) No, I hear you.

STEELE:

INTERVIEWER: And I'd like to remember that it's possible. And I love to see it instantiated here in the studio. And I know you're here with Tom Perez. And so how does-- explain to me how your friendship works? Because you disagree on important things.

MICHAEL STEELE: Oh my gosh. Tom and I will have knock-downs on policy. I mean, it just-- I'm like, dude, you just-- you got to stop drinking whatever you're drinking. And he'll look at me. You got to stop smoking whatever you're smoking. And I'm like, OK. So no. We have that. In fact, it is one of the reasons why it works-- because we respect each other's opinion, and we're not afraid of it-- not afraid of what he has to say.

I'm not afraid when he's right on an issue. I'm a very, very pro-life individual-- have been my entire life-- based on my upbringing, my faith tradition, and the personal, quote-- I'm going to use that word-- "choices" that have been a part of my own journey. And so when I engage with someone like Tom, who has a very profound, important perspective that is opposite from mine, a pro-choice perspective, I learned from him, because I listen, and I learn what that challenge is for a lot of women and men who have to confront those issues.

So if we shut our ears from listening and learning, you cannot be friends. I can't be your friend if I don't listen to you. I just can't. That's why I laugh at these guys on Capitol Hill. You know, my friend, the senator from x, my friend the congressman from-- he's not your friend. You don't even know. You couldn't even me tell me how many kids he has. You couldn't tell me what his favorite color is. You couldn't tell me what part of the state he's from. You don't know. These people aren't friends with each other anymore like the way they used to be.

In the good old days-- and they did exist-- members brought their families to Washington. Their kids went to school together. Their wives or spouses socialized, interacted with each other. They would have dinner. You could go to pretty much any restaurant in town-- and there were select favorites, but pretty much any restaurant-- and you would find a round table with seven or eight members of the opposite parties sitting there, having dinner, talking about the day. Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan ended every day over a bottle of scotch.

INTERVIEWER: I love that image. I really do.

MICHAEL STEELE: Because Tip would come down at the White House. And he would sit there. And they would joust around about the politics of the day. And then he'd get down to business about, OK, so how do we deal with-- that's how we got tax reform in 1986. That's how we got a number of

the things where both the Democrats and Republicans, quote, "won" politically. But the American people won substantially because we were able to be the beneficiaries of smart public policy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there's a political price to be paid for being openly friendly with people?

MICHAEL STEELE: Oh, today there is. I know a number of members-- Democrats, Republicans-- who tell me, I can't be seen talking to a member of the opposite party because the moment I'm off the floor, the caucus chair will call me and say, what were you guys--

INTERVIEWER: That's awful.

MICHAEL STEELE: We live in the land not of giants, but of cowards. And my recommendation is that next year, when people go to the ballot box, they fire them all.

INTERVIEWER: Well we'll--

MICHAEL STEELE: And replace them with people who are civic-minded, who are people-centric, and who can be conservative, who can be liberal, who can be progressive, who can be Republican, who can be a Democrat. But at the end of the day and at the beginning of the day, they start and end with "We the people."

INTERVIEWER: Amen to that. Well, let's have you back next year after the elections.

MICHAEL STEELE: Yeah, that ought to be fun.

INTERVIEWER: Michael Steele, it was so great to have you here today.

MICHAEL STEELE: I was great to be here.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for talking to us.

MICHAEL STEELE: Thank you, my pleasure.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

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