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**Jonathan Groubert:** From Amsterdam, This is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. A treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking. I'm Jonathan Groubert, and we start with something of a wake-up call.

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**Timothy Snyder:** We have this very complacent, in my view, tradition and Anglo-Saxon philosophy from John Milton through John Stuart Mill, which says: there's a marketplace of ideas, in a fair fight, the truth will win. That's just not true. If you put five people up on a stage, you have five contradictory and crazy views. The truth does not somehow emerge.

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**Jonathan Groubert:** And if the truth is hidden, we all have a big problem because truth matters. Ideas matter. That's what Timothy Snyder, professor of history at Yale University, pleads in his book; *The Road to Unfreedom* (2018). He also says that democracy and the rule of law in Western societies are under threat, so much so that we're living in a different age. This is the age of the politics of eternity. Us versus them. Witness Vladimir Putin's successful efforts to destabilize neighboring governments and to stir up dissent in countries from France to the United States, and the war in Ukraine. Mr. Snyder spoke at the Adams Institute back in 2018. But even though Donald Trump has been voted out of office since then, the forces that got him there, the forces of obfuscation and lies, are still hard at work everywhere in the world, abetted by social media. Mr Snyder says that without truth, we're stuck on the outrages of the now. We can't even think about the world to come, which is why, to paraphrase him a bit: without the truth in the present, you can't even start to imagine the future.

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**Timothy Snyder:** What happened to the future? Where did the future go? I was talking about this book a couple of weeks ago in Bratislava to a very young audience, mostly university students. And at the end of the question and answer session, one of the students asked: What was it like to grow up with a future? And growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, I can remember what it was like to grow up with the future, and I think it may be the most astonishing characteristic of our own political moment that we don't have a future. That is; I believe that you all walk out of this hall alive, that you will go home to your children or your goldfish or whatever it is. I don't mean you don't have a future in that sense. I mean that it's hard to think of a moment in modern history when thinking about the future has been so impoverished. Where politics has been so much about the risks of the present and lies about the past. We've got ourselves backed into a kind of dead end where politics is either about defending a present that needs to be improved instead or about telling lies about a past that never happened.

So what I'm trying to do in this book, in the 'Road to Unfreedom' is to get at this question of the rise of authoritarianism at that deeper level. I'm trying to ask "what comes before politics?" What are the things that we take for granted that form how we think about politics and how we behave politically? And then what happens when all of those assumptions, when our implicit systems of thought break, and something else happens that surprises us. This is how I'm trying to characterize the present moment, because the present moment is strange. It's not just that democracy is retreating, which it is. It's not just that

authoritarianism is consolidating, which it is. It's that we're constantly surprised. And one of the great ironies I think of the period after 1989, is that many of us shrugged our shoulders and said, history is over. There are no alternatives. The only ideas left are liberalism and democracy. And we didn't notice that that itself was an idea, an idea over which we could choose to accept or choose to reject. It's this idea in the book that I call the politics of inevitability, the idea that we know the future because the future is going to be like the present, but better. The notion of progress, to put it in one word, that we don't have to ask what's good because we know the present is good. The future is just going to have more of the good things that we have in the present. Time is like a line going forward and upward to a point that we know that's the politics of inevitability.

Now the problem with the politics of inevitability is that it crashes. It breaks at different times in different places, whether it's in northern France or whether it's in West Virginia, whether it's in central Russia, at different times, in different places, this notion of progress, this notion that we know the future based on the present has crashed for different people in different times, but for different reasons. But it's crashing. And now I think it has crashed. I think we've now reached the point that very few people believe in this idea anymore. And what's rushed in to replace it is something else. Another version of time, more dangerous, which I call the politics of eternity. And this is what I think all of these different kinds of authoritarians. It's so nice you get to drink beer like that. That's just, yes, cheers. I mean, that's civilization right there. So all of these things, if you're looking for something they all have in common. Trump, Putin, Brexit, Front National alternative for Deutschland, Orbán, Kuczynski. They seem different and they are. But one thing that they all have in common is this thing that I call the politics of eternity that is using a notion of the past where we are good and they are bad because we are inside and they are outside. And the thing that happens over and over again is that they come for us and we're good because we are us and they're bad because they're them and the same thing happens over and over again in history. This is also a view of time, like the politics of inevitability, it's a view of time which pretends to be history, but which actually crushes history, which takes actual history completely out of the picture. With the politics of eternity enables is a kind of politics of us and them, where, and this is where we are now, the future completely disappears. What the politicians of eternity do, is they loop back to a past which never happened or a past which can't be regained, I'll go into detail about this in a moment.

But they do this in a postmodern way with postmodern technology. So Mr Trump, for example, talks about making America great again. Oh, and incidentally, what is social science tell us about when America was great? If you ask Americans when America was great, it predictably turns out to be when the American in question was young. And you know, we can disagree or agree about what the state can do. But one thing that the state cannot do is make you young again, right? I see some disappointed looks. The politics of eternity does is that it simultaneously loops you back into an imagined past and there's a small daily loop, the technological loop, the tweet in Mr Trump's case, where every day you're elated or you're crushed by emotion, by technologically generated emotion, which makes it very hard for you to think about the future. You're thinking about the present. So the politics of eternity has a big loop back into an imagined past, but it also has a daily loop;

the news cycle, the way that we're prevented from thinking about the future because we're constantly, and this is Mr Trump's genius right, we're constantly shocked, surprised, humiliated, whatever it might be, by something that he did that day. Right? He runs the White House as if it were a television program in that very specific sense.

Now these are ideas, and the move that I make at the beginning of *The Road to Unfreedom* is that I insist that ideas matter, which is a very old fashioned, I know, conservative way to start a book. My, my publishers, my excellent Dutch publishers from Ambo Anthos are here. They did not encourage me to start this book by spending 30 pages on a dead Russian philosopher that no one has heard of. But I did it because I think it's true that ideas matter. I think it's true that ideas from the 1920s and 1930s are coming back. I think it's interesting that President Putin of Russia had the corpse of this fellow reburied. I think it's telling that he found where his papers were. The philosopher's name is Ivan Ilyn that Putin found out where the papers were and brought them back to Russia. I think it's interesting that Mr Putin lays flowers on the philosopher's grave. I think it's telling that Mr Putin cites this particular philosopher at pretty much every relevant occasion. But the reason why it's interesting for me is that this philosopher is an example of the politics of eternity. What Ilyn says is; Russia is always innocent. The outside world is always guilty. Democracy should be a ritual in which a leader who comes from outside of history has his power consolidated and reaffirmed. And interestingly, and this is where the fascist past links up with the postmodern present. Interestingly, this philosopher Ilyn also says: nothing about the world we live in is true. The way that Russia works is to take mistrust and turn it into something positive through which you can govern. And this is something which I think is new in the history of politics, and it's interesting. So what the Russian leadership says to its population is: you are correct not to trust us. We are, in fact, corrupt oligarchs. Our news is in fact not true. You know this. We know that you know this, and that is a new form of social contract. Fine mistrust us. But if you mistrust us, mistrust everyone else too. And this is where it becomes foreign policy. If you must, if you're going to mistrust us, your Russian leaders, you should also know that Dutch leaders and American leaders and British leaders and European leaders are just as much lying oligarchs as we are.

And the next step, you should understand that Dutch journalism, European journalism, American journalism or Dutch law, American law, European law. Dutch democracy. American democracy, European democracy, is just as much a joke as ours, right? It's a joke everywhere. And we all know this. We're smart people, we're in on this. We know it's all surfaces. It's all hypocrisy, right? We know this. We're in on it. That's what you have to accept. That's what governing from mistrust means. And that's a way you can govern without a future, because if everybody everywhere really are just hypocritical, cynical lying oligarchs, it's very hard to imagine that the world has much of a future which is different from the present. And so you can fall into the; oh well, you know, the powerful are going to be powerful. The ideas are all just masks for power and nothing really matters. And then the system of eternity wins. And so you'll notice that the way that Russia plays in foreign policy is not to say that Russia's good. I mean, they make some half- hearted efforts at that. Sometimes, if you know Mr Putin is forced into a corner, he will say something about how Russia's good, but that's not the way it generally works. The way it generally works is to say: other places are bad. And to say, you can't trust anybody. And that's the ultimate weapon,

the spreading of mistrust. So the way that this becomes foreign policy is interesting, because how if this is how you need to govern, what do you want to do to the rest of the world?

Well, you want to tell your population that the rest of the world is just like Russia. Despite appearances and you want to make the rest of the world more like Russia, which would seem like something very difficult to do. If let's say you're President Obama looking at the Russian Federation, you say, well, this is what Mr. Obama said: This is just a regional power. Right? The conventional wisdom in among our elite was; they don't make anything, therefore they don't have economic power, therefore they don't have any real power. But somehow they got to choose our president, which suggests that they did have a certain form of power, which is worth thinking about. So, how you govern with mistrust is you not only try to convince your population that the world is just as cynical and hypocritical as we are, but you try to make the world that way. You try to push against European and American institutions. You try to take institutions which by their nature, are going to be a little bit flawed and make them more flawed. You try to find people who don't really believe in the in the institutions, like Mr. Trump. You try to find people who are willing to push ideas that are controversial, painful and not true. Ideas, whether they have to do with global warming denial or denying the efficacy of vaccination. You find those people and you support them as much as you can. You try to spread distrust and above all, you try to spread the idea that there's not really any truth anyway. Who knows? You've got your opinion about vaccinations. I've got my opinion. You've got your opinion about global warming. I've got my opinion. In the end, who knows? It's all a matter of preferences. So this is why Russia is so important, and this is how Russia links into the United States. Because what happened in the United States in 2016 is that Russia found ways of making us just a little bit more like them, and now we're becoming more like them. Every day, every week, there are very few things which Mr. Trump does, which can't be classified either as undermining our institutions or, more fundamentally, undermining people's ability to trust in some kind of factual reality.

OK, so this gets me to the American version of the politics of inevitability, and this is going to be the fun part of the lecture. For those of you who are not American, because this is going to be the part where we notice all the bad things about America and how the Americans really had it coming and how they really deserve it, and they're dumb. And so OK, so this is going to be that part of the lecture. So yeah, perk up. So the American, the American, this is one of the many ways I can tell who the Americans are in the audience, the other. Well, I'll give you another words that you slouch. We slouch. I slouch, too. So the American politics of inevitability says this. It says: We won the Cold War. History came to an end. Economics determines politics, which is actually a strange thing to say right after you when you think Marxism is dead. And so you see economics determines politics, right? But economics is politics. Capitalism brings about democracy. There are no alternatives. Oh, and technology is always enlightening. That's that was our politics of inevitability. And there's a slightly more right wing version. There's a slightly more left wing version, but that's our politics of inevitability. Where that leads you, of course, is into a world where all of the gains in wealth and income in the United States in the last quarter century have been captured by a very small percentage of people where an American born today has a much less than 50 percent chance of making more money than his parents. An America where average life expectancy is going down, which is a shocking thing to be happening in the developed world.

An America where the average citizen spends 11 hours a day in front of a screen. And in America, where we have now seen just how the internet or specifically certain parts of the internet, especially social platforms, lead people away from the ability to carry out rational discussion with fellow citizens and towards a politics of us and them. All of which, or much of which, is as it were personified by Mr. Trump.

Mr. Trump is the kind of American capitalist who survived by playing outside the rules, and the way that he came to power has everything to do with the way the internet can be mobilized as a weapon of fear and anxiety. Also as a weapon of fear and anxiety used by foreigners. So the three main Camp Trump campaign slogans "build the wall", "lock her up", "drain the swamp". We're all tested by foreigners using Facebook. Before Mr Trump even announced his candidacy. Right? And incidentally, I mean, these things, these things have an incantatory, by the way, fascist, but in the incantatory power, which has nothing to do with reality. They're not going to drain the swamp. They're going to be more corrupt. They're not going to lock her up. Her means Hillary Clinton, because she hasn't committed any crimes they can prosecute her for, and they're not going to. They don't even have to build the wall. We don't. We're not building anything. That's an interesting difference, by the way, between this fascism and the previous one, the previous fascism actually built things. I mean, say what you want against it, and I'm happy to agree with all of it. But the previous fascism actually built things and actually redistributed resources. The American fascism this time around doesn't do either of those things, which is one... anyway. So Mr. Trump is an example of, of Mr. Trump is a very successful politician of eternity making America great again. Right? A cycle back to the past and then the daily, the daily, Twitter feed. And Russia fits into this because he's a natural for them, right? He's somebody who fits very nicely into the way that Russians think the politics of the world should work and does work. But more importantly, the reason why the Russian campaign in 2016 was effective was because it played on very real issues in American life.

So there's a reason why the Russian version of Republican Party websites were always more popular than the actual Republican Party websites. And that is that the Russians were willing to go further and provoke more and play on emotions a little bit more directly. There's a reason why Russian fictions were more effective than our fictions because they don't care about us at all. But they're willing to use the things that we want to believe. So a lot of people don't like Hillary Clinton. But the notion that Hillary Clinton is a pedophile pimp running a prostitution ring out of a pizzeria basement is one that we actually needed foreign help to believe in. We got that foreign help at a critical time. Right after a tape was revealed where Mr. Trump said that sexually assaulting women was fine. Forty five minutes after that, we got the pizza story about Hillary Clinton, which, by the way, is a very good example of how the Russians got him into office. Because what happened then, is that a story which everybody thought was going to kill The Trump campaign is immediately canceled out by another story about how Hillary Clinton is even worse. And that's what people thought. A third of Americans believe the pizza pedophile prostitution story. One third of Americans believe that in October of 2016. So, so we won't go into all the details here. But you know, I'll give you a couple of interesting stats. One hundred and thirty seven million Americans voted. 126 million Americans saw Russian material on Facebook. Right? And one could go on. OK, so this is our politics of inevitability, right? Our politics of

inevitability opens up inequality. It opens up vulnerabilities having to do with tech because we're terribly naive about how the internet actually works. And then these things can be used against us in a figure, something like Mr. Trump. OK, that was, that was that was the good part. Oh, wait, there's one more part about the good part.

Climate change. Climate change is very important. I said at the beginning that hydrocarbon oligarchs don't talk about the future because the future is climate change and it's their fault. Mr. Trump is very important here. There's a style of politics which is being practiced, which goes like this. You talk about, for example, the migrants, the Mexican migrants, right? The Mexican migrants. They're terrible. They're rapists. That was his very first campaign speech. The Mexicans are rapists. Rapists are Mexicans. He talks about the criminal immigrants, which is a trope which is familiar from Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe. You talk about this, but you don't talk about why it is that there's migration from the South. The reason why there's migration from the south is climate change. Not only do you not talk about that in policy, you do everything you can to make climate change worse. Right? So the very same people who make migration a political issue are the climate change deniers, which is incidentally very often true in the in Europe as well. The number of influential politicians, especially in Central Europe, who talk about migrants, are also climate change deniers. This this policy goes together, right? Because what you're doing is you're making a crisis worse, even as you're trying to define politics as the politics of us and them. So you're bringing a bad future closer all the time and you're preparing for it by getting people into this politics of eternity. I wish it weren't that sinister, but it is.

Russia plays the same game or played the same game with Brexit. The Russian propaganda and Brexit was all along the same lines. You've always been independent. You've always been a great nation. You'd be fine without the European Union. And by the way, the weapons were the same. So 20 percent of the Twitter conversation about Brexit was organized from abroad. 20 percent. And how many British citizens were aware of this at the time? Zero percent. The opportunity that we have to notice this that we didn't seize was Ukraine in 2014. That's where we blew it. So what happens in Ukraine is telling, not just because it shows how we were vulnerable, but also because of the techniques. So the technique of clustered fictions is the technique which was used around MH 17. So what happened was pretty straightforward. Russia invaded Ukraine. Russian soldiers and officers commanding a Russian unit and a Russian weapons shot down a civilian airliner, leading to the mass murder of 289 people. That's actually pretty straightforward, and the evidentiary trail was pretty clear on day one with what actually happened. But rather than saying, Oh, we invaded the country and we accidentally shot down a civilian airliner and we're sorry, what the Russian leadership did was create a cloud of fictions around the event.

Interestingly, this shows how intelligent they are by the way, they never directly denied what happened. They never directly denied the fact, they never said the opposite of what happened. They just had a bunch of other things like it; was NATO or the Ukrainians were trying to shoot down President Putin's jet, or Ukrainians were testing ground air missiles or Ukrainian fighter pilots were in the area or a Ukrainian Jewish oligarch is in charge of Ukrainian airspace, and it was somehow his fault. These Oh or the CIA launched a plane full of corpses from Amsterdam, and there was never anybody alive on the plane,

right? And these things were not meant to. Yeah, you can't know whether to laugh or cry, right? I cry is what I would vote for. But the point of this kind of discussion is to first; make it impossible to see the obvious truth. And the truth is pretty obvious, honestly. But second, to make the event itself somehow irrelevant, right? Because then when there are so many versions of fiction around an event, somehow the simple thing that people died who shouldn't have died gets lost from view and somehow Russia becomes the victim. Right. So more than 80 percent of the Russian population believes that Russia was the victim of MH 17 because the West conspired to create the story about what's not true. So that's one tactic.

Another tactic is total denial of reality, which has spread from Russia to United States when Russia invades Ukraine. One of the confusing things is the president of Russia says: Oh, we didn't invade Ukraine. Those were just local guys who bought uniforms at the Army surplus store. And you know, that's that was his position. That's new in history as far as I know. And it changes the game because then journalists have to decide, do we cover this guy who has this amazing power to create fiction or do we cover the war? And this then is now the problem of journalists United States? Do you cover this guy in his incredible, you know, stream of fiction, which is very entertaining and diverting? Or do you cover the opioid crisis? You cover the actual stories in your own country. But the third, the third technique, which is I'm going to just remind you of before I go into the happy, optimistic closing note is susceptibilities.

So I mentioned fascism. If you were, if Facebook thought you were on the political left, then Russia in your Facebook feed in 2014 would place stuff along the lines of Ukraine. The Ukrainians are Nazis and fascists and so on. Right. Which led to a lot of very unfortunate writing in the European press and the Guardian, for example, where actual people in the actual European press wrote on the basis of things which are complete fictions. But interestingly, if you're in the extreme right and you're on Facebook and Facebook thought you were a racist or anti-Semite, then the Russian stuff in your News Feed said that Ukraine is a Jewish state, Ukraine, the Jewish construction, the people who run Ukraine are Jewish oligarchs, Right? And of course, those things contradict it can't be both Nazi and, you know, part of the Jewish conspiracy at the same time. But on the internet, no one talks to each other. Contradictions don't matter, and what happens is that the extreme versions then crowd out the middle and make a discussion of what actually happened much harder. The same men in the same building working for the same institution, the Internet Research Agency in Russia, then did the same thing in the American presidential election. This is just one tiny way in which what happened in Ukraine in 2014 was part of what happened to the US in 2016, the same men did the same thing. They said, OK, if you like Hillary Clinton, if you're African-American, you like Hillary Clinton. We are going to fill up your Facebook feed with stuff that says Hillary Clinton is a racist, so you won't vote. If you are a racist. We are going to fill up your Facebook feed with stuff which says Hillary Clinton loves black people. Again, it contradicts. But that doesn't matter because we're just trying to suppress your votes and we're trying to get you activated so you will vote. And there were consequences to this. So that's the third technique. This is a way that the internet facilitates this sort of thing.

OK, here comes the happy part, the part about the future. I think that this is the real game in politics. I think the division and politics now are not, it's not right/left. I think that the main division is true/false, which is another way of saying future, no future, because the truth and the future go together. If you don't believe in the future, there's no reason to care about factuality in the present. Those two thoughts go together. If you want there to be a future, you have to make policy towards the future, and making policy towards the future requires factuality in the present. I think Europe has a wonderful chance. Maybe the best chance to be the Unit, the political unit, which creates some sense of the future. And I'm just going to articulate very quickly what I think that future might, not what it would look like, but what the argument for it would look like.

I think it has to do mainly with humanity. So humanity versus the internet, humanity versus the algorithms. Europe is the only entity in the planet which in a constructive way is trying to deal with the Google and the Facebook. You're the only ones, and that's not just playing defense that can be seen as an affirmation of humanity. It's not just protection against electoral intervention, which is very important. It's also, it's also the positive claim that we're caring about the humans, we're on the side of the humans. The second aspect of the future is climate. Like the euro, the political union which cares most about this and has maybe the best chance of solving it. Dealing with climate change is about creating a future in the most basic existential sense. But interestingly, hydrocarbons and futurelessness are very intimately connected. The same whether it's Russia or America or anywhere else, whether it's Saudi Arabia, the people who are closely connected to hydrocarbon wealth are the same people who suppressed the future and who suppressed factuality in a very, in a very elemental way. Whether it's a Saudi Arabia killing a journalist and having his body cut into little pieces, or whether it's Mr Putin getting dead journalists delivered to him on his birthday. It's the same phenomenon. Hydrocarbons are intimately connected to the loss of factuality, which leads me to the third thing about the future.

The future has to be about the production of factuality, the production of factuality not just believing in truth, which I think is also very important. But increase actively affirming institutions which go out and hunt for the truth. So we have this very complacent, in my view, tradition and Anglo-Saxon philosophy from John Milton through John Stuart Mill through Oliver Wendell Oliver Wendell Holmes, which says there's a marketplace of ideas in a fair fight. The truth will win. That's just not true. It is just not true. It's lazy and it's complacent. If you put five people up on a stage, you have five contradictory and crazy views. The truth does not somehow emerge. If you create an institution like the internet, in which 99.999% of what's out there is not connected to investigative reporting, put a whole bunch more nines in there. It's very unlikely that that's going to lead you to the truth. If you allow local news to die and the reporting profession to go away, if nobody's producing the facts to fill up some of the information space, how can the truth possibly have a chance of winning a debate? It just doesn't happen by itself. There's no automatic mechanism, so I think the places are going to remain sovereign. Or to put it a different way, the places where humane politics are going to be possible are going to be the places which actively engage in the production of facts. Which treat factuality as a kind of scarce resource that you have to, you have to try to suppose.



The final thing is democracy and time. So democracy, I mean, to put this in a positive way. Democracy produces time. You need time for democracy. If nobody believes in the future, nobody will vote. But democracy also produces time because when you vote, you're thinking, I might vote two years from now, four years from now, six years from now. So the two of them, the two of them go together. And then finally, this is the very last thing. What the politics of eternity in the politics inevitability have in common is that each of them does away with responsibility. So if you think that the future is inevitably going to be like the present but better, that, you don't have to do anything about it, you can just kind of go along for the ride. If you think time is just a loop where the others are going to come for us, no matter what we do, you'll have to ask what's good. You're good because you're innocent and they're bad because they're attacking you. And that's the end of the story. The question of responsibility never arises. That's what the two of them have in common. And that's why it's so easy to go from faith in progress to faith in doom. That's why this shift is so easy, and that's why it's happening. And the only way to get out from under it, I think, is to believe in history as history, right? To say, OK, there is a line of time. But it's not predictable and deterministic. We do have to know things about the past so we can situate ourselves in the present. But once we situate ourselves in the present, then we have to ask the ethical question of what kind of future we want.

And this is the final thing I want to say about the future. European or not. We can't get to the future without ethics. We can't get there without facts. But we also can't get there without ethics. What inevitability and eternity do is they farm out. They subcontract the question of what's good and evil. We can't do that. If we want to have a future, we have to be concerned about the way the world is. But we also have to be willing to make arguments about what's good. That's what I'm going to stop. Thank you.

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**Jonathan Groubert:** And attempted optimism there from Professor Timothy Snyder talking about why he wrote his book *The Road to Unfreedom*. This week's John Adams podcast was made with the cooperation of De Balie.

Did you know that you can go to our website, [John-adams.NL/videos](http://John-adams.NL/videos), where there's a link to the video of this extraordinary event. We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at [john-adams.nl](http://john-adams.nl) And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do. You get a discount to future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you, free of charge. That's it for this week's show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz. From Amsterdam, This was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.

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