

Judith Kelley:

On January 6th, Donald Trump tweeted this, "States want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt process never received legislative approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the states and," in capital letters, "WE WIN. Do it, Mike. This is time for extreme courage." That message was just the beginning of one of the darkest days for American democracy, the attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The capital attack was just one manifestation of the idea of grievance. Grievance is the belief in either real or imagined wrongdoing. Grievance has been central to the American experience, but in recent years it has been expressed in dangerous and problematic ways. In this, an election year where our democracy seems to be teetering further and further on the edge of disarray, does grievance actually pose a threat? I'm Judith Kelley, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Welcome to Policy 360. My guest today is a prominent journalist, Frank Bruni. He's a faculty member here at the Sanford School of Public Policy, and his new book is called The Age of Grievance. Frank argues that grievance has come to define our culture and politics on the left and the right. Thanks for joining us, Frank.

Frank Bruni:

I'm happy to.

Judith Kelley:

So first, why did you decide to write this book? Or more to the point, I'm curious, was there a moment when you said to yourself, this is a book that needs to be written? And was that inspired by any particular incidents?

Frank Bruni:

To the best of my memory, I mean, I think I'd been mulling these ideas and I don't know that I had the phrase the age of grievance in my mind until, I remember after January 6th, I think we saw stories soon after January 6th about text messages that Ginni Thomas, Clarence Thomas' wife had been sending to people in the White House, in which she seemed to genuinely believe that the country was being stolen from her and her ideological comrades, and the all capital lavish exclamation point tone of her emails was of someone who felt oppressed and cheated and wronged.

This is the affluent wife of the Supreme Court Justice. And as we've been learning more and more Supreme Court Justice, who has been enriched by favors from his well-connected friends. And yet, she was somehow enraged and wronged and looking at the world through this lens of who her enemies were and what comeuppance they deserved. And I thought this is a behavioral dynamic that is so prevalent in American society and American politics that shows up in places where it doesn't even have any business. And I think that was the germ of the book.

Judith Kelley:

So you say that what the left feels and what the right feels are identical, that they feel oppressed?

Frank Bruni:

I wouldn't say they're identical because that also connotes that it exists in the same measure and with the same stakes and severity.

Judith Kelley:

That's what I was going to say, because I think you actually maybe not, but-

Frank Bruni:

No, no, it doesn't. I mean, one of the things that's so hard about talking and writing about this is I do think there's a mindset that you see across the political spectrum, across the ideological spectrum. And it's a mindset of going into the public square, going into the political arena with the question, how have I been wronged? What am I owed? Who wronged me? And what comeuppance do they deserve? I see that across the spectrum.

That's different from saying it exists in the same measure and with the same stakes on the right and the left. Political violence, organized political violence, that's a phenomenon right now predominantly overwhelmingly of the right. It is the right that tried to overturn a legitimate election. It is the right that indulges in an intensity and scope of election denialism that is antithetical to a democracy. I'm not making any equivalences here, but I do think it's fair to say there is a mindset. There's a kind of almost political pathology that you see in all corners.

Judith Kelley:

Right. Because somebody on the right might argue, "Wait a minute, I look at the left. And what I see is a bunch of people who are very, especially very fragile, feeling personally aggrieved on behalf of every person towards whom a so-called," in their words, "so-called microaggression has ever been perpetrated." And so you want to tell me that that's not grievance, a grievance culture that's thriving on the left. Right?

Frank Bruni:

It is a grievance. It is a grievance culture. It's just not a grievance culture with the same stakes. But you landed on, I think, a very important word that I do talk about in the book, microaggressions. That word is so funny to me because the micro in it almost connotes, are we making too much of it? And I think sometimes when we come up with these long lists of microaggressions, some of these glossaries of forbidden language read like caricature. Right? And some of these glossaries come out, and they read so much like caricature, that the people who put them out retract them almost as soon as they've put them out.

There is a hypersensitivity in American life right now that concerns me, not just for its own sake, but when you wage battles and pick fights that seem overwrought and that make claims of offense that seem disproportionate to circumstance, you undermine the most important

part of your goal. We all want a more inclusive world. We all want social justice. When the battle is waged in an overwrought and operatic fashion, it gives your opponents a way to dismiss you, and it ends up working counter to your aims.

Judith Kelley:

A thought on the microaggressions thing, which we can return to later perhaps if we have time. But I understood what you said in that book, and it said that it's almost ironic because use of the word micro implies that it is perhaps a small thing. But the other way to look at micro is that's something that's hard to see. And microbes, they could be very, very dangerous, but they are often invisible. But that's just a different ... What you just said about over-sensitized makes me want to go to something you say in the book about emotions and feelings. You note comment by Nicholas Christakis, who is the husband of the professor at Yale.

Frank Bruni:

Yale.

Judith Kelley:

And with the dorm and the Halloween customs and all that whole thing. And he said that, "There's a kind of infantilization in our society." Talk a little bit about that and how you think that connects to what you just said.

Frank Bruni:

Well, it goes back to the word you used about feelings. There is a lot of conversation. There's a lot of if you listen to the way people talk and the claims they make. They often say, "If someone feels this way, it must be addressed. If someone feels this way, there must be some truth to it." Well, no, a feeling is not a truth. A feeling is not always substantive. We seem to believe that when we're hurt, the question is simply, how do I make that better? Not, well, wait a second. Is this hurt real or imagined? Is this hurt something that calls for government action or societal redress, or is it something that's private and you should work out on your own?

We certainly seem to be coddling people in a way that we typically associate with young children along the lines I've just said. And I think that's what he's talking about. He of course bears the scars of that viral moment when he was standing in a courtyard at Yale, and he had students surrounding him, screaming the most awful things at him. And if you go back and look at what was really happening there, he was out there for, I think it was something like two hours, taking their every question, showing them respect, and in return he was verbally pilloried. That's infantile behavior.

Judith Kelley:

Who is the we in what you just said? You said we coddle too much or we ...

Frank Bruni:

We as a society.

Judith Kelley:

We as society. So are we both the coddlers and the coddled?

Frank Bruni:

Yeah, but we, you and I are sitting here at a university, a university I revere and I feel privileged to teach at. But I think there are systems here in ways in which we coddle students. Look at great inflation. Duke, like other universities, I think great inflation tells a generation that everything they do is great. Great inflation is sort of the companion piece to participation trophies. I don't know that that's the way to send people out into the world in the toughest, most resilient, most mature fashion.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Frank Bruni:

That's a kind of coddling.

Judith Kelley:

The one thing I read in your book that really resonated with me, and I guess it also goes back to the opening about January 6th and how things seem to be almost like a chain reaction in our society. That's you. Talk about the work of James Kimmel and again, a Yale lecturer. He says, "Your brain on grievance is like your brain on drugs." And that research shows that our brain is stimulated by grievance, the same way it's by drugs, and that it drives us to retaliate. Right? And there's even such a thing as grievance addiction, which you say becomes the gift to the party of the candidate that you support. So talk a little bit about that grievance as an addiction and then how that is feeding into the politics we're seeing.

Frank Bruni:

Well, it's interesting that James Kimmel takes the metaphor even one step further and talks about Trump as a grievance kingpin. How he's actually kind of a drug dealer, and the drug is grievance. I mean, we see it on social media. We see it in voter behavior. Nothing motivates like anger. Right? And I think politicians over the past five, 10 years, have been acting on that, exploiting that as never before in my adult lifetime. I mean to me, emblematic of this as Ron DeSantis. His signature saying is, "Florida is where woke goes to die." I mean, death and a promise of retaliation is at the centerpiece of his political identity. Whatever happened to optimism in the shining city on the hill and its morning in America?

Judith Kelley:

Sunshine State?

Frank Bruni:

Yeah. The Sunshine State is a graveyard for woke, right? We have politicians who are trying to motivate us by telling us how apocalyptic things will be if the other side wins, how angry we should be at the other side, how vengeful we should feel, and how we should take out that vengeance by going to the polls and voting against. Not voting for, voting against. When you do that, how do you end up with a governable country when the losing side believes not merely that a candidate not to their liking one, but that evil one, that the road to ruin one, how do you then find common ground, find compromise, find all of those things that you need to legislate to move forward? It's a real problem.

Judith Kelley:

But it's not just voting against, and I think you bring this out in the book too. That it's actually voting as a type of revenge, because you have that quote by Trump. He says, "I'm your warrior. I'm your justice..."

Donald Trump:

... and for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution, I am your retribution...

Judith Kelley:

I am your retribution.

Frank Bruni:

People, many, many Trump voters, they are voting for him as someone who is despised by the people whom they despise. He is their retribution.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Frank Bruni:

Those liberal elites, those elites in academia like you and me, we condescend to him. We look down on him. We revile him. They get back at us by propping him up and by elevating him. And he knows that, and he works it. But again, I mean if his sole goal is to get elected, well, it worked in 2016. And who knows, it could work in 2024. But in terms of what that does to a democracy in terms of, as I said, having a governable country, it's utter, utter poison.

Judith Kelley:

So you talked about DeSantis before. So let's talk about Disneyland. You talk about Disneyland in your book a little bit. And what I like about what you have a story about the Joneses and the Johnsons.

Frank Bruni:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

I'd like you to talk a little bit about that because what you just said could sound, and I know that's not what you mean it to sound like, but it could sound like Clinton's deplorable comment. Those people do this, and that's a horrible thing that they're doing. Right? But what you show in your story with the Joneses and the Johnsons is a real effort to understand and empathize with people who are making these choices. And why are they making those choices? What brought us to this place? What are the different realities we're living? So talk a little bit about Disneyland and the Joneses and the Johnsons.

Frank Bruni:

I have a passage in the book that you refer to where I talk about the different experiences of the Joneses and the Johnsons as they go to Disneyland. I mean, they're hypothetical characters. And it's about if you have money in America these days, you have enough money, you can at every step of a voyage, at every step of ... at every moment of the day, you can get the higher level of service. You can have the path smoothed for you, et cetera. And I talk about travel being a good example of this. One person boards the plane first in first class, has plenty of room for their luggage. Somebody else boards the plane last after having stood in a long line because they couldn't afford TSA pre-check, let alone clear, the gilded layer of clear, and then they get to the airport on the other side.

One person has to wait for their luggage. One person doesn't. One person goes to a hotel and speeds in because they're an honors member. Another person stands in another long line. Then you get to Disneyland. Somebody has paid a king's ransom to cut to the head of every line to be able to do 20 rides in a day. Somebody else gets three rides in because they're standing on two hour long lines in the sun. That's just one example.

Something has happened in our service economy where there are tiers that were never there before. There are all of these micro-climates of privilege and exclusivity, and they're all visible to us. So if you are someone who can't afford any of this, you are throughout your day-

Judith Kelley:

Let alone food.

Frank Bruni:

Throughout your trip, if it's the Disneyland example that I use representative, but throughout your day, you are constantly reminded of who has more, of how much easier things are for them and of how far back in line you are. It is a engine of envy, like one we've never had before. Couple that with social media in which you are constantly being barraged by Potemkin images of how great everyone else's life is. Right? They're not true, but that's not the way they emotionally register. On social media, everybody around you is always clinking champagne glasses at a beautiful wedding as the sun is setting. Right? Because those are the lacquered images that we put out.

We don't put out images of us crying at the end of a tough day in bed with crumbs of popcorn around us, which is more real life. There are all of these facets of I think our modern life that although they weren't born for this, they're not designed for this, that fill us with envy in a sense that other people have it better than we do. Those are engines of envy. Those are catalysts for grievance.

Judith Kelley:

And makes the position of and the voting patterns we see more understandable, I think because ... Yeah.

Frank Bruni:

It does. And there's one other thing I want to mention that I think coupled with this is an enormous driver of grievance culture right now, and it's America's turn toward pessimism. A country that has always been known for optimism, and it's been overstated over time. We've always had warring currents of optimism and pessimism. But I think for most of its history, this has been a fundamentally optimistic country.

Judith Kelley:

It's interesting that you say that. Not just optimistic, but blatantly self-confident, right?

Frank Bruni:

Oh, yeah.

Judith Kelley:

I mean, I remember-

Frank Bruni:

Sometimes obnoxiously so, right? Yeah.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. I mean, I remember arriving here as an immigrant three decades ago, "This is the greatest country on the earth." And I was like, "Denmark's pretty nice. There's a lot of other nice countries." "No, no, no. We are the greatest." And so to hear nowadays presidential candidates saying, "This is an utterly broken country." That we are a Third World country. This a huge change in tone.

Frank Bruni:

Right. And you're not using a metaphor. Donald Trump has used that language.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Frank Bruni:

"American carnage," the famous phrase from his inauguration speech.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Frank Bruni:

I mean, he hasn't changed his slogan in seven, eight years, "Make America great again." That says America isn't great.

Judith Kelley:

Right, of course.

Frank Bruni:

Right? Surveys now in contrast to when I was younger, if you ask Americans, do you think your kids will have it better? The language changes, but it always means the same thing, than you did. That used to dependably be answered by a majority of Americans as yes, because that was part and parcel of the American mythology of the American dream. That's not how Americans answer anymore. And what happens, the reason I think this is so significant is if you no longer believe in continued growth, if you no longer believe that the pie is getting bigger, well, you begin to get much more jealous of your piece of the pie. You begin to see everything as a zero-sum game. If the Joneses are winning, me, the Johnsons, I'm losing. That fosters again, envy. It fosters a competitive mentality, and it encourages grievance as opposed to collaboration, mutual respect, all of those things that would be much, much better for our democracy.

Judith Kelley:

Right. Okay. Another thing you talk a lot about in the book is DEI and race. So I want to go there a little bit. And one example you have is this outlet mall where there was a shooting in Allen, Texas that killed eight people.

Female Reporter:

And the breaking news that we're following overnight, another mass shooting in Texas. This one at a mall near Dallas....

Law enforcement:

...white or Hispanic male subject wearing black tactical garb, armed with an AR....

Male reporter:

Good evening, the gunman has been identified by authorities as 33 year old Mauricio Garcia, and it's believed he interacted with neo Nazi and white supremacist posts online and on social media.

Judith Kelley: share a little bit about why you chose that example. What is was about that example that stuck out to you.

Frank Bruni:

Yeah. If my memory serves me about that example in particular, after that happened, there was a piece in The New Yorker, I believe, am I getting this correctly?

Judith Kelley:

Yeah.

Frank Bruni:

Because I don't don't have the book in front of me. There was a piece in The New Yorker that tried to describe the Latino, the Hispanic shooter as someone who was acting out whiteness.

Judith Kelley:

That's right.

Frank Bruni:

And it just struck me like, wait a second. First of all, I don't know how you know that, but it was this notion that even a mass shooting that was perpetrated by somebody in a minority group, the blame was whiteness. The blame was his aspiration to whiteness. That felt to me like an intellectual contortion. That suggested that we try to impose certain lenses on every situation regarding what the facts actually say. Now, is there white supremacy in our culture? Absolutely. But when you insist on seeing it in a situation where you have to really do a bunch of intellectual contortions to get there, you actually end up undermining the white supremacy diagnosis where it is most deserved.

I'll give you a much neater and cleaner example from the book. I read a number of pieces when Brittney Griner was unjustly, horrifically jailed and imprisoned in Russia. It said that she was languishing there and not getting attention from the government or from Americans because she was Black, lesbian and female. More Americans knew that Brittney Griner was a political prisoner than knew of any other political prisoner in recent memory. She was actually in the foreground. It was exactly backwards. Now, she wasn't getting that attention because she was Black, lesbian or female. Those things didn't put her at the head of the line. She was getting that attention because she was a celebrity.

But when you have people whose lens for everything is misogyny, racism, homophobia, and they take that lens and they insist on looking at Brittney Griner through it, they devalue those very important and legitimate claims in situations where they're absolutely appropriate. It's this one size fits all approach that people bring into the public square that concerns me.

Judith Kelley:

And part of this is, again, obviously part of the grievance story because it's fitting a round peg into a square hole of grievance all the time. So maybe let's get personal a little bit or to the extent that you want to. But you talk a little bit about how as a gay man, you've experienced some of this, and you talk specifically about the LGBTQ glossary at Johns Hopkins and some of the thoughts that made you have about what does that mean for the identity of a gay man versus a lesbian, et cetera. So do you recall enough about that to reflect on that?

Frank Bruni:

Yeah. Well, those are two different sections. The LGBTQ glossary that Johns Hopkins put out, and like some of those forbidden words thing had to retract. They had done this crazy thing where in the interests of being inclusive and sensitive to non-binary people and all that, they defined lesbian as a non-man involved with non-men, but they defined gay as a kind of man ... whatever. They ended up in an attempt to be extra sensitive. They in fact robbed women of something important, and they ended up taking it back. But where my own sexual orientation factors more in the book, and I think what really gets to your question is very often these days we talk about and we construct these hierarchies of oppression. Right?

Judith Kelley:

Yes.

Frank Bruni:

You have been marginalized and oppressed more than someone else if you're here, if you're there, if you're in the other place. You're qualified to talk about X, Y, or Z based on whether you're A, B or C. Right? And I was talking about the fact that I've been told as many of us have, when I've commented on matters of race or whatever, to check my privilege and know my ... whatever. I don't know how to assess and rank my privilege or not because yeah, I'm a white man who grew up in a very comfortable household. That is privilege. I'm also a gay man who grew up in the '60s and '70s when being gay was a very different thing in the western world, in America, everywhere.

I knew the fear that I was not going to be treated or taken seriously by people, that I was going to be dismissed because a matter of my identity. Right? So if we're trying to decide how sensitive to marginalization I can be, how privileged I am, how do you decide that? Right?

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Frank Bruni:

Because yeah, I'm white. I'm also gay. I'm gay from an era when that was a much bigger deal. And my point is all of us are so much more complicated than the categories that we're put into, and it compels you to wonder if we should be so reliant on those categories and if we should

extrapolate as far as we often do from someone's category to what they can and cannot know of and comment about in the world.

Judith Kelley:

That feeds perfectly into my next question, because when you talked about these hierarchies of oppression. Another thing that you say, I think is a pretty provocative line in your book, but it resonated with me. You said, "Popular and perverse grievance area reasoning that the oppress cannot ipso facto behave or oppressively." So not only is there hierarchy of oppression, but being perceived as an oppressed person comes with privileges in terms of ... Maybe that's the wrong word.

Frank Bruni:

I wouldn't call them privileges.

Judith Kelley:

No, that's the wrong word. Comes with not being able to be criticized, right? Because you say you can't be behave oppressively if you have been oppressed. So that clearly is not true. That clearly you can.

Frank Bruni:

No, but I'm saying you do encounter that thinking in some places.

Judith Kelley:

I think that logic is, particularly in universities, can be really dangerous because if the oppressed are incapable of themselves, any kind of wrongdoing or wrong reasoning, then it doesn't leave a lot of room for debate.

Frank Bruni:

And I don't think anything approaching a majority. I think it's a relatively small minority of people who would say to you that the oppressed ipso facto can't behave oppressively. But I'm sure you've encountered that thinking, and I have too. And it takes some really crucially important stuff out of the equation, character. Right?

I mean, we all are the products of circumstances of opportunities we have been given and opportunities that have been closed off to us. And for certain Americans in certain groups, those closed off opportunities are a much bigger reality and much more numerous. But how are lives turn out also is a matter of character. And what I'm saying is let's not take that out of the equation, and that goes back to what I said moments earlier. Let's not extrapolate so far from category that we eliminate the idea and the reality of human agency and character.

Judith Kelley:

All right. So I think your book diagnosis the ailment really well, and it's a malignant ailment. But in a recent New York Times column, you say that, "The antidote to grievance is humility." Is that

because humility forces on you a mindset that you are not necessarily right? Or why do you think that humility is the antidote to grievance, and if so, how do we administer this antidote?

Frank Bruni:

Well, how we administer it, I mean, we're in a position right here at university to, I hope. I try in my conversations with students, I try in my classroom to talk a lot about having respect for people who think and live differently. And by that I mean not just in terms of say LGBTQ people, but I mean that ideologically as well. I think humility is the antidote because humility, as you just said, tells you you're not always necessarily right. Humility also crucially tells you that you are part of something larger.

A humble person understands that there is your individual lot and you should care about and advocate for that. There's also the collective good, and you should care about that just as much, because the collective good is going to have as much to do with your own contentment and with the contentment of everybody around you. Humility tells you the world is not going to conform exactly to your liking, and that when it doesn't, that is not necessarily an insult or an injury. That's called life. Humility enables you to make distinctions between when you've encountered an injustice that you must rail against, and when you've encountered a disappointment that ranks as something lower and doesn't warrant a DEFCON 1 response. I think humility is the triumph of perspective.

Judith Kelley:

Humility is the triumph of perspective. I was going to ask you about that, because your definition of grievance upfront is real or perceived. And you also note that our country has been in many ways driven by grievances in important ways. The advances have been prompted by righteous anger. So from the individual perspective, there's humility, which brings perspective. But from a societal perspective, now what your book says is we've gotten to a point where we're addicted to grievance.

We've clearly tipped the scales in the ... but how do we know, how we find the right balance where grievance itself is still a healthy thing and how we teach young people that is okay? But how do we have them discern between the proportionality that's right to fight for? When is it? What is it about, the size of the grievance? We talked about that earlier. That some things just should be ... we should calm down over those things, because they're not that big of a deal.

I mean, I've sometimes listened to my children talk and actually been impressed by them putting an emphasis on things that I in the past would've been inclined to just brush under the rock. And we as women certainly brush things under the rock forever because ... just live with it. So how do we, yeah. Not really a question, but it's more of a ...

Frank Bruni:

No. I mean, it is a difficult thing. It's interesting though. I do want to just digress for one second. The word grievance has changed a lot, right? So I do say in the book the most important changes in this country, some of the most important changes have been driven by grievance. But grievance used to be a word that had as many positive as negative connotations. And the

fact that that's changed, I think is directly connected to how grievances have metastasized and become indiscriminate. If you looked in the paper over the next week in various papers, and every time you saw the word grievance, looked at the context, it's almost always used in a pejorative sense. It's almost always used now as a sort of overwrought, petty, obnoxious complaint. And yet, grievance is a word that is in the First Amendment to the Constitution, right?

Judith Kelley:

Right. They're legal.

Frank Bruni:

Right. To grieve something up until recent years was not necessarily a bad thing. It was often the course to justice. So how do we determine righteous grievances from that? First of all, I think we're talking now about causes versus grievances because of just the mutation of the word's connotations. I think you asked the question, how important is it that this be remedied and is there an actual remedy for it? And is that remedy something that is going to be in everybody's interests and not just the redressing of a personal insult?

We can't ask government and everyone around us to answer every insult or every injury that's come our way, and I think we just need to be mature about what can be done and what can't be done, and we need to ask again if what I'm advocating, if what I want to be done is in the collective good, or if it's just a matter of individual preference. We just have to be mature about it.

Judith Kelley:

What do you hope the book will accomplish?

Frank Bruni:

I hope the book will make us all take a really honest, hard look at ourselves at the degree to which rancor and recrimination dominate our political culture and our culture period. See how corrosive that is. I think the parts of the book that meant the most to me, were talking about the cost of all of this. And then take some steps that could bring us in a better direction. As you know, the final leg of the book talks about various political reforms we could institute, various cultural changes we could make. I don't think we have to be trapped here, but I think if we don't pivot in a healthier direction, I think the costs are going to mount, and I think we could end up not being able to pivot because we've gone so far down this very corrosive, disastrous road. So I'm hoping the book is that pivot.

Judith Kelley:

Great. I hope so too. Thank you so much for joining me today. Frank Bruni is the Eugene C. Patterson Professor of the Practice of Journalism and Public Policy here at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where he's affiliated with the The DeWitt Wallace Center for Media & Democracy, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

Policy 360 Transcript - Episode 155 The Age of Grievance

Frank joined Duke faculty after a long career at The New York Times. He's the author of four, hopefully soon to be five, New York Times bestsellers. His latest book, The Age of Grievance is out now. You might also check out his previous book and inspiring memoir called The Beauty of Dusk. We did a podcast previously with Frank Bruni at Policy 360. That's episode 129 that you might want to check out. That's all for today. Thanks for joining me. I'm Judith Kelley.