Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with U.S. Representative Christian Menefee, who is currently the member of Congress in the 18th District, recently put in place after the long-awaited special election last year. Representative, thank you very much for speaking with me. I guess the first question I have, now that you are in Congress after all of that time, how has the actual experience compared to what you thought it would be as you were running?

Christian Menefee

Oh, it's way better. I will tell you, after Greg Abbott pitted our communities against each other and weaponized the passing of the late Congressman Sylvester Turner, we went almost a year without congressional representation. That left people angry. We went through the Big, Beautiful Bill, which cut SNAP benefits and stripped access to Medicaid. We went through the longest government shutdown in modern history. And throughout all that, the 18th had no voice.

So to get to Congress on February 2nd when I was sworn in, it meant the world to so many folks throughout the community. And now that I'm in Congress, it is an extrovert's heaven. It's a lot of communicating, a lot of building coalitions. And I've only been there 90 days, but I am really enjoying the job, and I can tell that I'm going to enjoy it long term.

Charles Kuffner

Let's talk a little bit more about that, the coalition building part. I mean, I don't think it's a big secret to say that Congress is polarized in the same way that a lot of the country is. How much coalition building is going on strictly within the Democratic caucus, and how much is there legitimately across the aisle?

What does bipartisanship even mean these days when, frankly, a lot of the Republican coalition is just there to do whatever Donald Trump tells them to do?

Christian Menefee

A lot of the work is building a coalition within the Democratic caucus, and the reason why that's important is because, you know, look, you're not going to get any bill over the hump by yourself. You have to be able to have relationships. So I'm a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, very active, and the Congressional Black Caucus, and I've been deepening my relationships there.

Some of the folks in those caucuses actually support me in this race, and I'm very excited about that. But it's imperative that you build those relationships, you know, lest you end up filing bills and have no support, and they don't go anywhere. But I do think there are opportunities across the aisle.

Look, when I was county attorney, I found ways to work with Republicans to get stuff done. The first bill that I filed, Special Elections Timeliness Act, I think is a nonpartisan type deal, so I'm hopeful that I'll be able to pick up some Republican supporters there. But ultimately, the way that we win and the way that we usher in the type of version of America that we want to see is we've got to win elections.

Across the country, especially here in Texas, and so I'm committed to doing all I can to get more Democrats elected so that I can work within my caucus and be able to pass legislation instead of having to try to cross the aisle to get something done.

Charles Kuffner

And I mean, like within the state's caucus, I mean, it used to be a fairly normal thing for members of a state caucus to, you know, have shared interests, even across party lines. How much do you talk to, you know, the Republican members of caucus from Texas or how much do you anticipate talking to them going forward?

Christian Menefee

I've had some good conversations. I serve on the Science, Space and Technology Committee, which deals with a lot of issues that are nonpartisan. And there are a couple of members from the Texas delegation, Republicans who serve on there. Randy Weber is an example.

And we've been able to get some stuff done. I had an amendment to the reauthorization for quantum research, which is just a really nerdy way of saying like supercomputer research. And it was bipartisan, you know, folks supported it. I think there are going to be opportunities serving on that committee to work across the aisle to get stuff done.

But ultimately, look, the Republican Party, the modern version of it is completely beholden to Donald Trump. And it is going to be really difficult to work with people who don't want to cross a mad man who has no problem on, you know, one day telling folks to support him that he won't get into any more endless wars and then the next day dropping bombs in Iran and saying that he's going to wipe out an entire civilization. As long as Donald Trump is at the head of that party, I think you're going to have some real challenges getting folks to work across the aisle. But, you know, fingers crossed his time at the center of our body politic is almost over.

Charles Kuffner

Yeah. When we talked for the special election, a subject that I wanted to go into and we talked about some was accountability, because, you know, we saw we have seen what happened already last year after the Democratic Party and President Biden really didn't take what I think were enough steps to hold Donald Trump and his enablers accountable for things that happened in the first term. And now we're in the second term.

Let's break this down in a couple of things and starting with the war in Iran, which, you know, the president sort of did on his own. And, you know, it's on, you know, the funding mechanism for it is not defined. It's not been approved. You know, there's no there's been no invocation of the War Powers Act. In fact, you know, the president has recently claimed that, you know, technically the clock for that has restarted because of the ceasefire or whatever, whatever rationalization it was. So my first question to you is, realistically speaking, you know, is Congress going to do something to try and contain what the

president is doing with this illegal war in Iran? And what actions specifically do you support on that front?

Christian Menefee

The Iran war has been absolutely horrific. You know, we've seen 15 servicemembers killed, an Iranian school bombed, civilians being killed, and we're here because of Donald Trump. And we still have yet to hear any rational explanation for how we got here. And I'm sure that's because there isn't one that exists. At the same time, gas prices are way up. The cost of necessities are up in large part because of this war.

I was proud to vote in support of every single War Powers resolution that has come before Congress thus far, forcing the president to stand down and to come to Congress to make his case. And I'm certain that after he makes his case, I will still vote for there not to be a war. But right now, what you're seeing is Republicans are towing the party line and are not willing to cut across the aisle and ensure that we reign President Trump in.

So Democrats have a plan. And that plan is coming out of the Progressive Caucus to continue to file War Powers resolutions on a regular basis. If we're going to see U.S. servicepersons killed, if we're going to see gas prices going through the roof, then we need to have Republican members of Congress on record as continually refusing to force the president to come to Congress, which has the exclusive power to declare war, not the White House. That's a tactic that you're going to see. The second thing is when we win the House of Representatives back in November, there will be investigations going into next year. I can guarantee you every single dollar in my bank account, there will be investigations.

And those have proven to be effective. We saw Pam Bondi and Kristi Noem go before the House Judiciary Committee, get grilled, and soon thereafter get fired. And there's a lot of power that can come out of putting your head down and doing the unglamorous work in the committee. And I look forward to when we get the majority back, being a part of those efforts.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, on that score, it seems that, you know, Republicans in Congress and in Senate and the White House are aware that Democrats are likely to take the House and may even take the Senate. And so they're already trying to take steps to avoid future accountability. For example, after the long shutdown over DHS and funding ICE, that bill passed without more funding for ICE.

Now the Senate is trying to pass another reconciliation bill, a bill that would fund ICE not only for the rest of this fiscal year, but for the remainder of Donald Trump's term, which takes away the power of Congress, each individual Congress, to set funding levels. So what's the plan for that? And what do you support, you know, if the Republicans are successful in passing this, which they can do on their own without any Democratic votes, what's the Democratic plan and what's your intent in terms of undoing that so that the people can still have a voice in this kind of expenditure?

Christian Menefee

When we win the House back, we have to be prepared to claw back every single thing that was done by the Trump administration that is harmful to the American people. Look, say what you will about Republicans, but when they have power, they exercise it and they do it in a way that is unafraid. We have seen this Trump administration with his Senate and his House go in and dismantle so many Biden-era programs that were created to help everyday Americans.

They're stripping the EPA for parts. They're demolishing the Small Business Administration, the Department of Education. They're undermining the Inflation Reduction Act and a number of other programs that were enacted into law under the Biden administration.

We have to be prepared to do the heavy lifting of digging out the Trump administration once we win back the House of Representatives. And then we have to keep bringing them before committee. Look, when you shine light on the mess that is coming out of the White House, what we've seen is that's one thing that President Trump reacts to, is he does not like sunshine on his Cabinet officials and showing their idiocy.

And when you do that, you can get folks fired. So when we win the House back, we have to be prepared to take every single tool we have. And if we win the House and the Senate, then it has to be a legislative barrage of doing all we can to claw back and to pull us back to a place of normalcy and away from the harm that's been created under these several years of the Trump administration.

Charles Kuffner

And I mean, that's kind of what this all boils down to. I mean, these are the things that I think you and I agree, a lot of Democratic voters agree, but I think the disconnect or at least the concern is that members of Democratic leadership are not fully on board with the lengths that we're going to need to go to, to not only stop and stop the bad things that have happened, but undo them and hold the people who did them accountable. I mean, again, it still comes down to that. Investigations are great. Hearings are great.

But there's going to need at some point to be criminal referrals. There's going to need to be legislation that goes farther than anything we've ever done before to undo the damage. So how confident are you that Democratic leadership has what it takes and what are you going to do to persuade them of what they need to do going forward?

Christian Menefee

Well, I can only speak for the House because I don't serve in the Senate, but I'm confident in House leadership. Look, Leader Jeffries has stepped up to the plate time after time in the past six months that I've been very closely paying attention and been prepared to escalate every single time, whether it be launching investigations, whether it be ensuring that we're coordinated on litigation. Anytime there's been an opportunity to ratchet things up, I've seen Hakeem Jeffries be prepared to take those fights on.

So I'm confident in House leadership that folks will absolutely be willing to have the important conversations about not just investigations, but impeachment.

Can't say the same for the Senate. I am no fan of Senate leadership. They have undermined House Democrats a number of times. They've undermined Democrats writ large throughout the country. They've undermined the American people a number of times. And I think that there needs to be a change in Senate leadership.

But on the House side, I think we have a set of dynamic, young fighters who are prepared to take the proper steps to hold the Trump administration accountable. I would be surprised if you didn't see impeachment proceedings once we win back the House.

And I certainly will be pushing for them, at the very least, for the beginning of an investigation into what's gone on, because we already know that Trump has violated a number of laws, everything from enriching his family. You name it, he's done it. And we should be taking a hard look at it.

Charles Kuffner

That was going to be my next question. So you anticipated it well. You know, I guess let me change topics here. On the matter of immigration, we talked about, you know, funding ICE. You know, there's been a big fight over that. The Republicans are trying to do an end run around funding it going forward.

You know, on the one hand, it seems like some of the rhetoric over ICE has been dialed down. As you noted, Kristi Noem lost her job, although Tom Homan is still there. You know, but, you know, just because the rhetoric has changed doesn't mean the actions have changed. And in fact, you know, Secretary Homan is now talking about, you know, attacking New York after that state passed some laws limiting, you know, police cooperation with ICE, you know, something that we are familiar with here now in Houston.

So my question to you is, you know, it's easy to it's easy for all of us to lose focus on these things as, you know, rhetoric changes and some, you know, window dressing moves occur. And of course, with Donald Trump, there's always another distraction. Where are we with ICE? And, you know, what do you see as still as needing to be done to ensure that this rogue agency isn't harming people? Sorry, I had a hard time getting that out.

Christian Menefee

No, where we are is the Republican Party is going to bypass the traditional process for getting congressional approval for their funding. And instead, I think ICE is going to be funded through a reconciliation process. Look, the way that this played out was House Democrats, Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans all agreed to a deal that would fund all the components of the Department of Homeland Security that are not ICE.

So FEMA, the Coast Guard, the other components that do not include ICE. And ultimately, it was House Republicans that blew that up. The Freedom Caucus has control of the speaker and they blew the whole thing up.

And the message is very simple. We should not be funding an agency that has time after time terrorized communities, executed a couple of people in the street. And so that's why I was proud to vote multiple times in opposition to funding ICE and to be on the discharge petition that would force a vote on funding the other components of ICE, like TSA, FEMA and the Coast Guard, the other parts of DHS that were not ICE.

But Republicans are now just going to use their majority to bypass the traditional process and to now bootstrap in funding. Although the rhetoric may have changed maybe with conservative media outlets, I will tell you, Democrats are still very heavily focused on this. I believe we should be ripping ICE down to the studs. ICE is not something that is inextricable from the fabric of this country. ICE has not been around for 100 years. ICE was created after 9-11.

This is an agency that has built a culture of indignity towards immigrants, an agency that has a culture of radicalization and of going out and harming folks, regardless of whether they've been convicted of a crime, but just because they're undocumented. I think we need to rip it down to the studs. It needs to be a new agency that is not ICE, that is housed somewhere else, that purges the culture of treating immigrants with indignity and is focused on the enforcement of immigration laws with respect to people who have been convicted of crimes.

And then the larger picture on immigration is, look, we need a meaningful pathway to citizenship for long-term residents, for DREAMers. We need to modernize our VISA system to reflect the modern workforce. We need to do all we can to protect mixed-status families.

There was a time where Democrats and Republicans were willing to have serious conversations about how we restore immigration system in this country, but it's just not happening right now. Just yesterday, I went to the Dilley Detention Facility, which is just south of San Antonio. I went with Congressman Joaquin Castro and some other folks, and what I saw was horrific.

This is the only facility in the country that houses families, and they are detainees in a jail, effectively. I saw the looks on the faces of kids who I know are going to be traumatized from this experience for years and years and years to come. Their movement is restricted throughout the day in meaningful ways. Many called the food inedible, saying it made them sick. They've lost weight. The lights remain on all night long.

The guards are loud outside of their rooms at night so they can't sleep. It's absolutely horrific. The fact that we have this system existing right now in Donald Trump's America, I think, is a testament to their lack of respect for people in this country who are our everyday neighbors. In Houston, immigrants are part of the fabric of our city. They're business owners. They're workers. They make fantastic food. They're our neighbors. They point to our economy.

Donald Trump would have you think that every last one of those people is a violent criminal. We need to handle ICE, but there needs to be a larger conversation about fixing immigration policy in this country and Republicans, but Democrats too, have to stop running from the issue.

Charles Kuffner

It's interesting. One of the reasons why ICE has been able to do what it's been able to do is because it's gotten cooperation from red states, like Texas in particular, which has spent a bunch of its own money on, quote, unquote, immigration enforcement, just got a Fifth Circuit ruling to say that they can do that. And so it would be easy to say, well, the federal government should step in and stop states from doing that sort of thing.

But at the same time, blue states have been a big bulwark of the resistance by passing their own laws in contravention of federal directives. This is true on things like abortion. It's true on things like cooperation with ICE. It's true on gay and transgender rights.

So how do you see the balance of respecting what states can do while also providing a national framework, perhaps a floor, if you will, for rights and abilities in a way that both, like I said, restricts the bad things and enables the good thing? What's your thoughts on that?

Christian Menefee

Yeah, I don't think about it globally like that. The way I think about it is we have a task in front of us. It's our job to execute and to win. I'm not concerned with intellectual consistency across decades. I'm concerned with winning. And I think this is one area where Republicans have been able to beat us.

We have the opportunity to get Merrick Garland on the United States Supreme Court, and Republicans say, well, no, the rule is you can't do it that close to an election. OK, fine. But then the exact same thing happens under the Trump administration. And what happens? Mitch McConnell says, I don't care what I said yesterday. I have an opportunity to win and to cement a conservative majority for a generation. I'm going to do that. I think Democrats have to start thinking that way. My goal is when we have power, we need to exercise that power.

And if there are states that are harming immigrants, we need to crack down on them. We can save protecting the blue states and their rights for a different day. But when we have power, we must exercise it and be less focused on kind of the macro intellectual conversation, more focused on the execution.

If you look at the successes of the Republican Party over the last 15 years, that's how they've gotten there. It's been being less high minded about the consistency and more focused on the task at hand. The task at hand in front of them several years ago was overturning Roe v Wade. And it didn't matter what they had said the day before, the week before, the month before, the year before, the decade before, they were going to do that. And they did that.

I think we should be that committed to the things that we believe in. If we truly believe that Donald Trump and these Republican governors, many of them who are running to the most rabid parts of their bases, if we really believe that they're a threat to democracy, we have to be prepared to when we have power to exercise that power, regardless of what the kind of intellectual inconsistency may be that could bring harm 10 years down the road.

Charles Kuffner

Well, I mean, a big reason why Republicans are able to exercise that power is because the Supreme Court has enabled them. We see as, you know, not just with the Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade, but, you know, with the presidential immunity, with the decimation of the Voting Rights Act, and on and on.

So, you know, it seems clear that if we have the Democratic trifecta in 2029 that we all want, and we all think we can get, anything we do is going to be overturned by the Supreme Court because that's how they roll. So what are we going to do about that? What is your view? What will you advocate for to ensure that we have, you know, a real Supreme Court that isn't just an arm of the Republican Party?

Christian Menefee

I support term limits. Look, I don't believe that anybody should have a lifetime job. It just doesn't make sense to me. I understand the original intent of making Supreme Court justices lifetime appointees. It was to ensure that they would not be considering the politics of the day, but they would just go to work and do their job. You know, Charles, I'll tell you, if you look at the Supreme Court right now, it seems like they are very much impacted by the politics of the day.

So whatever our goals were, that is not what's happening in real time. These are politicians. These are people who get up on this bench, and they do, they chase political outcomes from the bench. It used to be that the right would accuse the left of judicial activism, but over the some of the worst judicial activism you have seen in the history of the courts. So these are political actors in my mind, and if that's the case, they should have term limits like anybody else.

I also support increasing the number of justices who will serve on the United States Supreme Court. Look, I think the Supreme Court is doing more harm to the body politic right now than anybody in modern American history, except for Donald Trump. We have to be heavy handed in addressing that and fighting back against it. So I support major reforms to how we end up with justices on the Supreme Court in this country.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, I want to ask you about cryptocurrency, because that's something that's both been in the campaign and is also just sort of a broader question, because we see how much money the Trump family has made through various cryptocurrency schemes would be the nice way of putting it. Scams, I think, is the more accurate way. You know, right now, cryptocurrency is largely unregulated.

The Biden administration took some steps to try and do that. The cryptocurrency industry responded with a whole lot of money. You know, they helped elect a Republican senator in Ohio. You know, what do you support in terms of regulating the cryptocurrency industry?

Christian Menefee

Yeah, I support regulating the hell out of them. Look, we need to regulate them to keep the scams and the fraud out of the industry. If you look at the 2008-2009 mortgage crisis, there were so many folks who had homes, started saying balloon payments on their mortgages, and all of a sudden couldn't afford those homes, and they were out on the street.

And this was in large part because of speculators on Wall Street, because government had buried its head in the sand and failed to properly regulate Wall Street, failed to properly regulate the housing industry, and it led to an absolute catastrophe. I am a firm believer that Congress needs to take on the tough issues. You cannot bury your head in the sand.

And so you can't act like the technology doesn't exist, because it's there. 55 million Americans use digital assets. It is a much higher percentage of folks who do in black and brown communities. And then when you get the young people, the number is even higher. So what that tells us is in the next five to 10 years, that number is going to balloon. This technology, blockchain technology, is not going anywhere.

And Congress has a duty to regulate the technology. So the way that I think about it is we have to check a few boxes. One, we have to regulate in a way that gets scammers out of the industry.

And I have a passion for banning scams and fraudsters. That's what I did as Harris County Attorney. I created an entire practice that went after the fraudsters and folks who would scam folks in a number of other ways. But we also have to ensure that there are processes in place to ensure that people who have traditionally been excluded from traditional forms of wealth generation, black folks, whoever may be, are able to build wealth without predatory fees. We have to preserve the real world use cases. I've talked a lot about how I dealt with the defraud cases at the county, and how we register deeds right now is completely antiquated.

And it's why people's homes are able to be stolen out from under them, because we have this weird paper system that involves the county clerk's office when there could be more thoughtful uses of technology that would allow for better protection. And then we have to be positioned well to continue to compete across the world. So there's all sorts of provisions, like forcing these platforms to verify identities and report transactions in the same way that banks do.

An outright ban on fraud in this space that is specifically tethered to the crypto industry and not just a writ large ban that we've seen folks rely on in the past. We need rules of the road. That's how you get the scammers out, and that's how you go after them. And then, of course, you have to ban politicians from trading cryptocurrency. I've already signed on to a couple of stock trading bans. I don't hold any personal stock.

I don't hold any crypto. I have never held any crypto. But we need to have a ban in place for members of Congress, the president, the president's family, from being able to push out these meme coins and defraud people and make money.

Charles Kuffner

Okay, well, you said up front that you're going to work to help get more Democrats elected in Texas and elsewhere. Tell me more about how you plan to do that.

Christian Menefee

Yeah, so look, although I'm the newbie to Congress, I think I'm the candidate in this race who has done the most to help get other people elected. Since I first stepped on the scene in politics in like 2016, I have spent just about every waking moment trying to get other folks elected, whether it be block walking with school board candidates, city council folks, county commissioners. I was the first elected official to support Dexter McCoy when he launched his campaign for county commissioner out in Fort Bend, to even folks in other parts of the state.

I can remember James Talarico calling me for my support when he was running for state representative years ago and me doing everything I could to help get him elected. We have to understand that this is a team sport. So many politicians get elected or they get nominated in the primary. They're in a gerrymander seat and they disappear. They are nowhere to be found for the general, not helping the ticket in any way, shape or form. I have a track record of putting my money where my mouth is, my time where my mouth is, putting my feet to the pavement to block walk for folks, throwing events for them.

It's about doing the work because ultimately my goal of a Texas where everybody's paid a living wage, where people are going to public schools that are fantastic palaces, where people have health care, that does not get done without us flipping the state of Texas. So if I am just about trying to push myself forward, I'm never going to be able to achieve the things that I want to in politics. So I'm always going to be helping other folks get elected.

I look forward to working for the ticket. I've already told both James Talarico and Gina Hinojosa that as soon as I win this primary to plug me in where you need me, I will fundraise, I will knock doors, I will galvanize people across the state. Let me know where you need me and I will be of service because this is a team sport and we have got to flip the state in order for us to reflect the true diverse population in Texas and not just the small minority of right wing nut jobs who control it.

Charles Kuffner

As you say, you have to win this race first. You are in the primary runoff to be the Democratic nominee for the new CD18, which unfortunately I am no longer in. So when people go to vote in this primary runoff on May 26th, why should they vote for you and not your opponent, the longtime representative Al Green?

Christian Menefee

Yeah, look, as I've talked to people throughout our communities, what they're saying is they want a fighter who's going to win and who's going to be in this fight for the long haul to transform our government. Look, what we're seeing out of the White House right now, these are once in a generation fights. We are not in normal times.

We need new tactics, new strategies, new fighters who are going to step up and stand up to the Trump administration. I was block walking and I knocked the door of an 80-year-old woman. And as she was opening the door, I was thinking to myself all these things she was going to ask me about, Social Security, Medicare. And she opened the door and said, young man, what are you going to do about Donald Trump? People want fighters who are going to be prepared to stand up and get stuff done to make their life better.

However, all these folks across the country who are running for Congress saying that they're going to fight, I've been saying this since 2019. And the good news is I have a track record now. I beat the Trump administration in court, Greg Abbott in court, Ken Paxson in court to protect voting rights, make sure we have clean air and clean water, to protect health care programs, so much so that the Trump administration themselves called me a radical attorney. I was just some random county attorney in Texas.

And they called me out as somebody who was doing that work and beating them. If you look at what's effective in Congress right now, it is young members showing up to the House Judiciary Committee, the House Oversight Committee, and figuring out ways to put these administration officials in a bind, getting them fired, getting their programs shut down. That's the name of the game right now, while also still being able to move legislation. And I'm going to be the candidate, the member of Congress who steps in, who builds relationships and who gets stuff done.

I agree with the many people who have said that seniority matters. But to me, seniority matters when it delivers. The way that Sheila Jackson Lee delivered to expand and extend the Violence Against Women Act, the way that Mickey Leland delivered on world hunger. It is about getting in there and getting bills passed and getting stuff done. And I'm going to be a workhorse, not a show horse, and do exactly that.

So I look forward to getting through to Election Day and hopefully winning this thing and continuing the fight in Congress and being an effective member.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Representative Christian Menefee, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Christian Menefee

Thank you.