04112023 Sportico Needham Boris Johnson

**Speaker: Boris Johnson – In-person Q&A – Kiawah, South Carolina, USA**

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**Host: Sportico Needham**

**Moderator: Andrew Ross Sorkin, journalist and author**

(Applause.)

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Good evening, everybody. What a privilege and ball this is going to be over the next 45 minutes that we’re going to have here with Boris Johnson to talk about the world, to talk about leadership, and maybe go on a little bit of a tour, a political tour. Boris is in the process of writing a book right now, which we’ll also get to. But I think there’s a lot to discuss.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** There’s a lot to discuss, Andrew. Fantastic to be here. Wonderful to see you all. It reminds me a bit of an English summer wedding, the atmosphere here, with slightly better weather, and less drunken. So far anyway.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** So far, so far.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It’s wonderful to be here.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Before we begin, a brief thank you to George and Jay, who put this remarkable group together, I know the beginning of many, many years of reunions. This is the second year, and it’s quite, quite exciting.

What I want to do is I want to talk about all the people that you know. I want to talk about the Zelensky. I want to talk about Putin. I want to talk about Xi, MBS, Trump, Biden. We’re going to go through the list, and we’re going to get your take on all of them.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Okay.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I want to also say, Boris’s sister, this is Rachel.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Rachel.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** She said this about you. She says, “As Boris was growing up, whenever anybody asked him what you want it to be, he would answer, ‘world king.’” (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** It’s totally untrue. My sister says all sorts. She’s a brilliant journalist. But I would point out, I did become president of the G7 and hosted COP26, which is pretty close. And held the UN Security Council presidency. I mean, that’s not world king, but it’s kind of it’s in the ballpark, I would say. (Laughter, applause.) I haven’t pointed that out to Rachel, but I think I will. (Laughter.)

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Before we get into the other cast of characters who probably think of themselves as the world king, I want to ask you just one question about leadership. This is a room full of leaders. There has been what I would argue to you, and you can disagree with me, a shift over the last decade about what’s a world leader and what a leader even looks like, what they act like, how the public thinks about them, how the public thinks about experts and expertise. And to some degree, and you again can disagree with me, I think you have been an embodiment of some that, an untraditional leader to some degree. What do you think of that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I think that the leadership response to the market, and we just heard our brilliant Youth Poet Laureate say, what did she say, “They say my generation has a short attention span, my generation has a short attention span, they say.” People are constantly on social media. They don’t want the same old stuff.

I think that people’s idea of what a leader is probably has changed, but that doesn’t mean that the function of leadership has changed. Leaders are people who have to take a huge number of decisions, like you guys all do, but just very, very fast and with implacably hostile media. Leaders are people who simply have to make that cool, and that’s what you’re there for.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** But do you think the approach – people use to comport themselves in certain ways. You wrote a whole book about Churchill.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah. Well, he comported himself in the most extraordinary way. He wore purple romper suits and all sorts of funny hats. I mean, he was, by his own standards at his own time, he was deeply unconventional and peculiar, and often drunk, in a way that would be thought today in western democracies to be completely unacceptable, which it is, of course, for the avoidance of doubt.

Actually, his financial arrangements, has anybody looked at that? Has anybody looked at how Winston Churchill’s private finances were organized, where he got his money, who funded it? It would not bear scrutiny today.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** That’s a good segue to Putin. (Laughter.)

You get a call from him.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah. No, I think we rang him, but yes.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** You rang him?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah. Well, several times. This is in the days before the war before the war.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Before the war.

What was your relationship with him like?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Terrible, vestigial because this is a guy who murdered an innocents – or ordered the murder of an innocent civilians in Salisbury, in Wiltshire when I was foreign secretary, using a Novichok poison to try to assassinate a double agent, who’s living in Salisbury, and he killed this innocent member of the public. And for me, he was a monster for doing that. But we had to talk to him, because we had to try to persuade him that invading Ukraine was crazy. And so that’s what we did.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** So you call him up.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** And what happened? Tell us about the phone – what happened? How does that work?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, it’s one of those long, rambling conversations, in which he –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** It’s like it was preplanned, meaning you have your people talk to his beforehand, so that there’s a whole sort of orchestrated thing, or how does that happen?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, I think the call is arranged, but it’s in no sense scripted. My job is to try to argue with him that Ukraine doesn’t pose any kind of threat to Russia, which indeed it didn’t, doesn’t, certainly didn’t, and that it would be insane for him to invade.

He kept trying to proclaim that NATO was going to station missiles in Ukraine, which is absolute nonsense, and that it was somehow that NATO was somehow encroaching too much on his borders.

And I said, look, Ukraine is not going to join NATO anytime soon, which is actually what the truth is. What I couldn’t say, the reality was Ukraine at that stage wasn’t going to join NATO anytime in the next 30, 40 50 years. Now it is going to join.

The one thing Putin has done is demolish the argument against Ukraine joining NATO, because the argument against Ukraine joining NATO was that it might provoke the Russians to invade. Well, that worked well, didn’t it?

I made that point to him. We talked a little bit about the risks of escalation, and he said that he didn’t want to get into any kind of military confrontation between Russia and NATO. He made some remarks, which we widely publicized, about not wanting to be responsible for a stray missile that could accidentally take me out.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Take you out?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s what I understood him to be saying, yes. (Laughter.) Why that would be a strategic objective of Putin, I don’t know.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** So when he says that, what do you say?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** What he was trying to do, and this is so important that everybody gets this in their head, he was trying to frame the argument about the invasion of Ukraine as a nuclear confrontation between Russia and NATO. Ever since, he’s tried to drag it, to drag everybody’s focus back to this nuclear risk. I don’t believe it exists, I think it’s nonsense, and I think most people now can see that. But he has tried to spook us, to make our flesh creep by talking about the nuclear aspect of this, and that’s what he was doing.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** He said afterwards that he didn’t say that.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Correct. And all I can tell you is that’s what he wants. That’s what he said, and all I can tell you is that is how he wants to frame the argument. And if we allow ourselves to go down this rabbit hole, and if we get spooked by him, then he’s going to have some kind of military success in Ukraine, and that is what I think is the real risk and the disaster.

I want to pay tribute, since I’m here in United States, to the United States of America, because I think that without the U.S., Ukraine would be in a very, very different condition today, tonight. I think that what the U.S. has done, $45, $50 billion worth of help, huge quantities of military systems, I don’t know what you folks feel about it, but I think it’s been absolutely magnificent. I don’t think that the people of the United States, the government of the United States gets enough praise and thanks for it, because it’s way, way beyond what any other countries do.

And all I would say is that now is the time not to hesitate but to double down and give the Ukrainians what they need, keep giving them what they need. They need it now, they need it this year, they need it in 2023. They can take back their land. They can take back this year, if they’re given what they need, if they’re given the artillery that they need, if they’re given the armored personnel carriers, they can take back that land bridge between barrier Poland and the Crimea, if you can visualize what I’m talking about, or they can punch through to the Sea of Azov, punch back through to the Black Sea. And all they need is the kit to do it.

I think if that happens, and the Ukrainians cut off Crimea, I think it’s a massive strategic defeat for Putin.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** And that’s how it ends?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think you’ll find, look, I mean, we’ve got to stop worrying about Putin, right? I don’t care what happens to his political career. It’s not our job to be his advisors or spin doctors. He’ll find a way of arguing his way out of it. But I think strategically it’s a disaster for him, because he loses his ability to guarantee Crimea, and I think he’ll have big political consequences. He’ll face big political consequences in Moscow.

So that’s how to do it, folks. All I’m saying is, United States of America, thank you for everything that you’ve done so far. Keep going, stick with it, double down, give them the APCs.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Let me ask you a different question. Last year, George Bush was on this stage. His brother is here. Where’s Jeb?

One of the things, if I remember correctly, that came up was President Bush talked about Zelinsky in the same sentence with Churchill, if I recall.

And so my question to you is, how do they compare, given that you know Zelensky in person and Churchill in writing?

**JEB BUSH:** (Off mic.) (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Say again.

**JEB BUSH:** He spoke very highly of you, too.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, I’m delighted to hear that, and honored to be here tonight with you. Great to see you.

Look, I think the there’s one important component. Churchill and Zelensky, again, you could say that they were both Mavericks. Churchill was widely criticized. He was thought to be a kind of eccentric radio personality, I think Evan Moore, the author, called him a second rate radio personality at the height of the Second World War. And Zelensky, as you know, is a big, big media figure and made his name as a TV game show host and actor and so on.

But the key point of comparison is that Churchill and Zelinsky both understood the vital importance to their country and to freedom of recruiting the support of the United States of America. I made this point already. Churchill spent, as you’ll remember, weeks and weeks wandering around the White House, without any clothes on, trying to persuade Roosevelt. There were no limits to what he would do to try and persuade Roosevelt to come in on the side of Great Britain in 1941, ‘42. And that was absolutely decisive for the freedom and for the history of the last 70, 80 years.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Let me ask you about China, and in particular, President Xi, another person you know well.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’ve talked to him a couple of times on the phone. I had a wonderful time as Prime Minister, but most of it was spent fighting this awful disease COVID, and Xi and I didn’t meet as much as I’d have liked.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Well give us your sort of top level take on two things.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m a Sinophile. Let’s not be hostile to China. I like China, okay? I don’t have this kind of visceral antipathy to everything Chinese that seems to be spreading around. I don’t agree with that. I went to the Beijing Olympics as mayor, and I had a great time. And I admire Chinese culture and civilization massively.

I mean, they’re very bossy. I had to go out and collect the Olympic flag on the stage in 2008. And the guy, as I was about to go out, he pointed at my stomach, which I thought was a bit rude. And I said it was too late; I was what I was. I couldn’t lose weight between now and going to pick up this flag.

He said, no, he wanted me to do up my jacket. I thought, well, maybe I was going to do up my jacket. And I thought, no. (Laughter.) I thought, I’m the Mayor of London. We believe in freedom. I’m not going to be told what to do with my personal sartorial style by some Chinese guy. And so, I went out with my jacket undone, and got viciously criticized by everybody in Britain, particularly readers of *The Daily Telegraph*, I seem to remember.

But I’m pro-China genuinely, but I think I’m worrying. I think I agree with those who say that we face a challenge from China, there are things where we can no longer be as optimistic as we were perhaps back in 2008. And I’m afraid there are too many areas now where I wouldn’t like to see Chinese investments any more in parts of UK critical national infrastructure, and we spent a lot of money getting them out of 5G networks and so on. We had to do that. Our nuclear power stations, we had crazy joint ventures with Chinese nuclear generation. We had to stop all that; vastly expensive. We’ve got to be realistic about China.

But my top line is, don’t have a cold war with China. Just don’t. I really don’t see –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** But how do you avoid a cold war with China if you’re doing the things that you’re talking about?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Because, well, you’ve got to protect your critical national interests. You’ve got to be tough. The Chinese expects you to be tough. They really do. They don’t want any pussyfooting around. But China is 20% of humanity. You’ve got to trade with China. You’ve got to do business, but you’ve got to be realistic.

Just a crucial thing, I don’t think China conceivably represents a long-term, strategic – well, China is obviously a challenger, it’s a competitor, but it’s not going to win.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** China is not going to win?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** China is not going to win. I’ll tell you the country that’s going to win. The United States of America is going to win. I know this. I was telling somebody earlier; I’d just driven from Charlotte to – do I mean Charlotte? I do. That’s right, I’ve driven from Charlotte to Charleston. And I can tell you, the amazing thing about this country is that it is not only already so stupendously rich in per capita GDP, and so full of genius everywhere, so many amazing cities, pullulating with universities and God knows what, but it is also, by comparison, both with China and even more so with India, staggeringly underpopulated. There’s nobody here.

(Laughter.) I’m serious. It’s amazing. This is the richest most, powerful country on earth, by far – by far, and it’s basically in its economic infancy. I’m serious.

The American hegemony is going to continue, in my view, way beyond my lifetime, way, way beyond my lifetime, and into the foreseeable future. Look at China’s demographic curve above everything else. India, China, these are ancient, ancient civilizations with vast population. The U.S. has still got a long way to go.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** You’re cool with keeping your TikTok account then?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I don’t know about that. I was asked that question earlier. I haven’t got the faintest idea about TikTok.

Who has a TikTok account here?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Shadow account.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Shadow, okay. (Laughter.) I mean, is it banned here, TikTok now?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Not yet, but it depends. We have some government officials here who probably can’t –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I’m TikTok agnostic. I don’t know whether TikTok is a crucial part of our national security.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Okay, I’m going to make it more complicated: Taiwan. To the extent that Taiwan is considered – and what we saw, look, some people actually say that what we saw with Ukraine and Russia is a dress rehearsal of sorts. The most interesting element of this was we saw so many Western companies, frankly, have to withdraw from Russia. And it was something that economically I think a lot of companies could afford to do. It was a moral decision, but it was not an impossible economic decision. If, in fact, China were to take over Taiwan, what happens?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, we’ve got to prevent that from happening. Look, I think the problem we have is that both the United States, to a lesser extent than the UK, but both of us have a problem, which is we’re emotionally committed to a One China doctrine. The U.S. has got various different riders to that, and is much further ahead in sticking up for democracy and independence in Taiwan than we are, at least formally.

But we need to recognize that that position is now redundant, it’s old. The fact is that Taiwan seems to want to have an independent, democratic future. I think we’re going to have to start thinking about how to help them to achieve that.

I don’t think we can be indifferent. I think if people have a feeling of national identity, they want to have a different future, that’s why Ukraine is so important to me. I think it’s going to be very, very tough. I hope that China, Beijing and Taiwan, Taipei can sort it out. But if they can’t sort it out, then we’re going to have to do whatever we can to prevent Beijing doing something terrible. Whether that’s giving arms to Taiwan or whatever, I don’t know.

But if I think back to Ukraine, I’m very, very grateful that we in the UK gave weapons to Ukraine in the runup to that invasion. Everybody at the time said, don’t do this. My officials several times said, don’t send them the shoulder-launched antitank weapons. The U.S., of course, gave even more. But I’m glad we did that.

Look, all I’m saying is I am worried about it. I think it’s very, very complex. I think the analogy with Ukraine is not perfect. But I think we can’t rely on this old idea that there’s just a One China solution. It seems to me that Taiwan is on a different path.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** We’re going to continue our travels around the world. You’re long on the U.S. I would gamble probably 80% of this room has been spending time in the Middle East a lot in the last year.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Good idea.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Maybe I’m wrong about that, I could be wrong about that. Are you long on Saudi Arabia? What do you think about MBS?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Look, I think I wrote a piece in – it might even have been in the *New York Times*, I think, saying – or maybe it was the *Washington Post*, I’m sorry, saying –forgiver me – saying that I thought that what the Saudis did to Khashoggi was appalling. I’m a journalist by background. You’re a journalist. I think it was an appalling crime. But the fact is that MBS is, I think, somebody who’s doing extraordinary things with his country, and he’s taking it in a different direction. You’ve got to hope that things will work.

I don’t think we can just ignore things like the murder of Khashoggi. You’ve got to bring it up, and you’ve got to be frank about it. You can’t just sweep it on the carpet. I never did and I never would. But am I long on Saudi and on the changes happening in Saudi? Yeah, I think that it’s extraordinary.

Just a basic thing that’s happened since MBS has been in charge is that Saudi no longer seems to me to be quite the breeding ground for international terror that it was, and it’s actually safer for a Western person to walk around the streets of Saudi Arabia that it was, considerably so. You’re at much less risk of being taken out by a jihadi nutcase, much less risk. That seems to me to be a positive development.

And if you’re looking at where the money is being spent, where the investment is going in, where the big projects are happening, NEOM is a colossal idea. Whether it will work, I don’t know.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** The next question may be closer to the bone for the Saudis. What do you think of the idea of sportswashing. You’ve heard this phrase, sportswashing?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I have, only since arriving here. (Laughter.) But it’s a great idea. (Laughter.)

Look, I think I can see what’s happening. What you’re driving at is, I know what you’re talking about. You’re saying, you’re gently suggesting to this distinguished audience that they may be involved collectively in helping some Middle Eastern governments that we would otherwise –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I think I’m saying –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** No, no, you can deny this if you want. (Laughter.) Some Middle Eastern governments that we might otherwise find not quite salubrious, they’re helping them to sportswash by investing in great teams, is that it?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** That’s basically the concept.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s the concept, okay.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** What do you think of that?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think that –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Sports is a wonderful thing. It brings people together.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Sure, sure. But I think there’s no – here’s what I think. There’s no fundamental difference between the investment by the United Arab Emirates or whoever in Arsenal, and their investment in the XL Center or whatever, no fundamental difference between the Qataris buying – which sports team do they have?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** (Off mic.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** That’s not a British team. (Laughter.) I’m not very good on football.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Man United.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. There’s no difference between that, the Qataris putting a bid in for Man United, and buying the Shard or the Olympic Village or Harrods or any of the other things that they own in London, right? What’s the difference?

Are you asking, am I in favor of inward investment from the Gulf? You bet. You bet. And if that’s called sportswashing, I don’t have a problem with that.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Let’s take the conversation back here.

By the way, I want to open this up in just a moment. I’m sure there’s a lot of better questions out here, and everyone will get their shot on goal.

But the politics of this country, your relationship with Trump, your relationship with Biden?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Oh, yes.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** 2024: What do you think is going to happen?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Well, I was asking you guys earlier on, and everybody went totally silent. It was a sort of terror, looking at each other with a terrified air.

I’ll tell you exactly what I think. First of all, Biden, the current president of United States, I have a very good relationship with him. As I said to you right at the beginning, and I repeated it several times, I am totally sincere in this, I think that what the U.S. has done to help the people of Ukraine has been wonderful. And I really, really think it’s wonderful. I think a lot more to be done. They need those APCs. They need air cover. They need lots of stuff, right? But Joe Biden has been magnificent, and he got it. He’s a natural Atlanticist. He understands the vital importance of America in Europe, as well as America in the Pacific and everywhere else.

And on Donald Trump, to be very, very frank with you, very, very frank, it is impossible not to feel warmly towards somebody who is so personal kind of like you or me. Like all human beings, I tend to like people who seem to like me. (Laughter.)

By the way, his endorsements of me became probably quite damaging. (Laughter.) At one stage. I enjoy his company. He’s amusing. He’s a brilliant communicator.

As for the ‘24 election, there as they say, I’m over-questioned, as they say. Let’s ask ChatGPT what it thinks is going to happen, because I bet – have you tried that? Why don’t we do that now? You’ll get a very sensible, you’ll get a very serious answer. Asking ChatGPT would be just about as much use as asking me.

Look, if I had to guess, oh dear -- (laughter) -- I’ll stick with what I was saying earlier. I think that probably – probably, look, knowing a fraction of what you know about the politics of the United States of America, I would guess that probably it would be tough for any Republican to win right now, given the composition of the country, but maybe even tougher for –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** What do you think the perception of the country is now, of the U.S?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think it’s positive, and everybody should stop worrying about the – (applause) – America is for me, it’s a shining city on a hill. It’s the greatest country on Earth, with the obvious exception of the United Kingdom. (Laughter.) It’s the last, best hope of humanity. Let’s all stop being so embarrassed about this. America’s leadership role in the world is clear, but it’s more indispensable than ever.

I think that, look at which countries produce the greatest scientific breakthroughs? Which countries produce the music that everybody actually wants to listen to?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** (Off mic.) (Laughter.)

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Okay, that’s a very smart observation. But they only had one hit. They had one hit called Gangnam Style. (Laughter.) Really. There was one year when the UK had six of the world’s top 10 tunes, and it’s the same for the U.S.

Sportico is interested in sport, right? Yeah. Okay. Well, so which countries produce the sports, the games that the world loves to watch? Do they watch the Chinese? I have no disrespect. You heard me say I’m a Sinophile, right? But do people watch the Beijing Premier League on their TVs in bars in, I don’t know, Kampala or Charlotte?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I don’t know the answer.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Seriously, I can tell you, I can tell you for a fact that in bars in Kampala, in Tierra del Fuego, they will be watching the UK Premier League. That’s what they’ll be watching. They will.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** They will. I’m sure they will.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And they’ll be supporting teams from my country, composed of people from all around the world.

But it is our countries that invented those sports, by the way. I mean, we invented them actually, but you took them. (Laughter.) I think we even invented baseball. (Laughter.)

I think however – actually, I realize I’m in the presence of a lot of American football. I don’t think we invented American football. (Laughter.) As the name suggests.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Finally, let’s just talk about your own country. I know you’re long on the U.S. and some of these other places. Talk about Brexit. Talk about where the country is now, where you think the country would have been without Brexit, with Brexit. What do you really think?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Brexit. Do not listen to the wonderful, liberal media that will tell you that this has all been – including, I’m sad to say, it’s on elements of the *New York Times*, and the *BBC*, and it’s nonsense.

Brexit was entirely the right thing to do. The United Kingdom should not have been locked into evolutionary progress towards a kind of federal structure of many different European countries. That was not the right destiny for the UK. There are all sorts of good, economic, regulatory reasons why independence has already proved its worth, and I’ll give you one, and that is the vaccines.

And by the way, who’s been vaccinated here. Right. I have, too, by the way. How many had Sputnik? (Laughter.) Anybody have Sputnik, whatever it was made of, monkey gland? How many had Sinovac or Sinopharm?

And again, no conceivable disrespect to our Chinese friends, but the most efficacious vaccines were made in the liberal, capitalist democracies, and they were devised there. They were patented there. And in the UK, they were approved faster than any other European country, much faster. In fact, I think we were the first country to put an approved and effective COVID vaccine into anybody’s arms anywhere in the world, under my former government. And as a result of that speed, we were able to do a vaccine rollout much, much faster.

And that was because of Brexit, because we’d taken back control, in the famous phrase of our medical health regulation agency, we’d taken it out of the European Medicines Agency, and we were able to do whatever we wanted to do as fast as we wanted.

So by April 2021, we had 50% of our population vaccinated, compared to about 10% of the rest of Europe. And I’m not putting it too high; Brexit saved lives. Thousands, tens of thousands of vulnerable, elderly people, who might have died from COVID, got a vaccine faster because of Brexit. You won’t hear that much on the *BBC*, but it’s true. And there are plenty of other things that we’re doing, and that we’re going to do.

I mean, we talk about AI, ChatGPT. They’re already wanting to ban it in – is it Italy?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** In Italy and in other places. Slow it down also.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** And the EU is starting to propose. And they have a history of it. They banned genome editing in the EU.

We’re not going to do that. You want to ban this stuff? I think it’s nuts, absolutely nuts. Every time there is a brilliant scientific advance, a labor-saving device of any kind, people come and say, this is a disaster for humanity, let’s smash the mills, let’s smash the looms, smash Arkwright’s, whatever Arkwright came up with. It wasn’t the Spinning Jenny. Was it the Spinning Jenny? Okay, whatever.

That’s what people want to do. They say, when they invented the internal combustion engine, people said it would put all the grooms and the hostlers and the carriage drivers out of work. And now everybody’s worried that it will put –

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I’m worried.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Are you worried?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I am. I am.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Would you ban it?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** I wouldn’t ban it, but I’m still worried.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Why are you worried?

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Have you used it?

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Yeah, I have. It’s good, but it’s not that good. It’s not that good.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Yes. Yes. There’s a bunch of people, I think, who –

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think it’s useful. I think we have nothing to fear. Nothing to fear.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** From your lips, I hope you’re right.

I know we want to get to food, and I know there’s a bunch of questions. I think we have a microphone in the back here, and I saw a couple people making eyes earlier. But maybe they’re not making eyes anymore.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think we’ve covered it. We did Russia. We did China. We did with the United States. We did Britain. We did Brexit. Sport.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Okay, I’m going to land you – oh, go ahead.

**QUESTION:** So on the note on sportswashing, you kind of leveled the playing field between the countries that are investing to build economic relations with the West, and countries that are doing it to cover their crimes.

Don’t you think that there should be a disparity and a distinction when we’re looking at the countries that are doing that in terms of the sportswashing? And it’s known, culture precedes politics. If you’re able to change the culture, the politics will change. So when you use sports to change a public perception about a crime, or about something that was done, don’t you think that there’s a difference between those two.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I get you. No, I totally understand that. But which countries are you talking about there? Who are you saying, which countries are you saying are so beyond the pale that there should be no sporting links with them at all?

**QUESTION:** Saudi Arabia for what they did to Jamal and the war in Yemen. And you made the distinction between Emirates and Qatar, and they’re kind of investing in those countries or more for the economic relations, to build relationships with the countries, but Saudi Arabia has been investing heavily in the cultural space, in the entertainment space, in the sports space, so that they can change the culture, and that way the politics would proceed and come later, and he’d be able to present himself in a different image, which is actually happening right now.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Okay, so on Saudi, would you then pitchfork away all Saudi investments altogether? Would you say no? I mean, the logic of your of your argument would be that any kind of investment from Saudi is tainted.

**QUESTION:** No, of course, not. There has to be some limitations and some sense of accountability for a crime that’s committed as heinous as the killing of Khashoggi and the war in Yemen, the poverty that’s happened there, the children that have died. All of those things, I feel there needs to be some sense of accountability and leveling the playing field between those countries and countries that are doing it to actually build relationships with the West is different.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I hear you. Look, I think that, first of all, nobody should minimize what happened to Jamal Khashoggi. I hope you heard me say that loud and clear. I’ve raised it with MBS, as you’d expect. I know the U.S. was as indignant and outraged as everybody else.

I think it was a political disaster for Saudi Arabia. I think it set them back hugely, and quite rightly. It was clearly an unforgivable crime. And there have been sanctions put in place for those who were clearly involved, with the exception, of course, insofar as the Crown Prince was involved, clearly there’s a there’s an exception there.

Look, I’m not going to pretend it’s pretty. It’s not easy. But you’ve got to think which way is this country going? It’s the guardian of the holiest places in Islam. Where do you ultimately want Saudi Arabia to end up?

It seems to me that – and I mentioned some of the ways in which you’ve seen progress in Saudi Arabia. I don’t minimize that. I don’t minimize the importance of that. And if Saudi Arabia can keep changing, keep making progress, then I would defend engagement with Saudi Arabia, even to the point of having sporting links with Saudi Arabia. We don’t ban them from sporting events. We didn’t ban them from the World Cup, for how far they got in the World Cup.

But it’s not easy. I’m not pretending to you that I love it. But if you start banning sporting participation, if you start stopping athletes from going to events, if you stop, where does it end? We tried that, and if it didn’t work with the Olympics in Moscow in 1980. We told the Olympic athletes not to go in the UK. The British team, they all went anyway, as far as I can remember. I think the Americans boycotted it and we didn’t. That’s my memory in 1980. Does anyone remember? Actually, that’s why we won a lot of medals actually. (Laughter.)

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** The great sportsmen.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** I think we did. I think we won the sprint. (Laughter.)

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Boris Johnson, everybody.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thanks to the American boycott.

**ANDREW ROSS SORKIN:** Thank you. Thank you very, very much. Thank you for the conversation.

**RT HON BORIS JOHNSON:** Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

END