TRANSCRIPT
The Impossible State

“Bolton Book and NK Blow UP”

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Andrew Schwartz: North Korea is the impossible state. It’s a place that’s stumped leaders and policymakers for more than three decades.

Judy Woodruff: (From recording from PBS NewsHour.) North Korea blew up the Inter-Korean Liaison Office, a building near the border with South Korea. This comes as North Korean rhetoric has grown increasingly hostile.

Andrew Schwartz: It has a complex history, and it has become the United States’ top national security priority. Each week on this show, we’ll talk with the people who know the most about North Korea.

Victor, Sue, we have so much to talk about today, but let’s start with the fact that the North Koreans blew up the liaison center between North and South Korea, a place where they’ve been meeting. It was a symbol of cooperation. Sue, what’s this all about?

Sue Mi Terry: Yeah. So they blew up this Inter-Korean Liaison Office at Kaesong, and as you said that’s really the key symbol of inter-Korean reconciliation. They threatened to re-host military units to Kaesong, Kumgang Mountain, guard posts in the DMZ; revive military exercises in the Yellow Sea, the whole thing. And I think this is just the beginning.

Clearly, Kim Jong-un is punishing the Moon administration for what they think, you know, he overpromised and basically under-delivered. I think Kim is upset that Moon has not delivered on sanctions relief, so that’s the first thing – expressing his deep displeasure with the Moon administration. And then, of course, I think Kim is looking – well, hoping that these provocations will pressure the Moon administration to deliver more on the sanctions front.

So all of this is part of North Korea’s broader strategy. Kim at this moment is determined to create an inter-Korean crisis, manufactured crisis, pick fight with South Korea to keep pressure on Seoul to make more significant concessions, particularly on the sanctions front.

And then, of course, South Korea, as usual, is a scapegoat for all of North Korea’s domestic problems, and there’s a lot. There are stringent COVID-preventive measures, also worsen their economic situation.

So there’s a lot going on. But I’m afraid that this is just the beginning.

Andrew Schwartz: So they didn’t really do anything to provoke this.

Sue Mi Terry: The Moon administration? No.

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah.

Sue Mi Terry: They absolutely did not. They bent over themselves backwards, I would say, to accommodate North Korea. But what I think the Moon administration did – and
actually John Bolton in his book, in his chapter about North Korea, talks about this – really sort of created this whole diplomatic situation, Seoul did. John Bolton calls it this whole diplomatic fandango was the South’s creation.

So since Singapore summit, now two years has passed and not much has been accomplished. So I think Pyongyang is really blaming Seoul, right, because Seoul – you know, remember when National Security Adviser Chung Eui-Yong came to Washington and said Kim Jong-un is interested in having a meeting with you, President Trump? Really, it was Seoul – it was Moon who sold it to North Korea, and then came to U.S. and kind of sold it to us. So they did a lot of this middleman thing, South Korea, in between. But the end result is after two years there’s not much to show for it. So I think, you know, the North Koreans are very unhappy with South Korea.

Andrew Schwartz: All right. We’re going to have to talk about the Bolton book in a minute. But Victor, I want to get your take on this blowup between North and South Korea.

Victor Cha: Well, I have nothing to disagree with what Sue said. I mean, I think they chose something highly symbolic, which was this liaison office, which was effectively, you know, the embassy for inter-Korean cooperation. Everything took place there. The entire building was built by South Korea for North Korea.

And then they’re going to walk back all of these demilitarization agreements that the two sides had made with regard to, you know, not having firearms in certain parts of the border area, removing guard posts. I think all that stuff is coming back. You know, they’re going to return it to what it was before, if not – if not more.

And then they keep talking about this new strategic weapon that they’re going to unveil. And so I think everybody’s expecting to see something there, whether it’s an SLBM – a sea-launched ballistic missile – capability or something, there’s something coming there.

Ostensibly, it’s about balloons, these balloons that were flying into North Korea that were critical of the regime by NGOs. But –

Andrew Schwartz: They were going to drop leaflets, right?

Victor Cha: Leaflets and money and Bibles and all these things. But you know, that’s just something that it’s a pretext, like, you know, that’s the reason. I think Sue’s right; it’s more broadly an anger and a frustration that South Korea was not able to deliver the United States.

It’s also a negative choice. I think in a sense that North Korea’s not going to engage in diplomacy with the United States now because Trump has an election, so why waste your time making an agreement that may not be in place if Trump loses. And so there’s that, there’s you can’t do diplomacy. With the Moon Jae-in government they know – the North Koreans know that they’ll be there no
matter what. (Laughs.) You know, they are like – even though they’re the jilted suitor, they’ll be still there waiting for them when the North Koreans come back. So they’re cycling back into, you know, this provocation period that’ll probably run through the election.

Andrew Schwartz: Now, something interesting’s been emerging here, which is Kim Jong-Un’s sister, Kim Yo-Jong. And since he was allegedly sick or he was MIA for a while, she has taken more center stage and she’s been out there doing more of the talking, and her power’s been allegedly deepening, and she has this revolutionary bloodline that makes her a potential candidate to replace her brother in North Korea should something happen to his health. Did she have something to do with this missile attack on the facility? And can you guys say something about her role and what’s happening with her?

Sue Mi Terry: Clearly, she has – her public profile, as you said, has completely risen, and she’s – her status has gone up. You know, she was someone who was never – rarely seen in public in 2010, and look what happened in a decade. She really has become her brother’s not only deputy, I think single most important figure in North Korean regime after Kim Jong-un. You know, she used to be just in charge of propaganda and carefully constructing public image for her brother, but she really has emerged as Kim Jong-Il’s alter ego. She’s playing this bad cop. All these recent statements, as you point out, has her name on it. It’s not Kim Jong-Un.

So, you know, it’s really interesting because when she was first introduced to South Korea in 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, there was a public image about her and people liked her. She was actually kind of popular. You know, they liked how she looked and how she did her hair and all that. But now she has this really shifted, right?

So to me what’s really interesting is this shifting of her role. No question now she has a more substantive public role, starting with inter-Korean issues and, obviously, on national security. But as you mention, all of this – her role, this more recent high-profile role, really is coming out amid lingering concerns about Kim Jong-Un’s prolonged and unexplained absences from the public and lingering health concerns, which have not gone away, right? We still don’t know why Kim Jong-Un only made three public appearances since April 11th. We don’t know why he miss April 15th celebration commemorating his grandfather’s birthday. So that’s kind of interesting timing.

But the very personal tone she has adopted in this very scathing criticism of the Moon administration and all these recent provocations really I think is revealing about her role. And I think – so we need to definitely continue to watch her role and her influence, which is definitely growing.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, if she gets a really bad haircut, you know, we’re going to know that she’s in line to take over, right?
Sue Mi Terry: Right. I mean – (laughter) – but clearly, you know, honestly, she – you know, she was noted for carrying pens and putting ashtrays and whatnot for Kim Jong-un. And so this turn, this shifting, is very interesting to me.

Victor Cha: Yeah. I would say, I mean, even when she was, like, the first envoy, right, the first real envoy for the PyeongChang Games, it took us off the cycle – 2017 cycle – you know, tracking towards war. And then she was always sort of around the scenes when – whether it was Moon going to Pyongyang or it was Trump and her brother, she was always sort of around there, like, doing things, like telling people to stand here, providing an ashtray.

So to me what’s interesting about that is that, you know, North Korea is – highly-structured society would be an understatement. I mean, it is – everything’s so rigid. And the fact that in all this very rigid, choreographed, you know, North Korea leadership show, she was the one person that could just move around and do whatever she wanted, even if it was a menial task, just already kind of signaled she was special, she was different, right?

I remember, like, when they were doing the color guard when Moon arrived in Pyongyang, right, for the summit, and they, you know, were walking down this red carpet, and you had all these soldiers standing at attention – this is on the North Korean side – and then they go up to the podium to watch the troops go across, and then she comes running out of nowhere and says, you know, you’ve got to stand over here, right – not over here, stand over here. You know, the fact that she could just do things like that in this environment just said that she was special. Now we’re seeing it not just in terms of her – these smaller tasks, but that they’re actually assigning her responsibility for saying these things and for ordering these sorts of actions.

You know, the bright side of all this, you know, from perspective of negotiations – not that we’re going to have any negotiations soon, but if there are future negotiations – the bright side of all this is that we now know who the number two is, right, as Sue said. We now actually know this person is the number two. And even through all of Trump’s negotiations – Trump and Pompeo’s negotiations – you know, Kim Yong-Chol was sort of the envoy – the kind of thuggish-looking guy was sort of the envoy. But it was never clear. Like, he wasn’t number two, right? I mean, he was –

Andrew Schwartz: No. And he wasn’t family. He’s not family.

Victor Cha: He’s not family. He wasn’t number two. But now we know who the number two is. And so I think if there’s ever a negotiation again, that will play to an advantage because then there will be someone that they can talk to when you don’t want Trump and the North Korean leader kind of winging it on their own. At least now there’s somebody who is a little bit down the food chain, but has still got a great deal of authority, right? And that’s good for a negotiation.
Sue Mi Terry: But, I mean, she might be better looking, but I have to say her language, the rhetoric that’s, you know – I mean, that’s classic North Korea. I mean, that was pretty – it’s pretty horrible language coming out of her – you know, with her name on it, right, calling South Korea “frightened dog barking,” calling North Korean defectors “human scum,” all of that. So it might be a nicer package, but I mean, in terms of outward appearance – (laughs) – but I’m not sure how much in terms of policywise we’re going to see a different policy coming out of North Korea.

Andrew Schwartz: Well, do we know anything about her nature? Like, is she – does she have a propensity towards violence? Do you all expect that she’ll display violence in the coming months just to show that she’s somebody to be reckoned with?

Victor Cha: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think, you know, this is a family of autocrats, so I don’t expect that they’ll be giving to the ASPCA or –

Andrew Schwartz: Right. (laughs.)

Victor Cha: – or Amnesty International or things like that. So yeah. And I think they’ll want to do more to build her up, I mean, one, because of the gender issue, right, just like they did with – Kim Jong-un had no military service, so they had – you know, they gave him credit for the Cheonan sinking, right, the sinking of a South Korean ship, right? So I’m sure there will be things that they’ll want to attribute to her that build her military credentials and her – they would call them revolutionary credentials. So, yes, I expect that there will be more.

Sue Mi Terry: I agree. We don’t know much about her until recent years, obviously. That’s why I said she was rarely seen in public until 2010 and North Korean state media didn’t even mention her until about 2014. So we don’t know much about her. But I do think that for her to be, you know, legitimate, they have to assign some of these provocations under her name, just like Cheonan sinking people think it was done under Kim Jong-un, really. So they will assign her this role so she can – she can have legitimacy domestically as well.

Andrew Schwartz: All right. We’ve got to talk about the Bolton book. Sue, you’ve read a lot of it. We’ve seen stuff in the newspaper starting yesterday, excerpts. Sue, you actually have a copy of it. You know, we have read reviews. We’ve seen what the president’s had to say about it. OK. Tell me what you all have learned about North Korea and this administration’s negotiations with North Korea from Bolton’s book.

Sue Mi Terry: So there are two pretty significant chapters on North Korea, one on Singapore and one on Hanoi, and I read the one on Singapore. It confirms – it’s not that there’s anything really new, but there are a lot of details in it that’s quite interesting, right?

So, first of all, like confirming that – Bolton confirms that President Moon told President Trump that he would recommend him for Nobel Peace Prize, and also
confirming that President Trump was pretty desperate to have this meeting in Singapore at any price. Trump really wanted to – you know, he himself said this is going to be great theater, right – this is going to be an exercise in publicity.

So what was really also interesting is that President Trump said he’s the one who is going to sell the deal to Kim, so there was no need for real detailed preparations. So you can see what happened in Singapore. Trump himself didn’t want a big, formal agenda, no great formality. He even told John Kelly and Bolton that he was prepared to sign a substance-free communique. And while they were all in Singapore, they were still negotiating with North Korea till the last possible minute on that wording of this substance-free agreement, which was indeed substance-free.

But also, there were other things that were quite interesting. Like, Bolton reveals that President Trump was actually very close to calling off the Singapore summit when North Korea failed to send advance teams to Singapore. This is before Choe Son-Hui/North Korea’s very nasty statement about Vice President Pence. So President Trump even had several tweets to go, so you can kind of see, well, oh, maybe there could have been alternate history, that we were so close to that.

And then some fun details like how Trump was so obsessed with getting to Kim Jong-un Elton John’s “Rocket Man” CD. That was one of his top priority for a few months.

And then one thing that I really thought was very interesting was on military exercises. It just confirms everything that we’ve been saying, that Trump has repeatedly gone off on a riff about how joint exercises with South Korea are expensive, how they are provocative, how Trump didn’t understand why even the Korean War was fought, why there are so many U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula, why there are exercises, why there are war games. That’s why in Singapore when Kim Jong-un brought up cancelling the joint military exercises, President Trump spontaneously decided to cancel it, calling them provocative wastes of time and money. And not only were the South Koreans not consulted, Trump didn’t even consult with Kelly, Pompeo, Bolton, Mattis.

And the last thing I would say is that Kim Jong-un left Singapore meeting, according to Bolton, somehow thinking there would be action for action approach. And Kim Jong-Un even asked if U.N. sanctions relief was going to be the next step. And Trump said he was open to it, wanted to think about it. So I can see why Kim Jong-un is so upset right now because I think he was just under the wrong impression that things were going to go differently after Singapore.

Victor Cha: What about Moon’s role in all of this?

Sue Mi Terry: That’s really interesting because basically Bolton portrayed Moon administration for really setting up an unrealistic expectation for both Washington and Seoul. So as I mentioned earlier, when Chung Eui-Yong, South
Korean national security advisor, came to Washington and said Kim Jong-un is interested in meeting with Trump, Bolton suggests that it was Seoul who suggested to the North to make this invitation in the first place. So Bolton suggests that President Moon also told Trump that Kim had committed to complete denuclearization. So again, I think there as this kind of high-level expectation. And Bolton, it seems to me, was kind of blaming South Korea for setting up this unrealistic expectation to both Washington and North Korea.

Victor Cha: So I have not read the book yet. I’m waiting for my copy to download on Audible in a couple of days. But I think that this is really fascinating and it’s really interesting. As you know, the only time that John Bolton has spoken publicly about Korea since leaving the White House was at CSIS.

Andrew Schwartz: With you, yeah.

Victor Cha: We did an event at CSIS. And of course, I knew him when I was last in government when he was undersecretary and then also ambassador at the U.N. And Sue and I talked about this after, we were chatting with him in the green room and then his event. What struck us back then was how, after having been through Singapore and Hanoi, his views on North Korea were the exact replica of what they were when he was in government before. In other words, nothing about being exposed to Kim Jong-un or Kim Yo-Jong or any of those people changed the way he felt about the issue. He was exactly the same.

And you know, without directly criticizing the president, you know, in this big public event where we had, what, 300 people there and 20 television cameras. Without directly criticizing him, you know, Bolton basically said the policy was a complete failure. And it sounds like he’s – not only has he reiterated that in this book, but there’s a lot of interesting color and detail. (Laughs.) And it makes sense. I mean, this is why the North Koreans are so vitriolically and so denigrating of South Korea and Moon right now, despite the fact, like, Moon has bent over backwards for Kim. Because, you know, basically he oversold the goods.

And to Trump, he doesn’t really care, because he got his meetings, right? He got his big meetings. But for Kim he cares, because they thought they were really going to get something out of this. And they got nothing out of it. And so that – you know, so they blew up the liaison facility.

Andrew Schwartz: So Bolton says in the book that all President Trump was concerned with – a photo op with Kim Jong-Un.

Sue Mi Terry: Yes.

Victor Cha: Yeah.

Sue Mi Terry: Trump himself said: Hey, I’m prepared to sign this substance-free communique. This is going to be great theater, great in publicity. But to
Victor’s point, it’s absolutely true. So throughout the chapter he talks about a bullet dodged here, or a bullet dodged there. And then he laments, like, how they set it up so Trump had several tweets ready to go on this specific day to cancel the Singapore summit, again, when North Korea failed to send advanced team and he got Trump convinced that he’s going to send out the tweet.

So he went to bed thinking he was going to send out the tweet that night. And in the morning Trump didn’t send out the tweet because he didn’t want to cancel it, even though he ended up sort of cancelling it later, and then not cancelling it. Still, so he laments this. And he’s talking about, oh, how history could have been different if he did cancel it. Clearly very unhappy with Singapore, how it went. And so, you know, it’s very clear. And there’s a lot of details in the book about how he feels.

Andrew Schwartz: And then, on the president’s side, President Trump has told The Wall Street Journal in response to this book that he had to stop John Bolton from putting the United States into several wars. And I assumed that comment – one of those wars was referring to North Korea.

Sue Mi Terry: Right. I mean, because besides Iran, North Korea – because President Trump wants to make sure the whole world thinks that he has averted war with North Korea and made a huge progress. But of course, as we talked about earlier, North Korea’s escalations are just beginning. They’ve started with South Korea, but they are going to turn to the United States very soon. So that’s going to disrupt Trump’s narrative that he has taken care of North Korean issue.

Victor Cha: Yeah. It’s just – the more you hear about this book and talk to people who are involved in the policy it’s really – the two things that sort of stand out is – one is, that Trump really didn’t care about substance. It was all about the show, right? Entirely about the show. And then at the same time, though, when he interacted with the negotiators and the negotiating team – and he was doing it differently, right? I mean, he was going to meet the North Korean leader. No other president has done that. And maybe that can change his views. All he seemed to care about was making sure that everybody knew – meaning the press knew – that he was doing something different and that only he could change things.

Like, there was no interest in the underlying substance of what was being discussed. It’s just the narrative that he’s going to – he’s going to there, he’s going to go change things, and he’s different. And he got the show, right? I mean, you know, Sue and I were covering both of these summits for NBC. And all of us were joking how, you know, if you do North Korea, right, this is like the Super Bowl, right? (Laughs.) This is the Super Bowl. And I’m sure that’s the way Trump saw it too, you know? This was just big Super Bowl. He doesn’t care how the game is played. He just likes the whole spectacle and the show.

Andrew Schwartz: You guys were on air for, like, nine hours straight or something those days. (Laughter.)
Victor Cha: Yeah. Us and Wendy Sherman, yeah. (Laughs.)

Andrew Schwartz: OK. So what now? So the book is out. Bolton has weighed in. Trump says nobody cares about John Bolton. You know, and that may be true. But what do you guys think?

Sue Mi Terry: Well, the problem for President Trump is that, as I mentioned and Victor talked about, how North Korea’s going to escalate. So what he’s going to do? And there is – I mean, I’m not necessarily saying that North Korea’s going to launch an ICBM or a nuke test. There are many things they can do before that, before resorting to that. Although, that’s possible, let’s say, in October.

But they’re going to increasingly dial up pressure and, as Victor said, you know, showcasing this new strategic weapon can vow that this world will witness that shortly. And, you know, that could be something like demonstrating more advanced missile technologies that can be used as part of the long-range delivery system, right? Victor mentioned testing of a submarine-launched missile since developing a nuclear-strike-capable submarine. That’s a perfect one.

So my question is, how is Trump going to respond to this? Again, that really disrupts his narrative that, you know, North Korea is no longer a threat, right? It’s clearly North Korea policy is a failure.

Victor Cha: Yeah. And I think we will. It’ll be crises and provocations, you know, through the election year because, again, that’s what they’ve done in the past and that’s what the data shows. They do more of these in election years than not election years. And suppose part of this is an SLBM launch, which then means they have a ground-based and now a sea-based capability. I think what this sets up then is the question for the next administration, whether it’s Trump two or whether it’s Biden, what are we going to do now? I mean, are we going to follow the same policy and try to get a freeze for freeze and then, you know, move on from there?

Or, you know, are we going to try something completely different where, you know, we effectively accept North Korea as a nuclear weapon state, try to cap the program, and try to verify what’s there, in return for, you know, all the benefits and a new relationship? You know, a sort of India deal, if you will, for North Korea. Now, I’m not saying that’s the way we should go, but I think that will – the policy logic will start to move in that direction. Do we do the same thing? Or do we have to completely shift the paradigm to something else that will minimize the risk rather than chasing a dream that, you know, three, four agreements in the past have not gotten us to?

That will require a huge change at the very top. The president himself would have to set that tone, that we’re going to try something completely different. Then he’d have to get Congress behind him to do that. That’s, I think,
the big choice that’s coming down, particularly if they show that they have a viable sea-based capability. Like, if they have that, it becomes much harder to think about successful first strike and it really becomes a much more difficult issue. And I think that’s the conversation it’ll force. It’s probably already forced the conversation internally in some places, but it’s too early. But by then, who knows?

Sue Mi Terry: I 100 percent agree. But, you know, first thing first. I’m just concerned about the rest of this year. Again, just increasingly – it’s going to get worse. And then we have October 10th which is a holiday marking the 75th anniversary of the Korean Worker’s Party founding day. So that’s going to be sort of the climax, right? Whether at that point it’s the submarine-launched missile or it would be even an ICBM at that point. Maybe North Korea will calculate that it’s so close to the election that President Trump’s response is likely limited. I mean, what is going to do, have a war on the Korean Peninsula a month before the election? And Kim knows that.

So I’m just concerned about the level of provocations, how much Kim is going to dial it up. And in terms of just the negotiation, I don’t know if it’s necessary that Kim would want that right now. I don’t see much reason for Kim to conclude such a – any kind of deal before November. So I think for him it’s just better for him to follow – which is a family tradition, right, of ramping up provocations, and improve his WMD systems, and keep on raising the ante for eventual return to diplomacy because you have more leverage in either Trump’s second term or Biden’s first term.

Victor Cha: And I think it’s a real dilemma for Moon right now because they had just come off this big election victory a couple of months ago. You know, everybody thought they were going to lose big time and he would become a lame duck. Like the ruling party would lose in the legislative election, then he would be a lame duck in the last two years of a single five-term presidency. But they won big, right? They won really big, in large part, because of new COVID response. And now he’s not a lame duck, he had two years left. And almost immediately after the election they started signaling: We’re going to really push the envelope on inter-Korean engagement, right? Railroads, infrastructure, all this sort of stuff, signaling to the U.S. they want sanctions exemption, all this sort of thing.

And now the North Koreans have thrown all that in their face with Yo-Jong’s statements and then, you know, blowing up of the liaison office and going back on the demilitarization agreements. And so, you know, Moon was able in 2017 to 2018 he was able to use the Olympics. You know, maybe he did – he oversold both sides. But he used the Olympics to try to create diplomacy. I just don’t know what he can do at this point because there’s little that he can say to the North Koreans to bring them back to the table, because the North Koreans know there’s an election in November.
Why would they come back to the table? And Trump’s just too distracted by all the other stuff that’s going on. (Laughs.) You know, the idea of another summit with Kim? You know, I just don’t – I just don’t see it. So I think it puts the South Koreans in a very difficult position because they’ve always been the ones that have tried to be creative, right, and try to create something out of nothing. And they don’t have anything to work with right now.

Sue Mi Terry:

And I’m really frustrated with the North Koreans because they’re not going to have this kind of line up, right? We had President Trump who was – who met with Kim Jong-un, who was open to negotiating with North Korea. And Moon with this election result, like, he had a mandate. So this lineup is going to be hard, right, where you have Moon, a progressive government in Seoul, and president in the United States willing to do something. So I’m just frustrated North Koreans did not take, you know, advantage of that, and just had to ask for so much, like, in Hanoi and – you know? Because I think a partial deal would have been good for North Korea. At least it would open up sort of the initial part of the sanctions relief, and what not. And, you know, that’s an opening at least.

And right now what do they have? They have serious economic stressors to the regime. They are dealing with this coronavirus measures that they have taken, even though they are claiming there’s a single positive case. They are still suffering from secondary effects of this isolation measures that they took. There’s a lot of promise there. And, you know, we’re not going to give sanctions relief anytime soon. So I just feel like North Koreans could have taken this opportunity, and they didn’t. And that’s very frustrating.

Victor Cha:

Can I just foot-stomp that? So Sue’s right, North Korea could not have had it any better. They had a South Korean president who was ideologically committed to engagement with North Korea. And when we say ideologically committed, it means no matter what is happening – just like Americans, we’re ideologically committed to democracy – they’re ideologically committed to engaging with North Korea, no matter what. And then you had a U.S. president – it was like the perfect U.S. president for them because he was someone who was willing to give them face, you know, all these meetings. Wants a deal. But doesn’t care about substance. It was like the perfect thing for them. And still, you know we ended up getting nowhere.

Andrew Schwartz:

Well, we will have a lot more to talk about in the weeks and months to come. Thank you both for these insights today. And we’ll look forward to talking next time on The Impossible State.

(Music.)

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