

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EPISODE 466 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan, along with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: Hello. Good morning.

Steve Skrovan: And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody.

Steve Skrovan: How much of our poor health is really our fault? We love to blame a crisis on personal responsibility. Global warming isn't about industrial pollution; it's about you not recycling your water bottles. Auto Safety isn't about the engineering of cars; it's about the nut behind the wheel. The housing crisis isn't about predatory lending; it's about you taking out a mortgage you couldn't handle. In the new book, *The Commercial Determinants of Health*, Public Health experts tackle America's health crisis by examining the social, political and corporate influences that shape our lives. And they question whether public health in America is ultimately determined by our personal choices or the fact that we're surrounded by corporate marketing campaigns for junk food, we're exposed to polluted air, we can't afford to see a doctor, or we live in a food desert.

Our first guest, Dr. Nason Maani, explores these issues as one of the editors of *The Commercial Determinants of Health*. Then we'll welcome back journalist Chris Hedges to discuss his recent article, *Woke Imperialism* where, in the wake of the murder of Tyre Nichols by a so-called elite unit of Memphis police officers, Hedges highlights the tension between class politics and identity politics.

Ralph is also going to give a short commentary on Joe Biden's State of the Union speech. And as always, somewhere in the middle, we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, who's responsible for your health woes? Is it the system or is it you? David?

David Feldman: Dr. Nason Maani is a lecturer in Inequalities and Global Health Policy at the University of Edinburgh. He is also the host of *Money Power Health*, a podcast on how our health is influenced by commercial forces, wealth, and power. He is co-editor of the new book *The Commercial Determinants of Health*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dr. Nason Maani.

Dr. Nason Maani: Thank you so much for having me.

Ralph Nader: Welcome indeed, Dr. Maani. Listeners should know this is quite a remarkable book. It has about 30 contributors from all kinds of disciplines—economic, engineering, science, psychology, you name it—so it's very broad and it's revolutionary in its scope even though its language is more evolutionary and we're going to get into some of the details. But I'm sure the first question is obvious, Dr. Maani, what do you mean by the commercial determinants of health?

Dr. Nason Maani: Yeah, that's a really good question. In general terms, we mean the activities of the private sector that shape population health. And the term emerges from an understanding

that our health is largely shaped by forces outside of health care--by the quality of the air we breathe, the wealth of our parents growing up, the pollution in our neighborhood, how close our house was to roads. These are the forces that account for 20-year gaps in life expectancy between neighborhoods. And those have been termed over the last 20 years or so the social determinants of health. But what's becoming apparent is that a lot of those forces are shaped by the activities of the private sector, in particular, large internationally consolidated global corporations. And that's where the term the commercial determinants of health came from just to acknowledge the upstream ways in which our health, and how we think about our health, is shaped by the activities of commercial actors.

Ralph Nader: And you're very specific here. In section three you have case studies by industry written by different experts. One is on the alcohol industry. The other is on the tobacco industry. A third is on the oil, gas, and coal industries. The fourth is on the exploding gambling industry. And the fifth is on sugar sweetened beverages that are directed to youngsters, and as my mother said, turning their tongues against their brains in terms of taking in junk food and drink, which are very bad for them, that are directly marketed to these children circumventing parental authority and guidance, which is a very radical move in the last 40 years. They never used to do that years ago. That would have been considered anti-cultural norm to undermine parents and sell bad things, including violent programming directly to children.

So what you're saying is that the language is changing. It used to be social indicators that was kind of a euphemism in the sense that it didn't really focus on giant corporations that are strategically planning just about everything in the lives of people around the world. That's what they do. They strategically plan because they like control. They don't like indeterminate environments that they can't plan for. When you edited this book published by Oxford University Press with your two co-editors Mark Petticrew and Sandro Galea, did you find any controversy as to how strong or weak the language is? Because there is a language of avoidance among academics. They don't like to use words like corporate crime, corporate coercion, corporate welfare. They use words like white collar crime; even law professors have not really gotten on board here. There aren't that many the courses on corporate crime although more than years ago at law schools around the country. Did you have any disagreements? Because you have all these viewpoints that have a lot of facts amounting to various conclusions, or did you find they were all on the same page? Or did you find people who didn't want to go as far as you thought the facts and norms would guide them to go or people who were too extreme in their condemnation? How did you pull them all together?

Dr. Nason Maani: There are certainly some diversity in viewpoints and that partly reflects people's own positions and biases; it partly reflects the type of research discipline they come from. But what we hoped to do with the book was try and bring together as wide a diversity of perspectives of types of evidence that relate to the direct and indirect effects of these companies. Actually, if you look back historically, there's been some really good work on, for example, the activities of the tobacco industry, or even work on the coal industry, or the asbestos industry, or the work you did yourself on the car industry when you produced *Unsafe at Any Speed*. But often, some of this work happens in silos. So, whole conferences and groups of academics focused on the tobacco industry and whole journals dedicated to that topic, and whole separate groups of advocates and academics focused on the alcohol industry or alcohol in general. And I guess the idea for *The Commercial Determinants of Health* is a lens and what we hoped to do in

the book was show that these forces have strong parallels between them; they use similar strategies, sometimes language, third-party organizations. Often the staff themselves are interchangeable at the top. And because of that, these are forces that science should bear witness to. The same way we bear witness to physical forces like gravity, we should be able to bear witness to commercial forces and describe the ways in which they influence the world. Part of the way of overcoming challenges of ideological difference was just to say look, our role as scientists is to bear witness to these forces to measure them, to predict them, and to allow society to make decisions about what is and isn't appropriate. But first of all, we have to acknowledge it. And the final thing related to that is a lot of science simply doesn't acknowledge this. There are some really good researchers who've done work on the rule of bias from commercial funding and research, but there are lots of other researchers who largely avoid commenting on it, or sometimes don't declare conflicts of interest very well themselves. So I think it's the elephant in the room in some aspects of science, and it's good to bring it to the surface.

Ralph Nader: Well, there's also interesting differences. I should say to our listeners that a number of the contributors distinguish between talking about giant global corporations and small business. They're really not talking about small business. As I've said in prior programs, the giant corporations are not only different in degree from small companies, they're different in kind. They have a completely different dimension of privileged immunity and impact transnationally astride the globe.

I looked in the index, which I often do when I read new books, and I didn't see an entry for children. And what has been quite prominent over the decades is that once they direct market to children and undermine parental authority, it's a half a trillion dollar industry in the U.S. Direct marketing to children is extraordinarily cruel as corporations tempt, seduce, and addict them--whether it's the addiction of junk food, which has been documented to be an addiction, not just something that's sweet; addiction to the Internet gulag where children are exposed five to six hours daily to all kinds of harmful influences, violent programming, commercial exploitation; intrusion on personal information of these youngsters, making them sign fine-print contracts where they give up their rights.

And this is paralleled by, in our country, the Republican Party which has opposed extension of child tax credits that cut child poverty by a third in the early months of the Biden Administration. They oppose regulating pesticides that are especially cruel to developing bodies of young children. They insist on junk food being put in school lunch programs. They oppose what you have in your country, paid family leave, paid child care, on and on. Do you think enough attention was paid on the impact on children? I mean these companies now are strategically planning our genetic inheritance. They have thousands of patents on gene sequences. For example, companies like Monsanto and Bayer, who bought it, are into that area as well. What's your view?

Dr. Nason Maani: Well, I think you're absolutely right. Certainly there's a commonality in strategy with regards to children as a market, and that was true in the context of tobacco where most smokers began smoking before the age of 18. And advertising was acknowledged internally as a really important way to ensure brand loyalty at a quite young age. Similarly in research we've done on internal alcohol industry advertising case studies, you see them talk and worry about replacing the heavy drinkers of today. They're super consumers and they talk about how

they're going to "recruit the heavy drinking loyalists of tomorrow." That was a direct quote from one of their internal documents.

So, you're right and we could have probably focused more attention on children specifically, but really it cuts across a huge swathe of these companies and the way in which they choose to protect and grow future revenue. One area that we've done some research on recently, which is particularly concerning, is how industry-funded charities are allowed entrance into schools to promote framings of problems and solutions that align closely with their other strategic interests. So a recent paper, led by a colleague, looked at the way in which alcohol industry-funded charities were presenting their education programs on alcohol to schools. And those programs were very selective in what they focused on. They talked about learning how to drink properly, making sure that children know how much is in a unit of alcohol and the historical legacy of alcohol and the ingredients in it. But they wouldn't reference alcohol marketing or the role of the alcohol industry. And that's not just the case for alcohol. We find that in other sectors. And it's eerily familiar with earlier examples, like when *The Lorax* by Dr. Seuss came out in the 70s and there was a very strong increase in interest in environmentalism, a logging association produced a children's book to counteract *The Lorax* called the *Truax* that spoke about the value of the logging industry and framed *The Lorax* as a goody two-shoes who doesn't know what the real world is like.

Ralph Nader: Well, I think people in our country who are older remember Paul Bunyan who was a fictional creature of the lumber industry and they got into all the schools. They actually had little stories, pamphlets distributed. And I remember one with Paul Bunyan as a fictional character alleged to have been born in Maine. And when he was born, he was 200 pounds. Anyway, when he grew up, he became a lumberjack and connected with the Great Blue Ox and set out cutting down trees. And so they had all these pamphlets watching Paul Bunyan go across country laying waste to forests. And when he finished off trees in Montana, he was heading for Alaska. And the last line of the book was, "And Paul Bunyan and the Blue Ox will continue until the last tree is down." How about that one for the generations of American elementary school students. We were never told the truth, of course. We did a report over 40 years ago on these companies and commercialism in the classroom about how the nuclear power industry and the coal industry trying to lure the boys in the classroom into the coal mines without mentioning the horrific exposure to coal miner pneumoconiosis, which has killed hundreds of thousands of coal miners over the last century or more. And looking at your topics, you have one called "Industry Influence on Science." There is a big difference between corporate science and academic science in terms of disclosure and peer review; one is called "Role in Trade Deals and Investment;" another is on "The Role of Corporations in Influencing Culture." And you co-authored one called *Commercial Determinants of Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Dr. Nason Maani: Yeah, there's actually quite a lot of literature on the role of corporations and how they affect health in different national contexts. And what's important to note is that depending on where you're based and what level of protections you have at the national level and also what your own socioeconomic status is or employment rights are, you experience the harms of commercial actors very, very differently. It's very rare that I would hear someone in the U.S. or the UK look at their laptop top and think hmm, that's harming health right there. But if you're in the supply chain for the raw materials for that laptop, or you happen to be in the factory where

that laptop is being put together in a different country in a different setting, that company may be having huge impacts on your health, not necessarily positive. And the same is true when we look at research in South America, for example, and efforts to improve employment rights. And they almost have a completely different view of what commercial determinants of health is there because they have a strong legacy of seeking to push back.

Ralph Nader: There's one chapter that really stood out and I want to go into it in some detail. It's chapter 18, "Corporations as Irresponsible Artificial People: Human Rights, Profits, and Public Health," written by George Annas, one of your colleagues who teaches at Boston University School of Public Health. And I want to read a section from this, because it really goes to the root of how long can people tolerate giant corporations being at all compatible with a democratic society. I just wrote another recent article on that subject explaining that corporations have been given equal rights in our country. They're persons and they have vast wealth, power, and control over capital, labor, technology, and politicians. So there's no contest between real human beings and giant corporations. And they're given all kinds of privileges under bankruptcy law, fine- print contracts, access to the courts, and all kinds of double standards that take the Equal Rights fiction by the Supreme Court of the United States and turn it into tyranny and domination.

Professor Annas digs right into this. And I want to quote him and then get your view on this as he quotes Justice of the Supreme Court, John Paul Stevens, in the notorious *Citizens United v Federal Election Commission* case in 2010, that allowed corporations to spend unlimited money for or against candidates running for public office as long as they didn't coordinate with any campaign. And Justice Stevens wrote an historic dissent and he went right to the nub of it when he said in dissent, "Corporations have no consciences, no beliefs, no feelings, no thoughts, no desires. Their 'personhood' often serves as a useful legal fiction. But they are not themselves members of 'We the People' by whom and for whom our Constitution was established." "The conceit that corporations must be treated identically to natural persons in the political sphere is not only inaccurate but also inadequate to justify the Court's disposition of this case."

And Professor Annas quotes American philosopher, jurist and scholar, Ronald Dworkin who says, "The argument that corporations must be treated like real people under the First Amendment, is in my view preposterous. Corporations are legal fictions. They have no opinions of their own to contribute and no rights to participate with equal voice or vote in politics."

And then he gives a devastating example of the double standard. Most people I know cannot create their own parents; corporations create their own holding companies for evasive purposes-- tax evasion and regulation evasion. Most people cannot create thousands of subsidiaries lodged in files in the Grand Cayman Islands or some other tax haven. But this is what happens when you give corporations equal rights of persons. I'm going to quote Professor Annas who said, "Pfizer was fined \$1.2 billion by the federal government for fraudulently marketing Bextra. Federal law required that any company found guilty of such a crime be automatically excluded from the Medicare and Medicaid programs. But government prosecutors thought that this would lead to the collapse of Pfizer, which they considered too big to fail. Accordingly, the prosecutors approved a plan in which a Pfizer subsidiary corporation, called Pharmacia & Upjohn, would plead guilty to this crime, pay the fine, and be excluded from Medicare and Medicaid. The parent company, Pfizer, would continue doing its business as usual." We're talking with Dr. Nason

Maani, who is one of the co-editors of this new book *The Commercial Determinants of Health* by Oxford University Press. Good gift to libraries, listeners, in addition to your own circle of friends. Here's my question, which goes right to the fundamental issue as to whether corporations should be subordinated, not equal, subordinated constitutionally to the supremacy of the rights and remedies of human beings. That is, they would not be allowed as corporations to lobby to fund campaigns, et cetera. Individuals working in companies could do that but not the corporate entity itself. You think this message is reverberating through all those contributors in your book? Did this chapter particularly bring them down to basic fundamental change in the way a political economy has to be organized?

Dr. Nason Maani: I wish I could say that it had but I'm not sure. First of all, I know Professor Annas is going to be thrilled that you quoted from his chapter. He devoted a lot of work/effort to that. And he's a distinguished professor in human rights law so he's the perfect person to write this. It certainly cut through with some. But I think one of the challenges with much of science is that we're often in our own disciplines, our own silos. These kinds of legal arguments are sometimes waved away, but I think it's really crucial, and he makes a really important point. A reflection I've had, and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this, is that we're constantly being fed the story of corporate personhood through, for example, corporate social responsibility language, through the language of partnership or of self-regulation. All these terms create an illusion that companies have moral agency like we do; that they can make moral choices about right or wrong like we do. But of course these are for-profit companies. They can't do that. So, there's something powerful in how discourse is being shaped continuously to reinforce this idea that these companies have moral agency when they really don't.

Ralph Nader: It's important to make this a political campaign issue to make candidates running for public office take their stand on corporations being equal to human beings. This was a contrivance of a case in 1886 by the Supreme Court and the Justice had a scribe. In those days they would write the opinion down in the head notes. The scribe happened to be a former railroad attorney and the case involved a railroad in California as to whether taxation of the railroad was unequal protection of the laws compared with taxation of regular people. And the justices denied that they reported the case this way. They said we did not address the issue of corporate personhood under the 14th Amendment, Equal Protection Provisions. So it was basically a fraud by the scribe. That didn't stop subsequent Supreme Court cases from elaborating one equal decision between corporations and people after another until they reached the almost maximum equality with real human beings under our Constitution, which doesn't mention Corporation or company once in the entire Constitution, which only references persons. So now about the only exception to equal rights of corporations with individuals is they can't plead the 5th Amendment against self-incrimination. So it just continues with the advocacy of these mischievous corporate law firms developing one theory after another.

This leads to an interesting suggestion. Since the whole is often greater than the sum of its parts, have you ever thought of organizing all these contributors into a professional association? There are all kinds of professional associations of sub-specialties in medicine and law, like Bankruptcy Lawyer Association. Have you ever thought of organizing them? Are they susceptible to being organized? You talk a lot about getting over silos here. Because they can speak with a stronger voice. This book should have been all over the media in the United States and unfortunately it's being ignored for the most part. Have you or your colleagues thought of organizing so you can

have conferences, put out statements, and testify? Or are they not ready to go that far? They're concerned contributors but they haven't reached that level of urgent seriousness that their own studies might call for.

Dr. Nason Maani: Well, I think many of them have different ways and in some ways have been a lot braver than I would ever be. It's certainly not something that's originating just from us as editors. There's actually a department within the World Health Organization (WHO) that focuses on social, commercial, and economic determinants of health. And It is organizing global events and coordinating increasing numbers of scholars and activists to try and think about these issues. If you take the example of infant formula marketing, there's a series out this week in *The Lancet*, one of the leading medical journals worldwide, that explicitly acknowledges the role of infant formula companies in continuing to shape norms and consumption globally.

So there is an increasing amount of cohesion in the scientific community that these are important issues and there are global networks. There's a governance body for ethics and public health—a network that's composed of researchers from all over the world. So there are these networks forming and I think that's a good sign. The problem is that these ideas have to, as you say, move into public discourse. They have to get wider coverage and they have to penetrate into public opinion. And part of the problem is what we call the pollution of discourse. It's the idea that all these companies for their own reasons are feeding into discourse with narratives of individual responsibility or how complex it all is or the apocalyptic alternatives if we regulate them in terms of economic development or even civil rights. And it's important to acknowledge that each of these companies does it for their own ends. Exxon says that the science around climate change is incomplete or regulators are flawed. A pesticide company says the World Health Organization (WHO) is flawed and that science is incomplete about its links to cancer. And these all have cumulative effects. The sum is greater than individual parts. These collectively pollute our discourse just like companies might pollute our environment. So it's a very powerful force to try and overcome.

Ralph Nader: Well, in some of your writings in this book, you attribute the motivation obviously to the profit motive--the drive for more sales, more profits, more executive compensation--that creates a lot of damage and harm. But you also say that the profit motive has often created some good products because of regulation. You want to give some examples?

Dr. Nason Maani: Yeah, the best way to think about this is to look at cross-country comparisons, and to take an example that might be most relevant, we could look at the pharmaceutical industry or at medical device industry. In the U.S., those industries have been gifted extraordinary power. And almost unique among countries globally, it is able to exert that power, both in terms of lobbying, setting prices, holding sway over discussions about changes to the system through political advertising, and also through patent protections. You talked before about knowing the rules of the game, and this is an example of an industry that knows the rules of the game very well and exploits the rules massively in the U.S., including through direct advertising to patients.

Almost all of that is simply not allowed in a country like the UK, where the pharmaceutical industry is much more tightly regulated. It can't market to consumers. Prices for medicines are negotiated nationally. They have to meet a cost-effectiveness threshold. The industry can only input in a certain place. So the same industry, because it's been so much more tightly

constrained, costs the UK a lot less money, and the UK enjoys longer life expectancy than the U.S. and better health outcomes along a whole range of conditions. So you can see how an industry, if constrained in the right way, can be of greater benefit than it might otherwise be. But equally, if left unrestrained, it can be quite damaging.

Ralph Nader: Well, Amory Lovins, the early advocate of renewable energy and opponent of nuclear power, once said quite incisively, "Markets make good servants but bad masters." And of course, "markets" is another name for corporate marketing. You wind up this book with what you call a research and translational agenda. Could you please outline the agenda briefly?

Dr. Nason Maani: I'll do my best. The purpose of the end of the book was to look forward and think about implications of all these different strands of evidence and all these different contributions. And these are just the tip of the iceberg of the wider literature. That is to say that we know enough to start to influence how we engage with these corporations, how we regulate them, both individually and collectively. We know enough that we can't predict the kind of actions they might engage in if their profits are threatened, or if there's risk of regulation.

We also say that we don't need necessarily to insist on all or nothing approaches. There's scope for radical incrementalism. There's scope to improve all the time on the system as it is now. And we also talk about how there's a risk of this becoming just another academic silo, another discipline with groups of researchers who pat themselves on the back and say we conduct research on commercial drivers of ill-health, aren't we good? We meet in conferences, we swap papers and citations--and that's the end of it. But we talk about how this research needs to translate into the real world. It needs to be impactful. And that's a responsibility that science has generally, but we in particular must take very seriously.

Ralph Nader: This is a good first start and we look forward to additional expansions of what you've just said with empirical rigor, because the planet is running out of time, not just climate disruption, but expanding pandemics, ravaging of land, forest, elected dictatorships, you name it. David?

David Feldman: Yes, thank you. Following through on this theme, in America children are brainwashed that government is the enemy; the nanny state is making all of us weak. Has the anti-government propaganda bred to Europe the way it has in the United States? Has it spread to the UK? And how do we teach children that for better or worse, the only solution to all our problems is government?

Ralph Nader: But, David, these giant corporations take over the government. That's what we call corporate socialism or the corporate state that we've talked about over the years on this program.

Dr. Nason Maani: Yeah, these are really big questions. I think on the topic of the nanny state kind of rhetoric, it absolutely has spread to the UK and has been a pivotal feature in recent debates. And it does permeate into Europe although perhaps to a lesser extent. But you see very similar think tanks and organizations with similarly, what author and investigative journalist Jane Mayer has called Dark Money sources that make similar ideological arguments about the elevation of individual choice, the dangers of regulation and regulatory overreach, and arguing that much public health evidence, for example, is junk science and can't be trusted. So you do see that although not probably to the extent that it has really historically occurred in the U.S.

When it comes to how do you protect children and how to change this mindset, like we said before, part of this is about influencing public discourse in really meaningful ways. There is value in learning from counter-marketing. We've had examples of counter-marketing campaigns and initiatives around the tobacco industry. Why can't we have counter-marketing campaigns that more generally speak to the rule of us as citizens in society, and frame corporate power as something that children can actually bear witness to, expose, and push back against. Ultimately these are structural problems that require structural solutions. In the meantime, there may be ways to reduce influence along the way.

Ralph Nader: We're out of time, unfortunately. We've been talking with Dr. Nason Maani from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He also teaches at the Boston University School of Public Health. The book is called *The Commercial Determinants of Health*. You'll want to read it a little at a time. It's tremendously eye-opening, very well footnoted and documented, published by Oxford University Press. You can reach Oxford University Press at oup.com. Are you willing to give some virtual lectures around the country if people want to invite you to speak to high school, or college, or citizen group gatherings?

Dr. Nason Maani: I'd be honored.

Ralph Nader: Well, thank you very much. We appreciate it. And good luck. Stay with it.

Dr. Nason Maani: Thank you very much.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Dr. Nason Maani. We will link to his book *The Commercial Determinants of Health* at ralphnaderradiohour.com. When we come back, Chris Hedges is going to tell us what he means by the term "Woke Imperialism." And Ralph has some comments about the State of the Union Address. But first, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* "Morning Minute" for Friday, February 10, 2023. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

The manufacturer of a brand of over-the-counter eye drops said that it was recalling the product, EzriCare Artificial Tears, after it was linked to a drug-resistant bacteria strain that has caused at least one person's death and vision loss in five others. That's according to a report in the *New York Times*. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised people to stop using the eye drops, as the agency investigates an outbreak of a strain of bacteria, which can cause infections in the blood, lungs and other parts of the body. This strain of the bacteria had never been identified in the United States before the current outbreak. The bacteria strain had been found in 55 people in 12 states. The agency said the infections had caused one death, vision loss in five of 11 people who had eye infections, and some hospitalizations.

For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan, along with David Feldman and Ralph and the rest of the team. What does Woke Imperialism mean? Let's ask Chris Hedges. David?

David Feldman: Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, who spent nearly two decades as a foreign correspondent in Central America, the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans. He is the host of *The Chris Hedges Report*, and he is a prolific author. His most recent book is *The Greatest Evil Is War*.

Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Chris Hedges.

Chris Hedges: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Ralph Nader: Well, Chris, you just unleashed a thunderbolt called “Woke Imperialism” on your Substack, which is creating considerable reaction. I want to read to our listeners the setup paragraph, and then I want you to go share very specifically, because you make a very important argument and it's all in the details. Here's what you say, "The militarists, corporatists, oligarchs, politicians, academics and media conglomerates champion identity politics and diversity because it does nothing to address the systemic injustices or the scourge of permanent war that plague the U.S. It is an advertising gimmick, a brand, used to mask mounting social inequality and imperial folly. It busies liberals and the educated with a boutique activism, which is not only ineffectual but exacerbates the divide between the privileged and a working class in deep economic distress. The haves scold the have-nots for their bad manners, racism, linguistic insensitivity and garishness, while ignoring the root causes of their economic distress. The oligarchs could not be happier."

And that's what you call woke imperialism. And I'm sure our listeners are saying, what does he mean by that specifically? Give some examples.

Chris Hedges: Political correctness. This hypersensitivity to systemic injustices and prejudices, especially those around ethnic, racial or sexual minorities, but it's a largely linguistic concern. It's not actually concerned with ameliorating these social and economic injustices which plague these groups. And as you know later on in the article, I kind of list the dire economic situation faced by people of color, in particular Blacks, in the United States. And the corporatists and even the Pentagon, of course, is now recruiting transgender soldiers. They love it because it essentially gives them a kind of veneer of inclusiveness and diversity and sensitivity, while they continue, in the case of Wall Street, to plunder and loot the nation; and in the case of the military-industrial complex, to carry out one military fiasco after another, not to mention the fact the resources are over \$850 billion a year.

Ralph Nader: Chris, you give other examples where elevating to CEO status or high office of minorities, women, people who have been usually excluded and it doesn't make any difference in terms of the organizations they're running. Why don't you give some examples.

Chris Hedges: Well, I open with the murder of Nichols by the five Black Memphis police officers. And not only are the former officers Black, but the city's Police Department is headed by a Black woman. None of this of course helped Nichols, who just became a victim of another modern day police lynching. And then in the third paragraph, I go through, beginning with Charles Curtis, the first U.S. vice-president of Native American heritage (Kaw nation), but he pushed through legislation mandating assimilation and the revoking of tribal land titles, and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, a Black man who opposes affirmative action. Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, used to work for Dick Cheney when he was vice president, and now works for Biden. I mean it mutates from one Democratic to

Republican to Democratic administration as a war hawk, a cheerleader for the wars in the Middle East, now in the Department of State. Lloyd Austin, who is an African-American and now the Secretary of Defense has done nothing to ameliorate permanent war. Social inequality and the surveillance state aren't better because the CEO of Google and Alphabet was born in India, is of Indian descent. We have a woman who is the CEO of Northrop Grumman, and another is the CEO of General Dynamics, and then a figure like Janet Yellen, the Secretary of the Treasury, openly promotes increasing unemployment and "job insecurity," to lower inflation. And it's celebrated, not just in the political and economic arena, but also in the entertainment arena. I mentioned Kathryn Bigelow who made the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, which was just agitprop for the CIA. These people are selected to essentially provide an appealing face to a system that carries out tremendous cruelty and imparts suffering on the very people, women and people of color, they claim to represent. So, they're not actually serving their communities; they're serving the system. And it's this kind of species of corporate colonialism. So, you had all sorts of people, Papa Doc, and Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, and Mobutu Sese Seko in the Congo, and Shan of Iran, Mohammad Rezā Pahlavī. They would all do the dirty work while allowing large corporations, whether it was United Fruit or a British Petroleum in Iran or whatever, to loot the country.

Ralph Nader: Let's examine your argument here. Years ago when I was at Harvard Law School, we were among the very few people who were pushing for more admissions for women and Negroes, which is what African-Americans were called, and the argument that we made was twofold. Not only is it important to give all people an opportunity to scale the ladder of success and position as defined in the society, but if you give minorities and women that kind of equal opportunity, they're going to make a difference because they're more sensitive to certain kinds of injustices that the male-dominant clique ignores. For example, there were far more unnecessary operations on women when the medical profession was 95% men than is the case today.

So someone might say, okay, Chris Hedges, you're saying that putting these people in positions of power does not change the power structure. There was a woman who was the CEO of Lockheed Martin, I can't remember her name, for several years until recently. It didn't affect anything Lockheed Martin was doing in terms of ripping off the government--boondoggle of F-35, never enough weapon systems for the taxpayer to pay, all kinds of waste and cost overruns--didn't make any difference. So some of them may say, Chris Hedges, why are you putting a bigger moral burden on these people? Why not just recognize they should have an equal opportunity and not say you've got to do things differently, better, and more just than your male counterparts that you've replaced at the top of these organizations.

Chris Hedges: Well, I certainly agree with you. Not only should these people be included but in the case I support reparations, of course, for Black Americans. But we have to remember that it's the white power structure that selects who goes out. Biden was a huge champion of Clarence Thomas, who is nowhere near Thurgood Marshall. So you have all sorts of women and people of color who do have that sensitivity but they're not people that the power system is going to incorporate into their structures. As you know, you went to Harvard Law School, I went to Harvard Divinity School, but in 1970 at Harvard Divinity School there were no Black professors and Black students in protests occupied the president's office and so that pressured the Divinity School to interview. And one of the people they interviewed was James Cone, the greatest

theologian of his generation, probably the greatest theologian in America since Reinhold Niebuhr.

Well, Cone came for a meeting to Cambridge but the white power structure had no intention of offering someone like James Cone, who was fiercely independent as well as being brilliant, that job. The job was given to a very pliable African-American candidate who had never written a book, he just finished his PhD. In fact, his entire tenure for three decades he never did write a book. So there's a classic example. Those of us who come out of theological training should be highly embarrassed that you would take the most important theologian of his generation and essentially not hire him. They wanted a nonentity. They wanted a Black face that would be malleable. They didn't want James Cone. So that's another example of the problem. People who have that streak of independence, and I would argue even that brilliance, are too much of a threat. And to climb within the power structure you have to do the bidding.

I mean, it was then Major Colin Powell who boosted his career in the army significantly when he wrote the reports that covered up the 1968 massacre of 500 civilians at My Lai. I mentioned in the column Barack Obama who was a product of the Chicago political machine, one of the dirtiest and most corrupt in the country. And in order to achieve political prominence and ensure his election to the presidency, he threw under the bus Jeremiah Wright, another prophetic and powerful voice. So, yeah, those voices are there though many of these people have a strong commitment to their communities and to the oppressed, but they're not the people who the privileged or the ruling class is going to adopt and promote.

Ralph Nader: What did Cornel West call Obama? He supported Obama's campaign in 2008, went all over the country.

Chris Hedges: Yes, he did. I think he did over 60 events for Obama and felt justifiably betrayed when, as soon as Obama took power, he brought in the big bankers and Larry Summers, Robert Rubin and all these figures who had largely orchestrated the 2008 crash largely. And Cornel called Obama "a black mascot for Wall Street." So that's what I'm writing about. To put, in a case of Obama, a black face on imperial projects and on bailing out the banks and everything else. Of course Obama massively expanded the Drone Warfare. His assault on civil liberties was worse than that carried out by George W Bush. They function as a brand. In fact, after Obama won, he won Advertising Age's award for Marketer of the Year because the advertising professionals understood exactly what he'd done.

Ralph Nader: You quote the late journalist, Glen Ford, as noting this phenomenon early on, years ago. He was head of the *Black Agenda Report*. What was he saying?

Chris Hedges: Glen understood this very early. And the quote in the story was "it's an insult to the organized movements of people these institutions claim to want to include. These institutions write the script. It's their drama. They choose the actors they want, whether black, brown, yellow, or red faces. And he called these promoters of identity politics "representationalists," people who want to see Black people represented in various sectors of society—Black scientists, movie stars, and scholars at Harvard. But as Glen pointed out, it's just representation. It doesn't change the power structure at all.

Ralph Nader: You say, "Diversity is important. But diversity, when devoid of a political agenda that fights the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed, is window dressing. It is about

incorporating a tiny segment of those marginalized by society into unjust structures to perpetuate them."

Are you saying that the white power structure is picking the wrong minorities and women? Or are you saying that they're picking minorities and women who you think should make a difference once they ascend to the top of the organization? My earlier point, are you putting a greater moral obligation on them?

Chris Hedges: No. They pick those who are pliable. And if they're not pliable, they're gotten rid of. Though there are no shortage of people of color and women who are fighting the systems of injustice, they're not the people who get selected. Look at the vast difference between Thurgood Marshall who was real and who spent his life fighting on behalf of disenfranchised African-Americans and Clarence Thomas.

Ralph Nader: And what's your view the Black Caucus here in Congress?

Chris Hedges: Well, they've gone the same way as the Progressive Caucus. They've largely surrendered for political expediency and to salvage their own careers. Glen Ford used to call them the black misleadership class. The rules are very strict. and if you want to keep your seat in Congress, you better dance to the tune they play. And if you don't, you won't keep your seat. You can ask Dennis Kucinich as the Democrats redistricted his district in Ohio to get him out of the House.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Chris Hedges who just authored a thunderbolt of an article, "Woke Imperialism." I thought the end of your article is quite compelling. You spent quite a bit of time with inmates in prisons in New Jersey as a volunteer, and you ended with this story.

Chris Hedges: Yeah, so I teach in the college degree program through Rutgers University. And a few years ago, I helped 28 students in a maximum security prison write a play about their lives called *Caged*. The play ended up running for a month at the Passage Theatre in Trenton; sold out almost every night. It was subsequently published by Haymarket Books. But the 28 students in that class insisted unanimously that the corrections officer that was written into the play not be white. That was too easy. And that allowed people to simplify and mask the oppressive apparatus of banks, corporations, police, courts, and the prison system, all of which make diversity hires. And they understood, probably better than most because they're victims of it, that these systems of internal exploitation and oppression are what have to be targeted and dismantled. It doesn't matter who they employ.

Ralph Nader: Well, let's open this up. David?

David Feldman: Chris, you brought up Jeremiah Wright who Obama threw under the bus. Jeremiah Wright, first name, Jeremiah. How culpable are America's religious leaders for not letting loose with jeremiads? Where are the prophets, the Jeremiads? Where's the fire and Brimstone telling Americans to repent for what we're doing to people overseas and to ourselves?

Chris Hedges: Well, that was Jerry. Nobody did it with more brilliance and more eloquence. And people should listen to him. He's stunning and prophetic. And of course, as soon as he became a liability, he had not only married Barack and Michelle Obama, but I know, because Jerry is a friend of mine, he had mentored Obama from the moment he landed in Chicago.

Obama knew very little about the African-American experience. He was raised in a white household in Hawaii. And in many ways he became a kind of surrogate son and that's why Jerry was also hurt on a very personal level. He invested a lot of time in Obama. But as Obama rose within the Chicago political machine to Jerry's dismay, any political position that might hinder Obama's advancement, Obama shed. And as Jerry said to me once, there's a word for people like that. So they're there but they're not only locked out of the mainstream, but if they get any kind of prominence, as Jerry did during the campaign, they're demonized and attacked.

Ralph Nader: Well, we're unfortunately out of time. We've been talking with Chris Hedges, former prize-winning *New York Times* correspondent. More than a foreign correspondent, he was a war correspondent in some of the most violent conflicts of those years. And the author most recently of the book *War is the Greatest Evil*. And another one of his books, listeners, you might want to read, which I accuse Chris of understating, is *The Death of the Liberal Class*. And it was prescient when it came out. And the liberal class has further confirmed Chris's foresight. Thank you very much, Chris.

Chris Hedges: Thank you, Ralph.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Chris Hedges. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. And now for a final word.

David Feldman: Ralph, in terms of just style, I thought Joe Biden did a pretty good job for the State of the Union. Your thoughts?

Ralph Nader: Well, I have to disagree partly. It was full of good recommendations that the Republicans have been blocking—environmental, climate, child tax extension, protection of workers, and minimum wage. He made all the lists but it was too palsy-walsy. That is, a good many of the 38 million people who apparently watched or listened to Joe Biden's State of the Union speech could miss the fact that the reason why he was pressing forward on this huge list of improvements for the American people is that the GOP is blocking it. He didn't make that clear at all. He wanted to talk bipartisan palsy-walsy and so forth. And he's done that again and again in the speeches that he's made.

Second, he didn't spend enough time on climate disruption. It was almost a throwaway paragraph and he should have been much more pointed on that in addition to his warning about what could this mean to the globe, I was looking for more specifics. And thirdly, he called Nancy Pelosi the greatest House speaker in American history. Well, she only lost the last five out of seven congressional races starting in 2010, '12, '14, '16--four losses. She got in in 2018, just squeaked by in 2020, and lost against the worst Republican party in history in 2022. I don't know how that qualifies as being the greatest speaker in the House of Representatives history.

Steve Skrovan: I want to thank our guests again, Dr. Nason Maani and Chris Hedges. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up." And we've got a new feature on "The Wrap Up", so tune in to that. A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, it's free, go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: The American Museum of Tort Law has gone virtual. Go to tortmuseum.org to explore the exhibits, take a virtual tour, and learn about iconic tort cases from history.

David Feldman: We have a new issue of the *Capitol Hill Citizen* out now. To order your copy of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, "Democracy Dies in Broad Daylight," go to capitolhillcitizen.com.

Steve Skrovan: And remember to continue the conversation after each show, go to the comments section at ralphnaderradiohour.com, and post a comment or question on this week's episode. We'll pick out some standout comments. So be sure to tune in next week, you may hear Ralph's response.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music "Stand Up, Rise Up" was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you. It was a great program. I have a little suggestion for listeners: next time you meet someone, instead of saying, "How are you?" why don't you ask, "How's your civic life?"