

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EPISODE 495 TRANSCRIPT

Hannah Feldman: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Hannah Feldman. Steve Skrovan is off today. I'm your guest host here with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: Good morning.

Hannah Feldman: And of course, we have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody. Get ready for a special kind of show.

Hannah Feldman: Our first guest today, Steve McNamara, has been making newspapers for more than five decades. He got a start as a reporter and editor. And in 1966, Steve and his wife Kay bought the *Pacific Sun*, one of the country's oldest alternative weekly newspapers. And they published the *Sun* in Marin County, California until 2004.

When the warden at San Quentin Prison, just down the road from them, revived the prison's inmate-run newspaper in 2008, he assembled a team of volunteer advisors. They helped get it off the ground and mentored the incarcerated men who would be writing and editing the paper. And this team included Steve McNamara. Today, the *San Quentin News* is the largest prison newspaper in California, and it's distributed to every prison in the state as well as to independent subscribers. It's also available in its entirety, online for free.

We'll speak to Mr. McNamara about the unique challenges of publishing a newspaper from inside a prison, as well as the challenges that come with publishing any independent local paper. We'll also talk about how the paper helps build community pride and prepares its staff for the transition out of San Quentin, plus how the *San Quentin News* program fits into the changing criminal justice system in California.

Our second guest will be Peter Lurie, President of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. The CSPI is an independent science-based consumer advocacy organization. For more than 50 years, they have held industry and government accountable to the public health and advocated for a safer and healthier food system. Mr. Lurie will join us to discuss the center's many victories on behalf of consumers as well as their ongoing advocacy and education work. Plus, if you're wondering why the United States hasn't ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, you are not alone. To close out today's show, Ralph will respond to one dubious justification for the United States in action.

As always, somewhere in the middle, we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's get the latest news out of San Quentin. David?

David Feldman: Steve McNamara is a newspaper publisher, editor, reporter and volunteer advisor for the *San Quentin News*, a newspaper written and published by those incarcerated at San Quentin. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Steve McNamara.

Steve McNamara: I'm very glad to be here.

Ralph Nader: Welcome indeed, Steve. Listeners might be interested in knowing that Steve and I were classmates at Princeton, class of 1955, and he has a long career in journalism. For over 30 years, he was the editor of a weekly in Marin County near San Francisco. So I think today people are going to get a view of prisons that is not ordinarily narrated. Most of the information about prisons occurs when there's an exposé of especially brutish conditions in prisons or if there happens to be an uprising or maybe a contagious influenza sweeping through a prison. But today you're going to get a real upbeat view of what happens when prison wardens have a rehabilitation attitude. And that is expressed throughout this 24-page monthly newspaper called the *San Quentin News*, *Written by the Incarcerated and Advancing Social Justice* is its subtitle. And Steve has been a longtime advisor.

And I want to give you, Steve, an opportunity to give people a sense of what this newspaper contains and how it has reduced the recidivism rate to zero for prisoners who have worked on the paper, either writing for it, editing or layout or even photography. Give us a sense of the San Quentin News and how widely is it distributed throughout prisons in California and elsewhere.

Steve McNamara: Good questions. When the warden asked me and two other newspaper people to get this back off the ground, the warden, a wonderful guy named Bob Ayers, hadn't a clue about how to put out a newspaper. He just knew, and he told me that the most important item in a prison is information. And most of the information that's passed around, from inmates from cell to cell or down in the lower yard, is wrong. And he wanted to have a newspaper that was not the warden's newsletter and it wasn't backing up the prison system, but it was simply an expression of the news that prisoners wanted to exchange among each other. And that's what he got.

But it took a little while because at the beginning, we just printed 5000 copies. It was a four-page paper, and it just went to the inmates in San Quentin, which is the oldest prison in California and one of 34 different prisons. So what had to happen is the inmates, who hadn't a clue as how to put out a newspaper, had to be taught how to do it. And after 15 years, they're terrific; they really put out a wonderful newspaper. And as Ralph has mentioned, the recidivism rate among the inmates is zero. At the beginning, there were three inmates, now there are about 30. And actually the problem that we have is the turnover is terrific because they keep getting paroled or serving their sentences. That's not a problem for them, but it is the problem if you're putting out a newspaper.

Ralph Nader: And it comes out monthly and it's now 24 pages?

Steve McNamara: Yes. And the press run is 35,000. It goes to all of California's 34 prisons, plus about 10 other prisons throughout the country.

Ralph Nader: And how's it funded?

Steve McNamara: Not by the State of California. The State of California's prison system provides computers and office space, but all of the ink for the printers—the printing bill, which is the main item on the expense chart—is paid for by foundations. Ford Foundation helps, San Francisco Foundation, some private foundations help. But altogether, the budget by now has gone from about... I started an organization called the Prison Media Project and went around and knocked on some doors I knew and got the money, which was about \$5,000 or \$10,000. By now, there's a budget of about \$250,000 a year, and it's all privately raised.

Ralph Nader: And when this distribution occurs throughout the prisons in California, it's free, right?

Steve McNamara: Yes. That's kind of a small story in itself. Originally, as you and many people probably know, prisons are little empires, and the emperor is the warden, and what he decides goes. Many, if not most, of the other wardens in California wanted no part of this damn newspaper, and so we had a lot of trouble getting it distributed. But by now, it's become very popular with the inmates throughout the state and with many of the correctional officers as well, because we've made some intelligent decisions. Some was to write personality profiles of some of the better correctional officers and of the programs that take place during the prison.

Ralph Nader: And do the 30 or so inmates who work on the newspaper get any pay at all? The prison jobs sometimes get a very tiny amount of pay.

Steve McNamara: Yes. And that's a big understatement. They kind of work their way up to \$0.75 an hour.

Ralph Nader: And what about the union? The prison workers union is so powerful in California that it has constantly supported a bigger and bigger budget. At one time, the prison budget of California was equivalent to the amount of the University of California system budget, about \$9 billion, and that was some years ago. How does the union weigh in here?

Steve McNamara: They haven't weighed in as a union. Some of the correctional officers embraced the paper, some of them not so much. And that touches on one of the real key points. As the governor has said, he wants the San Quentin to not be San Quentin State Prison, but San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. And he's making some real important movement in that direction. So what needs to happen is not just that inmates in prisons need to behave like civilized people. I think to an amazing degree, they already do that. Not all of them, but a lot of them. The problem, or one of them, is that correctional officers often sign on for the job because it's sort of a military organization and they want to exert their authority over others.

What happened about six months ago is that people from this prison went to Norway and had a look at how an enlightened prison system works. One of the things that astonished them was that the correctional officers in Norwegian prisons just dress like civilians. They don't have big belts and colored uniforms and hats that distinguish them from the inmates. And so what needs to happen, if there's truly a change from prison to rehabilitation center, is not only the inmates, who

are already involved with a lot of wonderful programs, but there needs to be a change in the mentality of the correctional officers as a whole.

Ralph Nader: You actually have an article on Norwegian prison model being adopted by a prison outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Steve McNamara: The Norwegians are doing it right, and there are a lot of people taking notice.

Ralph Nader: I'm sure our listeners now are really eager to know what is in this 24-page newspaper. Before we get into some of the interesting articles, Steve, is this newspaper online? We're talking with Steve McNamara, longtime journalist, editor, and recent advisor to the *San Quentin News*

Steve McNamara: Yes, it's online, sanquentinnews.com. And as with most stuff online, it costs you nothing to access it. And the whole paper is there if you'd like to have a look at it.

Ralph Nader: All right. In the recent January issue, you have a page-one story where the headline is "Judges, lawyers get firsthand look at incarceration", by Timothy Hicks, a staff writer. What was that about?

Steve McNamara: That's an interesting story. My wife and I have six kids, and a little over 10 years ago, one of them was an assistant district attorney in San Francisco and ran their neighborhood court program. Her name is Marisa Rodriguez she said to me one day, "Hey, why do you spend so much time in San Quentin?" And I said, "Well, come have a look." So she came in to the media center to a meeting and was astonished at how smart and enlightened this group of men was. When we left the prison she said, "I got to show this to the boss," which she did.

The boss at the time was George Gascón, who was the district attorney of San Francisco (now the district attorney of Los Angeles). George came in and he too said, "This is astonishing; these guys are really on the ball." And another wonderful inmate named Arnulfo Garcia—who died in a car crash after his parole—he and I began to work on something called a San Quentin News Forum. It works this way. We get about 40 inmates, 40 people from outside – cops, prosecutors, district attorneys, people who are in the system but haven't had a very positive look at it in some cases. And we have meetings called the San Quentin News Forum.

And it's a system whereby we spend a morning at the prison and there's a meeting of everybody in a big room, and then we break into smaller groups of 8 or 10 and talk for an hour and a half, two hours, and then reassemble in the big group. And the people there, participants, often cover three things – what in their lives got them to where they are, being a cop or being an inmate? What have they learned during this session? And third, how do they propose to carry on what they've learned as they move forward in life?

One of the high points was the district attorneys of the United States, which has an organization that has conventions, and it was having a convention in San Francisco about four or five years ago.

And George Gascón, then still the district attorney, said, "Okay, you guys, first thing we're going to do is go to San Quentin Prison." And they said, "What? We thought we were going to hang around and chat and have a nice dinner." And they did come, and they did participate. There were about 60 of them and a busload of the district attorneys from throughout the United States—New York, Chicago, Baltimore—the works.

And I later learned from my daughter that the district attorneys from around the country who had resisted coming—they thought, "Geez, San Francisco is a wonderful party town. Why am I going to a prison?" They spent much of their three-day convention talking about what had happened to them when they went to one of these San Quentin News Forums. So that's been a very big step in the right direction.

Ralph Nader: Well, years ago, starting in Nevada, some judges would go and visit prisons to get a look at the end product of their sentencing. And that's still going on for San Quentin. You have judges, not just district attorneys, right?

Steve McNamara: Correct. There are judges, cops, prosecutors, defense attorneys. And the reason it's a wonderful and enlightening step is this—most people in the criminal justice system think that it goes this way—somebody breaks into a house, and they get caught, they go before a judge, they get sentenced, and they disappear. And as far as many people in the criminal justice system are concerned, that's the end of it. These people have disappeared; we don't need to worry about them anymore. But as everybody should know, 80%-90% of them will be back on the streets. And you think, well, they're not coming to my neighborhood. No, but they may come to your gas station; they may come to your supermarket. So do you want these guys, and they're mostly guys, to have the same attitude about life as they did when they went into prison? If not, here's a chance maybe to move things in a better direction.

Ralph Nader: You have an article in one of the issues of *San Quentin News*, titled "Four states end forcible prison labor". Give us the scene on that subject.

Steve McNamara: Well, I'm not the right guy to talk, because there isn't any here. San Quentin is the prison within the State of California that every inmate hopes to get to. And the reason they do is because San Quentin has about 70 or 80 programs ranging all the way from Alcoholics Anonymous to Shakespeare productions, and the newspaper is another one of them. These programs are taught and supported by up to 3000 volunteers who come in.

You may think, what's the good part about that? Well, every inmate hopes to get out. And the way you get out is you go before a parole board and the parole board asks you, "What have you been doing since you got in here?" And if you've just been playing checkers, their chances of getting out are not very good. If, however, you've been participating in a bunch of self-help programs, that enhances your chances a lot. And as someone mentioned in the introduction, the percentage of *San Quentin News* staff members who've been paroled, who have come back to any prison is zero. So clearly, we have a program that's doing a good job.

Ralph Nader: Leafing through the *San Quentin News*, they have an interesting array of articles. One says "Midterm election result suggests support for criminal justice reforms". Another one says "A day of healing. San Quentin News hosts violence prevention symposium". You have crossword puzzles and you have a lot of space devoted to the sports. Are there actually inter-prison soccer team contests between prisons or all these sports are located and played in one prison at a time?

Steve McNamara: The latter is mostly the case. No, prisoners don't travel—from other prisons don't come, but lots of outsiders come. The most impressive example is members of the Warriors basketball team come into the prison and play a game or two a year. And they are fiercely fought basketball games, and often the prison team wins. Now, this is not... Steph Curry may come in, but he won't be playing. However, there will be members of the Warriors operation who will indeed be on the team.

Mostly it's groups of other people who are interested either in track or a marathon that's run at the *San Quentin News*. You think, "How in the hell can they run a marathon 26 miles in a prison?" You can if you go around and around and around the athletic field. And indeed, somebody who just got out on parole after, finishing their sentence, ran the Boston Marathon.

Ralph Nader: You have some fascinating features, Steve. One just caught my attention. "Hawaiian youth corrections eliminates imprisonment of girls. Shift in policy and practice focuses on girls' history of trauma". Then you have another one. "California prisons' role in aviation history. Planes, dirigibles, mechanics are all part of the Correction Department of California history". Do any of these articles get picked up by the mainstream or progressive press around the country? Do you ever have television crews coming to interview some of the editors and reporters?

Steve McNamara: The latter, yes. A lot of famous media people who come through. One of the things that happens is that the inmates who start out not having a clue about how you write anything more than a letter to your mother, become really good writers. And they don't get paid much writing for the *San Quentin News*, but a lot of them write stories that wind up in the *Washington Post* or the *Atlantic* magazine, or a place like that. So there is that exchange of news that comes from San Quentin, but it's not stories that we run get picked up, but the writers that we develop find themselves able to get jobs as freelancers for outside publications.

Ralph Nader: Just to increase the variety of articles conveyed to our listeners, Steve, you have an article, "Canine rehabilitation programs prove successful". And another one on the same page of the April issue, "Wild Horses. Prison farm employees "gentling" method to reshape horses, humans". What are those about?

Steve McNamara: Well there are not a lot of wild horses that come in San Quentin. I think they're probably talking about programs in other prisons that deal with wild horses. But as I said, there are perhaps 70 or more different programs going on in San Quentin. And in fact, if you talk to an inmate in San Quentin and I suppose other places, to program is a verb. And when you get to prison, if you want to get out before too long, you program. And it means you take yourself into a variety of programs that draw out your better qualities.

Ralph Nader: You also have an article called "'Basic' Act Takes Aim at Canteen Price Gouging. SB 474, a bill, California Senator Josh Becker hopes to eliminate excessive markups on commissary items". You mean consumer gouging occurs at San Quentin?

Steve McNamara: Yes, it occurs at prisons throughout the United States and perhaps the world. The prison system will contract with some provider who will... there's a catalog and you can get sneakers and you can get all kinds of stuff through these catalogs—food, whatever, not perishable food, but food. And it's been traditional that the company that has the concession to provide these things, really screws the inmates with excessive prices. Some of the inmates are standing up on their hind legs and saying, "Come on, you shouldn't charge this much money for a sack of popcorn or whatever. That's ridiculous." And they're making some progress.

Ralph Nader: There are two articles that I just want you to summarize briefly. One is called "Second Chance Month highlights the power of personal transformation" and the other is "Proposed amendment in Sacramento would restore voting rights to incarcerated people", people who are still in jail.

Steve McNamara: What they're hoping is that things will move in the right direction in the ways you just imagine. There is a good deal of coverage of what's going on politically within the State of California and the prison system. The paper is supported financially from the outside. People might say, "Well, is it censored?" Not in the sense most people would say censored. The public relations office at San Quentin, which has been led by some really enlightened, wonderful people, has a look at the paper. But mostly what they're looking for is mistakes in reporting on events that have taken place within the prison bureaucracy. If somebody's got it all wrong, they'll say, "I think you guys ought to look at this again. That's not exactly the way it happened." But there is no real censorship in the sense that there's some editor with a red pencil who's going through the paper and crossing things out. That's not allowed. In fact, the founding statement from Warden Bob Ayers was "This is not the warden's newsletter." Yet occasionally there'll be somebody in prison headquarters in Sacramento who will want to exert some authority, but we'll fight back. Indeed, some years ago, I got on the phone with the people in Sacramento and told them, "You got to remember what we are. We're independent." And they gulped hard and said, "Yeah, I guess that's really the way we should be viewing this."

Ralph Nader: Well, there you are, listeners. The US has the highest percentage of people in jail per capita of any country in the world, way ahead of various dictatorships. And Steve has provided you with a broader view of what's going on in some of the more enlightened prisons so you can draw your own conclusions where you live and reside in terms of the prison conditions in your state. Anything else you want to say, by the way, that we didn't cover?

Steve McNamara: Yes, I think that while the prison system in America is horrible, taken as a whole, in various places, San Quentin being one... California being one, there's movement in a good direction. While in past years there's been a lot of backsliding, I don't think that's how you would characterize the situation these days.

Ralph Nader: Well, unfortunately, we're out of time. Steve, this has been very engrossing. Thank you for sharing your experience here. Can you tell our listeners once again how they can access the *San Quentin News* on the internet? And what if they want a print copy, is there a subscription by outsiders?

Steve McNamara: Yes, easily answered. One is if you want to read it online, you go to sanquentinnews.com. And there is the newspaper. And the newspaper will show you how you can subscribe to it, but you basically make a contribution to its livelihood and you'll get the paper in the mail.

Ralph Nader: On that note, thank you. We've been speaking with Steve McNamara, a longtime advisor to the *San Quentin News*, but over a long career in journalism as editor, publisher from coast to coast. Thank you very much, Steve, for your lifetime of work and continue it on.

Steve McNamara: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity.

Hannah Feldman: We've been speaking with Steve McNamara. We will link to the *San Quentin News* at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Up next, we'll get an update from our food and health watchdog, the Center for Science in the Public Interest. 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, September 1, 2023. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) has fined American Airlines (AA) \$4.1 million for violating federal law, prohibiting tarmac delays of three hours or more on domestic flights without providing passengers an opportunity to deplane. The Department's investigation found that AA kept dozens of flights stuck on the tarmac for long periods of time without letting passengers off. The DOT is ordering AA to pay the largest fine ever issued for tarmac delay violations, and cease and desist from violating the law. The fine is part of the Department's unprecedented effort to ensure the traveling public is protected, including returning more than \$2.5 billion in refunds to travelers.

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

Hannah Feldman: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Hannah Feldman, along with David Feldman and Ralph. What has the Center for Science in the Public Interest been up to? David?

David Feldman: Dr. Peter Lurie is President and Executive Director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest. Dr. Lurie previously worked with the Food and Drug Administration and Public Citizen's Health Research Group, where he co-authored their *Worst Pills, Best Pills: A Consumer's Guide to Avoiding Drug-Induced Death or Illness*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dr. Peter Lurie.

Peter Lurie: Thank you for having me.

Ralph Nader: Yes. Welcome, Peter. We go back a long way. The Center for Science in the Public Interest was started by people who worked for a short time at our own center, and it was a wonderful spinoff. Give us an idea of the size of the center, how many staff, its budget.

Peter Lurie: You're absolutely right, Ralph, that in many ways this began with you, as did many other groups, of course. And our executive director at the time or at the beginning who worked with you was Mike Jacobson. He and a couple of others formed a group back in 1971. So we're over 50 years old now.

We've been able to expand, actually, in recent years since I took over as the second executive director of CSPI, which was six years ago. We now have about 65 employees, which is about 50% bigger than when I came along. We have an \$18 million budget. We're active in most of the different branches of government in various ways that hopefully we'll get to discuss today. Overall, it's a long and substantial history, which goes all the way back to the beginning with you.

Ralph Nader: I've credited the Center for Science in the Public Interest with transforming the nutritional habits of perhaps 40 million people. It generated front-page news. It was on the evening television news, congressional hearings. Recently, and this has happened to a lot of citizen groups, Peter, the media has not been covering what we're doing. I'm sure that you're feeling the same sense of being more and more excluded by national television, radio, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *AP*. Are you as concerned about that as I am? And what are you doing about it? Because you keep putting out reports, petitions to the FDA on sodium excesses in our food, excess sugar in our food, and you have this wonderful newsletter which we're going to talk about, one of the best buys in the consumer publishing world, called Nutrition Action. It comes out 10 times a year. Give us your sense of your problems with the media here, trying to reach tens of millions of people.

Peter Lurie: That's certainly true. I'm sure there's not a consumer advocate out there who doesn't feel that they should be better heard, and we're certainly among those; it is tough. We've tried to compensate in at least a couple of ways. One is to move more into social media. We have plenty more to do there, but we've revamped our website numerous times. We try to contact people and build bonds with them through those kinds of social media locations like the X, Twitter, X and Twitter, or whichever it is, and Instagram, Facebook, and the rest.

We continue to put out reports. One way in which we're a little different than before is we turn out a lot more in the way of peer-reviewed medical and nutrition articles than used to be the case. And those have a particular life of their own. Some of them get attention when they come out as actual news. But the nature of the industry now is that everything lives forever in a database, PubMed, and those are accessible forever. So we have ongoing influence because those reports don't come and go in the way that newspaper coverage can do.

So those are a couple of ways in which we've tried to adapt. But you're absolutely right, it's tough as nails. When you call them up, they sometimes suggest that you have biases, as if the industry does not. Those somehow have to be declared. That seems fundamentally unfair.

Ralph Nader: Tell us how people can get *Nutrition Action*, which is very brightly written, great colorful layouts. I've read it time and time again going back. You had a whole issue on chemical additives once. You name names, there's nothing vague. You name company names, you name names of the additives. You name all kinds of names of good food and what different kinds of food can do to your health. You focus on children's diets. How can people get *Nutrition Action*? It's still in print, not just online. Hundreds of thousands of people subscribe to it in print.

Peter Lurie: That's right. There was a time where we had 900,000 subscribers, and it's gone down over time for sure; that's part of the overall declining print and magazine industry. We're a victim to that like anybody else. You can subscribe either in print or online by going to our website, which is cspinet.org. There, up in the top right-hand corner, you'll find a little button saying *Nutrition Action*. So cspinet.org, and then hit on *Nutrition Action* and that will get you there.

We think that it's a complementary work to what we otherwise do. CSPI has sort of two faces, and we're trying to bring them together in our website and the magazine more and more. One is the educational function, which is what you described, and what the magazine does to a large extent. And the other is all the activism, which I'm sure we'll go on to talk about here, but which is more focused toward government policies and so forth. We try to educate consumers on the one hand. On the other hand, try to take care of the environment such that consumers in some way don't even need to be as educated because the environment is different.

Ralph Nader: Looking back over 50 years, do you see that these corporations that are marketing directly to kids, very often bypassing and undermining parental authority with terrible foods, drinks, foods, high sugar, high fat, high salt, are they shaping up at all? You've gone after them. Mike Jacobson's gone after them. Sometimes people on Capitol Hill. How would you compare them today with in the 1970s?

Peter Lurie: I would say that there's been a modest amount of progress. Broadcast industry has a standard that relates to what they'll advertise on television and at what times of day, what ages, and pushing towards more nutritious food. It's all voluntary, of course, as you can imagine/ Nonetheless, they have heard the complaints of parents and consumers enough that they've at least adopted a code, for whatever that's worth. It's very hard to get much beyond that, given this country's First Amendment restrictions, so that's been an improvement.

We've done quite a bit of work in restaurants for a long time. Kids' meals had this customary practice of having a default beverage, and the default beverage was almost always a carbonated sugared one. And we've made quite a bit of progress over the years in getting that to change. We've also managed to push through legislation in some localities and states that prevent that from being the case.

So companies understand and know that there is a drive from consumers for more healthy food. They may honor that in the breach, but they also see it sometimes as an advertising opportunity, and so they'll push forward, trying to highlight these changes. Sometimes the changes are trivial, and they highlight them all the same. Don't get me wrong. But if you take the 50-year perspective on things, mild progress has been made in the interim. And you see people looking in the store at the labels in ways that were literally impossible 30 or 40 years ago. So that's very heartening.

The next step in labeling, though, for us is something called front-of-package labeling. And what that tries to do is to distill the essential information on the most important nutrients that people typically overconsume from the side, Nutrition Facts panel, and then move it to the front of the package. Perhaps, ideally, from our point of view, with some indication of whether you're too high or perhaps too low in that particular nutrient. And this is the kind of cutting edge of food labeling internationally.

Interestingly enough, most of the work has been done in Latin America, and they've had very good results. In most of the countries that have adopted this front-of-package approach, there have been decreases in sodium consumption, decreases in added sugar consumption. And in Chile, at least, even more encouragingly, there's been reformulation of products to take out added sugars, because otherwise they're going to wind up with a sign saying that added sugars are too high.

So the companies are reformulating. And in many ways the ultimate secret here is not to have shoppers in the position of having to use the Nutrition Facts label to shop among the variety of choices that any supermarket has, but rather to change the environment to the point that the incentives get the companies to reformulate. And then when you pick the product off the shelf, it's more likely to be a healthy one.

About a year ago, we filed a petition with FDA, and they're conducting research on this and gathering information on the science related to it. We think that that's a real opportunity for change.

Ralph Nader: Well, I hope you also focused on the print being large enough for people to read it, because one of the ways companies get away with the labeling requirements, they make the print so small that many people can't even read it.

Peter Lurie: Or you put it up against the background such that you can't tell the print from the background anymore; it's just literally illegible. These are standard tricks, as you can imagine.

Ralph Nader: Yes, that too. Well, Mike Jacobson wrote a book recently, called *The Salt Wars*, and he derived from studies that over 100,000 people in this country are dying because of excessive consumption of salt in their diet. You have a salt petition. You call it a sodium petition before the Federal Food and Drug Administration. You also have an added sugars petition before the Food and Drug Administration. Give us an appraisal of this regulatory agency that you worked for once, and whether it's being subjected to adequate oversight and budgeting and staffing in the food regulatory area by the Congress. Give us a read.

Peter Lurie: We can certainly return to those particular efforts later on if you want, but I think that most people, including in all likelihood, the current commissioner, understand that the food program within FDA has been like the poor stepchild of the agency. People have focused more on drugs; they've focused more on medical devices, vaccines, and even more recently tobacco. So food has been relatively neglected, and we've, at times, paid the price for that.

Usually, as you know probably better than anybody, it takes a crisis to make things change. And the recent crisis in FDA's food world was the infant formula disaster from a couple of years ago, where it turned out that there was contaminated product. The company actually knew about it, and they destroyed the product rather than telling the FDA. Eventually, more product with similar contamination cropped up, and that resulted in a massive recall, which was superimposed on the pandemic. And the next thing, we had empty shelves and parents, who were only feeding their children with infant formula, without adequate access to that very product.

So that has forced a long overdue reconsideration of food at FDA. The agency put in for a very large increase in funding for that part of the FDA program, but it's not looking especially promising at the moment. The House has struck the increase in funding, so we'll see what can be done on the Senate side.

The agency also elevated the food function within FDA to a higher level, technically speaking, than drugs or tobacco so I think that the message, as a result of this crisis, has gotten through, after decades of relative neglect.

Ralph Nader: How do you characterize the food industry lobbying in Congress? Before the Republicans took control of the House, there was not much going on there. It's quite surprising because there's so many issues that grab people back home which are their constituents—school lunch nutrition standards, for example, being some, and as well as the usual lack of teeth in the meat, poultry and fish inspection laws. We worked on a lot of these bills in the late '60s and early '70s, and the food companies battled to make sure that the penalties were very modest and the capability of even pursuing criminal prosecution was almost nonexistent. What's the scene in Congress now, and who are some of the champions that people should get in touch with?

Peter Lurie: Yeah. So the Congress is the way. It sort of always is a background of significant lobbying. And in the food area, not only might there be involvement in particular bills, but there's this micro involvement in remarkably small aspects of regulation. So there are riders relate to whether FDA can work on sodium restriction. There's a rider related to potatoes in school lunches. They attempt to mess with whether it should be full or low fat milk that's being served to kids in schools.

These are the kinds of things that Congress has taken upon itself to get its fingers in. It's really preposterous, because those things should be left to the regulatory agencies. But there's no issue too trivial for the industry to show up in an obviously self-interested way and advocate on their own behalf.

There are some signs of hope though. Interestingly, the pandemic provided some of them. For example, two reforms were ushered in during the pandemic—a universal school meals plan was put in place for the duration of the pandemic, and it was made easier for people to pick up school meals during the summer. Of course the minute the pandemic, so-called goes away, immediately those got retrenched; despite what were very popular programs, those have now disappeared. So we've had to turn instead to the states to try to get them to implement universal school meals. Maine and California have done that, and a number of other states are trying to do that. But really that should all come from the federal level.

Republicans in Congress mostly are very often opposed to those kinds of things they claim constitute government overreach. But we certainly have our friends and colleagues in the Congress. For example, Connecticut Representative DeLauro has been supportive for a very long time, and we have worked very productively with Senators Durbin and Blumenthal. The rising star in this area has been Senator Booker, who has a strong personal story with respect to nutrition and who's very engaged in these issues as well. So there are some involved congressional members. But unquestionably, from a financial point of view, the advocacy side is hopelessly outgunned by the industry and the only real hope for winning is a well-made, well-presented argument, and having the science on our side, which we do.

Ralph Nader: Don't you think that groups like yours should be more forceful in throwing these companies against the wall of the criminal behavior that they have engaged in? And do you intend to expand your litigation capacity to get some of these issues in the courts that are ignored by the corporate-indentured members of Congress?

Peter Lurie: You can avail yourself only of the laws that exist, and as you point out, they are largely nonexistent. Historically, CSPI'S litigation department has engaged in tort litigation, class action cases, almost all around some kind of mislabeling. So where a company makes a claim that isn't justified or they label or put text or pictures on their product in such a way that, for example, suggests that there's a boatload of fruit in there when there's actually concentrated juice extract or something. That's a kind of common thing where judgements can be won in certain instances under such circumstances. And we've had some luck in the whole grain area in particular, and we've even made some useful law.

What we've tended to do, though, in recent years, after I consulted with a number of people who used to work for you, Ralph, is to move a little bit more away from that kind of work, although we do still do it, and more in the direction of administrative procedure type cases. Procedural questions, sometimes substantive ones, but more that relate to what government policies are and our ability to challenge those. One I told you about where we got the school meal provisions from the Trump administration overturned is a really good example of that. We got something called the Sunset Act or provision overturned. That was something put in place by HHS during Trump's administration that would literally have required every single regulation within HHS to be revisited and re-justified every five years, and given the fact that there are about 17,000 of those rules, we felt made that was completely and utterly impossible, and would basically guarantee that in the absence of renewal, the rules would simply disappear. These would have been rules that were related to food, but also rules that were related to drugs, related to the Centers for [Medicare and](#)

Medicaid **Services**. All these things would have just literally evaporated for failure to renew them using a substantive and very time-consuming process every five years. Impossible. So we've done that kind of work more recently, Ralph, and using the Free Information Act a bit more. And we're thinking that long term, that's probably the more effective approach.

Ralph Nader: It's amazing the cruel contrasts in this country. As you say in one of your dispatches, In the US, an estimated 30% to 40% of the food supply ends up as waste; meanwhile, more than 10% of US households were food-insecure at some point in 2020. There are millions of kids who go to bed hungry at night in the US. And yet, the food is piled up, and much of it goes into waste, which is an environmental problem as well.

I want to ask you about imports. There was some period in the past where the dollar value of food imports into the greatest food producer in the history of the world, the US, equaled or slightly surpassed the dollar value of domestic food production. How are you dealing with health and safety hazards and deceptive marketing relating to the huge importing of food in this country?

Peter Lurie: Well, it's a massive problem, and underlying it all is a problem that FDA in particular, because there's less importation of actual animals, it tends to be finished food products or ingredients. So most of those are subject to FDA, not USDA regulation. They're inspecting 1%, 2% of all products that have come across the border. That means all foods, all drug, all tobacco, all everything.

That's the underlying problem. So you're never even close to being able to, in a meaningful way, inspect any FDA regulated product that comes across the border. And in order to do so, you'd have to have a vast increase in resources, which I'm not aware anybody is seriously contemplating at this point, even though they should. So you're right. And in those ways, all kinds of things can get into the US marketplace.

Dietary supplements can be a special problem in that area because some of them are made in facilities that may not be able to exclude heavy metals. And so certain categories of supplements have been shown fairly reliably to have lead or occasionally mercury within them. It's a huge problem, but in some ways even bigger than the food. That's the unfortunate fact.

Ralph Nader: Well, imports of food from China have been shown to be contaminated — Contaminated peanut butter, for example — in part because they grow food next to polluted environments, whether it's air or water pollution. And how confident are you that the USDA organic label is actually reflected in the food that the label is attached to, first in the US, and then abroad?

Peter Lurie: The organic label, in an ironic way, is one of the more dependable parts of food labels in this country, by which I mean other things that you customarily see, like healthy, natural, phrases like that, those go without definition. Organic at least has a definition. You can go to the USDA's website and find it, and it speaks about GMOs, and it speaks about pesticides. At least in principle, there is a mechanism for enforcing those requirements. I'm not here to say that they've

been well-enforced, because I simply don't know. I'm just here to say that that is the one that is actually in the Code of Federal Regulations; it's really there and can be enforced.

The healthy and natural stuff is a wholly different thing. FDA is trying to define healthy now, and we've submitted comments on their proposal, which actually looks okay. It's a voluntary approach, though, so that's a huge problem in and of itself. But those kinds of claims I have zero confidence in, because there's just no way to regulate them unless they make a claim so outlandish that somebody brings a class action lawsuit against them, which might get things changed.

And I to emphasize that CSPI is one of the few groups remaining that doesn't take money from corporations at all. We don't take advertising in *Nutrition Action*. We take money from the government only inasmuch as it supports limited research efforts, and that it comes from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), as opposed to the agencies that we lobby. We hold dear to Michael Jacobson's original vision of this and some of the other groups that were formed under your aegis that still stand by that approach to things.

Not having advertising certainly makes life a bit more difficult than it would be. But from our point of view, that's absolutely critical if we're ever going to have credibility and ability to be seen as honest brokers in this space. Even though we've had some opportunity to take corporate money over the years, we've turned it down, and I plan to continue doing so.

Ralph Nader: Well, we're going to have to conclude. Can you give the contact number so people can subscribe to *Nutrition Action*, which I would strongly recommend they do. And any last point you want to make that we haven't covered?

Peter Lurie: Yeah. Well, thank you, Ralph. The best way to become a subscriber to *Nutrition Action* is to go to our website, cspinet.org, and to click on the *Nutrition Action* button. There you'll see not only information from *Nutrition Action* itself, but a whole array of activist activities that I've described on this call and any number of opportunities for people to get involved, to sign petitions, to participate with action alerts, to exhort their members of Congress or regulatory agencies to take the actions that we're seeking.

We've certainly covered a lot. In recent years, we've tried to put more emphasis on the access and hunger and equity issues that relate to the food system, not just the ones so much that we've talked about, but additional ones. And we're reaching out to some of the hunger groups to try to form a stronger movement within food. Our work is increasingly informed by those kinds of equity and sometimes racial concerns. And that has helped us bring new people into the movement, both people who support us on the outside and people who have joined us on the inside as CSPI employees. So we continue to move with the times and to do so for another 50 years.

Ralph Nader: Thank you. It's excellent having you on. We've been talking with Dr. Peter Lurie, President and Executive Director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, based in Washington, D.C. Thank you, Peter.

Peter Lurie: Thanks for having me. And David and Hannah, nice to meet you.

Hannah Feldman: We've been speaking with Peter Lurie. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Finally, Ralph, you wanted to respond to a letter from our good friend Bruce Fein.

Ralph Nader: Listeners, just a quick story on the United States and international treaties. There are so many treaties that the vast majority of nations have ratified and we as a country have not. But the most remarkable one is about to be described briefly by David.

David Feldman: This is a quote from a friend of yours, "The United States is the sole nation in the world that has refrained from ratifying the Convention on the Rights of the Child. No US president has even submitted the treaty for Senate ratification. Opposition stems from a belief that the convention interferes with parental rights to raise children."

Ralph Nader: Imagine, listeners, all the countries that we've had very good relations with and what we call the Western democracies, don't seem to have any problem with this treaty interfering with parental rights to raise children. In our country, we don't have any laws that interfere with rapacious corporations trying to raise our children, as written about recently by Harvard psychologist Susan Linn in her book, *Who's Raising Our Kids? Big Tech, Big Business, and Our Children's Lives*.

Six hours a day, they're separating these kids, on addictive smartphone devices (like iPhone), from their parents, community, and nature, selling them horribly damaging things to their health, mental, and physical. And nobody seems to be worried about that while they're being worried about ensuring no ratification, not even hearings in the Senate, on the United Nations international human rights treaty known as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. You might want to raise this issue, listeners, with some of your representatives and maybe some of the children's groups in your area.

Hannah Feldman: I want to thank our guests again, Steve McNamara and Peter Lurie.

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", featuring Francesco DeSantis and "In Case You Haven't Heard". A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

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

Hannah Feldman: Our theme music, "Stand Up, Rise Up" was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our production assistant is John Richard. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt. I'm associate producer, Hannah Feldman.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when our guest will be procrastination expert, Piers Steel. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. Be a Capitol Hill citizen. Go to capitolhillcitizen.com, get a copy of the latest issue, print-only, and roll up your sleeves to recover Congress. Change the country that way.