

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 453 TRANSCRIPT

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

David Feldman: Hello, Steve.

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

Ralph Nader: Hello. Post-election discussion.

Steve Skrovan: As we record this program, it's the morning after the midterm elections. Many races have yet to be called, but what we do know is that the red wave, that many predicted and some feared, is less a tsunami and more a gentle lapping. The Republicans will likely take control of the House. The Senate is still up for grabs, especially since Georgia is heading for a runoff election. But it'll be a few days and maybe weeks before the entire picture comes into focus. Here to give us his analysis of what has happened and what may happen, we welcome back Dr. Drew Westen, a professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University, and has written extensively about the role of emotion in deciding elections. We'll talk about what the Democrats did wrong in these midterms and in some cases, what they did right, and what they need to do on December 6th to win that runoff election in Dr. Westen's home state of Georgia between Raphael Warnock and Herschel Walker. That's just the first half of the show.

In the second-half, we're going to talk about veterans. You know, the military industrial complex loves war, but hates veterans. Congress appropriates a bottomless budget for nuclear submarines and defective fighter jets, but it balks at giving the VA adequate resources to take care of the physical, emotional, social, economic, or psychological needs of returning veterans. In the new book, *Our Veterans*, Steve Early and his co-authors explore the realities of life for returning veterans. We'll speak to them about the connections between veterans' issues, labor issues, and the social safety net, and the damage done when millions of veterans are betrayed by institutions and individuals who claim to be on their side, a more insidious version of friendly fire.

And as always, somewhere in the middle we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's talk midterm elections. David?

David Feldman: Drew Westen is a clinical, personality, and political psychologist and neuroscientist, and Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at Emory University. Dr. Westen is the author of *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dr. Drew Westen.

Drew Westen: Thanks for having me back on.

Ralph Nader: Welcome indeed, Drew. This election must have had a lot of emotion to it, because it's hard for some of us to figure out how a Republican Party that is opposed to workers in terms of minimum wage and other benefits; opposed to expanding the web of health insurance; opposed to family paid leave, paid sick leave, paid child care; opposed to extending the moratorium on rent during the pandemic. Its leaders have called the pandemic just another

little bit of flu and lost major weeks under Trump costing hundreds of thousands of lives, according to credible studies. Calls the climate disruption, which is showing itself in terms of very, very visible hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, droughts, wildfire, calling climate change a hoax, and one can go on and on. Tax cuts for the wealthy and the corporations, deregulation of health and safety protections.

The rational analysis for voters would be that this is a Republican Party that's going to be landslided. Instead, they're even or a little ahead. We're recording this interview when the final results are not in for some of the races. So obviously some wave of emotion has overtaken a huge segment of the American public, so how do you look at this from the viewpoint of your expertise and your many years of analyzing elections?

Drew Westen: Well, that's quite a mighty list you gave of reasons why someone should not vote Republican, and it's been around since the Reagan Revolution. Yeah, it's in some ways, I think Trump just amplified it and added fascism. At least Ronald Reagan would have graciously stepped down if he didn't get reelected. But that list has been there for 40 years. And the person who wrote about it, I think the most persuasively was probably Karl Marx in his discussions of what he called false consciousness of the ability of people who are being exploited by the system to take on the ideologies of the people who are exploiting them.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, and of course it gets deeper than that. I mean the issues I mentioned are supported by the Democratic Party with all its warts. So there is a contrast on all of these issues and the Republican leadership to reelect Senators. Rick Scott from Florida, who put out a report, and a lot of Republicans supported it around the country, establishing a sunset provision for safety laws, for Social Security, for Medicare. I mean, that should have been or would have been, that would have been political suicide years ago. Just Social Security and Medicare would have been political suicide. Never mind all these other issues. So we got the Republicans opposing all this, the Democrats supporting all this, and the Democrats can't landslide the Republicans.

Drew Westen: But you know what's remarkable, Ralph, in what you just described about Medicare and Social Security in particular, FDR was really smart in putting together the mechanisms for funding those programs. You probably knew this already, but I just came across a quote from him from a memo - it was never published, I don't believe then, either the memo or his words were - where he basically said, "You know what, I'm going to fund this through money that is taken out of people's wages every week so that this is what it is. It is social insurance. You pay a premium, and at the end, no one has the moral or political or any other kind of right to take that away from you." And I mean, what a brilliant way of foreseeing who the Republican Party was going to be for time immemorial.

And the really remarkable thing is that somehow, we could lose Florida by the just massive numbers when there are so many older people in Florida who rely on Medicare and Social Security. Democrats should have been blanketing the airwaves with nothing but that because in Florida you don't want to scare people just for the sake of scaring them, which is what the Republicans do all the time--Oh, look out for the brown people, parentheses, "immigration." Look out for the black people, parentheses, "crime." So they scare in that way, but it is legitimate to get people really worried about the fact that Medicare could be sunsetted and these people are trying to sunset it, especially when the opposite should be going on.

It should be, for example, that something the Democrats I've never seen champion, but it would be wildly popular if they championed having a COLA (cost of living adjustment) attached to the minimum wage--that the minimum wage just automatically goes up as the cost of living rises. That would be a way to ensure that the minimum wage stayed up and didn't wait 30 years to be updated.

Ralph Nader: Well, the Democratic Party has failed tactically, strategically, linguistically, all ways. They've surrendered their judgment to these political media consultants who have many corporate clients and are conflicted and who want to get their 15% from their TV ads, so they don't know a ground game from an air game. So I think what the Democrats failed to do is to aggregate. You can talk about (how) the Republicans stopped the extension of the \$300 a month child tax credit, which went to 58 million children and cut child poverty by a third, but they didn't aggregate the assault on children in like 15 different ways by the GOP, starting with inadequate support for neonatal care, all the opposition to paid medical leave and/paid sick leave, rather, and minimum wage; and expanding the health insurance embrace for kids, junk food in school lunch programs, repealing pesticides that particularly endanger small children. I mean, the record of assailing the health, safety and economic well-being of all children by the Republicans should have finished them off right on that score there; the same with the assault on women's rights; it's not just reproductive rights. The GOP is against the equal pay, equal rights amendment. They haven't done anything on discrimination in the marketplace. So is it fair to say that this election was lost by the Democrats rather than one by the GOP?

Drew Westen: Well, let me first say something you'll rarely hear me say. Let's start with the positive thing that the Democrats did. The way voters process their economic circumstances and the way it weighs in on elections is they tend to blame whoever is in power for whatever they're feeling on a day-to-day basis economically. You can tell them that inflation is actually higher elsewhere around the world. And Joe Biden's stimulus package did not cause worldwide inflation. You can tell them that, but that doesn't affect the fact that every time they reach for the gas pump, they're paying more for gas. Or when they go to the grocery store, they're paying more for groceries. So normally, within the first couple of years of a president's administration, he's usually picking up from where the last president left things, which is usually with a bad economy. And voters blame the new president for it. That's why you see these historic midterm effects where the party in power usually gets killed. And this time, the Democrats didn't get killed. Let's give them that first.

But the flip side is there are some ways to see to it that you don't get caught up in that. I mean one of them, again I go back to FDR because he was just brilliant. He used inoculation. He never referred to the Great Depression. He always called it Hoover's depression--always Hoover's depression. And the thing that was so intelligent about that was you create this association in people's mind when every time they feel like they are hurting, they remember who the hell did it to them, because otherwise they're going to stick it on you. And how is it that this has escaped Democrats--that you have to do that from the start, i.e., this was Trump's unemployment. When 20 million of you lost your jobs, that was Trump's job loss. That was your job loss because of Donald Trump's mismanagement of the pandemic. You start there and then things like the crises that Republicans like to manufacture at the end when they're losing--this time it was crime and

immigration, which came out of nowhere. Immigration would have been so easy to handle by simply saying, if President Biden had said, you know what--presidents have been trying to deal with this immigration thing for... Ronald Reagan finally said, you know there's 10 million people who came here without papers. You're all legal now because I can't get my own damn party to pass any legislation on this. So here's what we're going to do. You guys are trotting this stuff out like you always do when you're losing. So Chuck Schumer, you and Mitch McConnell, Nancy Pelosi, and Kevin McCarthy--I want to see the four of you sit down in a room for the next week and come out with a damn immigration reform bill. And you can't leave that room until you do. And when you come out, if it's sensible and it's something I can sign, we'll be done with this problem. But what I'll bet that the Republicans in that room will not be willing to sign off on anything because they just don't want to do it, because it's just too good a political issue to be able to blame things on brown people. So go out and do it, and then we'll have a conversation about immigration reform. And if you like, we can have that conversation in Martha's Vineyard. We can have it in New York City. We can have it right on the border and I'll sign that bill into law right on the border by the Rio Grande.

Ralph Nader: You know, Drew, you point out something. Trump names names, then he garnishes them with pejorative nicknames. He's already started with DeSantis. But it was "little Marco," "lying Ted Cruz," "crooked Hillary," and as long as the media trumpeted all of these things, and even use the capital letters in his pejorative phrases, why haven't the Democrats given them a taste of his own medicine. Why don't they say, oh, here you go again, Trump Dump, with your nicknames or something like that, because it took over a year for Biden to refer to Trump other than "the other fella." He wouldn't even mention Trump, who handed him a terrible recession and a terrible pandemic situation.

Drew Westen: Yeah, it's one of those things where you can try to deal with something by not naming it and the other side continues to brand, or you can go right after it and try to brand it yourself. Frankly, I think President Biden has done a hell of a lot of stuff in his first two years in office that when historians look back at it, the fact that he's done this despite people like Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema who take corporate money and then do corporate bidding, it's actually a pretty impressive list of things that he's pulled off. I mean we've been trying to get an infrastructure bill through Congress for a couple of decades now, and he's finally the first one who was able to do it. So he's pulled off a lot of that stuff.

Ralph Nader: Let's talk about Georgia. You're in Emory University and what looks like a runoff between Warnock and Walker may well decide the Senate, because if the Republicans take the Senate seat in Nevada, then that's going to put the Democrats either at a 50/50 or 49/50. So what does this runoff situation look like without Kemp on the ballot to help Walker?

Drew Westen: Well, it's certainly good news that Kemp's not there because there were a lot of suburban Independent and suburban Republicans – I haven't seen the data yet, but they had to be to produce this outcome – who defected from the Republican Party the way they did for Biden in 2020. And we certainly will be, I don't know when this will air, but we'll certainly be in a lot better shape if the Democrats pick up Nevada, because then there really won't be much reason for Republicans to hold their nose and vote for one of the absolute stupidest--it's pretty

impressive to get that title--one of the absolute stupidest people ever to run for the United States Senate. So, I think it would make a lot of difference if the Democrats already had 50 and this was just icing on the cake. I don't see much reason for the Republicans to show up at that point. So that's one where we can cross our fingers and it would also frankly, mean that we could lose either Manchin or Sinema and still pass legislation and exempt it from the filibuster. So it would make a lot of difference if we can just hang on in Nevada, which I think we ought to be able to.

Ralph Nader: What's your take on political media consultants? You've had to observe them over the years; they seem to have imprisoned the Democratic Party and they're conflicted in all kinds of ways. They have corporate clients and they don't know a ground game. I mean the unions that did a real good ground game unite, the hospital workers union and the culinary workers. They actually connected with people door-to-door on the issues and discussed it with them. But the overall Democratic Party is just a television party. Too much, because the consultants get 15% of that and they don't get a percentage of the ground game expenses. What's your take on that, Drew?

Drew Westen: You're absolutely right. The disincentives for them to do anything other than to advertise on television are enormous. And unfortunately, the larger the incentives to plug money into something that's incredibly expensive and decreasingly useful, is not only bad for politics and just for winning elections because we're not using optimal ways of spending campaign dollars, but it also just continues to drive up the cost of campaigns, which drives up the importance of corporate money and money from rich donors. And I'm not telling you anything, you weren't talking about 50 years ago.

But if you look at the roots of the problems in our system at this point, just about everything is so rooted in these corporate contributions, which 85% of Americans consider campaign contributions from corporations and the rich to be legalized bribery. That's the term that most resonates with ordinary Americans. They get what's going on. I mean, you look at if we hadn't had corporate contributions from oil companies and their lobbyists taking over Congress, we would have dealt with the move to clean energy and avoiding what we're seeing in terms of the extreme weather caused by climate change decades ago just like we would have protected so many millions of people from dying from heart disease and lung disease, from cigarettes. But they do have just an incredible hold that we have a pollster and consultant industrial complex on the Democratic side that in some ways is actually much more dysfunctional than on the Republican side. Because on the Republican side, at least they use, whether or not people win and lose, as a criterion for using them again. On our side is just, wow, look at this person's CV. Look at this resume, they've been doing this a long time. And it's like, well, yeah, that's kind of how we had Bob Shrum running something like eight elections, all of which lost for Democrats but he sure could get Ted Kennedy elected in Massachusetts.

Ralph Nader: Let's touch the third rail of politics. All politicians flatter the voters. We're talking with Drew Westen, Professor at Emory University. All politicians, with very few exceptions, flatter the voters. When do we say, "It's the voters' responsibility" that they have exerted a wave of masochistic voting against their own interest? A large number of them at least.

Drew Westen: Somehow, I don't think that's going to be on a bumper sticker anytime soon.

Ralph Nader: But we do have to face up to it, don't we, that the voters are often uninformed. They spend more time on their bridge game by far than on who's going to use their sovereign power and in the Congress, and so many damaging ways to the interests of their families and World Peace and equity at home, etcetera. As long as we don't pay attention to the voters and to civic education in the schools and to an honest media that is not sound bite or censorious, people like Trump will manipulate enough voters to win. What do you say?

Drew Westen: Part of what we need, I think, is a lot more political leaders like Sherrod Brown, who has won in a red state, Ohio, over and over and over again. Now, as senator, I think he's in his third term, and he wins because he practices radical genuineness in the way he speaks to Ohioans; they know that he has their back. And he's a union guy. He talks about being a union guy. He talks about why unions make a difference and about what's happened to your job as unions have disappeared in Ohio. He speaks straight to people and he wins speaking straight to people as a-- the word populist is often used as a pejorative, but whenever you see right-wing populism, you see left wing populism. And he's a populist in a good sense. That is, he points at just obscene inequality that we now have. That as a GDP has gone up by 250% in the last 40 years, executive compensation has gone up over 450%, and the compensation of ordinary working people has gone up less than 150%. He talks about that stuff in really real ways to people. And you contrast the outcome in his elections in Ohio with what Tim Ryan just did. Ryan did some really great things in being genuine most of the time, and in speaking in those similar kind of populist ways. What I meant to say before was, what right-wing populism adds to that kind of left-wing populism where left wing populism calls it like it is and basically says, hey, you're getting screwed by these rich people and these big corporations, and there's more of us than there are of them. We're going to rein those--I'll clean up my language--those people in. What right-wing populism says is, "Oh, look at my wand and not at my hand." Oh, there's not just those people up there who are bad, but there's these little people who are smaller and darker than you are who are taking your jobs--like in California in a 100 degree weather picking the fruit that you always wanted to pick. They go after them.

But what I was going to say about the Ryan campaign is that Tim Ryan just lost a fairly close election in Ohio to this Vance guy who is almost as bad as Herschel Walker in Georgia--doesn't have the same failings but has his own Silicon Valley versions of them. But Ryan ran what was in many ways an impressive campaign. He spoke to working class voters about working class issues, but he was ill-advised by somebody to take potshots at his relationship to Pelosi and Biden. And you don't win by saying I'm almost as Republican as the Republicans because people who are Republicans will say, then I'm going to vote for the Republican.

And frankly, if someone said, hey, look, I'm almost as good a Democrat as the Democrat is, right? I'm a Democrat. I'll vote for the Democrat. So that strategy always loses. But Democrats have trouble figuring out that if you just speak honestly as a populist, you can win anywhere. You can win in the south that way, because people know when they're getting screwed. And they know when somebody has their back. And they know when someone is speaking honestly to them. And frankly, honesty is usually the best policy in politics. It's just the last one...

Ralph Nader: You know, Drew, Jim Hightower made that point in our winningamerica.net Zoom conference in July. He won two races against agribusiness in Texas as agricultural commissioner. He made that point that if you just focus on the corporate predation, corporate rip-offs, he had more easy vernacular, you'll get left/ right voters because they all bleed the same color. They're all getting ripped off by the credit card companies, or the health insurance companies, or the oil companies, or the drug companies. He made that point. And listeners, you can see that and more. Just go to winningamerica.net.

Well, we're running out of time, but I want to give Steve and Dave the opportunity to converse with you. Go ahead, Steve.

Steve Skrovan: Yeah. Dr. Westen, you examined, I assume, the national electoral landscape for these midterms. Who do you think among the Democrats ran the most effective campaign and why?

Drew Westen: Oh, that's a really good question. Wow. I'm sort of going down the list in my head of this year. I think one of the people who ran the best campaigns was Gretchen Whitmer, Democratic Governor of Michigan. I think she ran it in the same way that she ran her last campaign, which was she comes across as a really straight shooter, as someone who says what she believes. What she does that I think is going to make her probably our first female president --and if she's not, someone very much like her is going to be--is that what people want in their leaders are two qualities that my colleague at Emory, the Primatologist Frans de Waal, describes as surprisingly the two main characteristics of alpha males in every mammalian species and certainly in primates. And one of them we expect, which is strength; you sort of think of alpha males as thumping their chest and being able to beat people up and stuff. But strength is one. Interestingly, the other one is warmth; what alpha males are also really good at doing is putting together coalitions. And when people are starting to fight within the ingroup, they are really good at getting them to shake hands. In fact, on one of his books called *Peacemaking Among Primates*, there is a wonderful picture of two gorillas shaking hands at the end of a fight, which just blows your mind to see. But what Whitmer does so well is she exudes traditional femininity in the good way of warmth, and you get the sense that she actually cares about people. She actually cares about doing right by the people she's representing. But she also does a really good job of speaking from a position of strength. She spoke about the attacks on abortion directly and well. She spoke about the attacks on democracy directly and well. In both of those cases, she did it in a way that brought it home very close to the ordinary person, very close to this is what it feels like not to be able to have the freedom to decide whether and when and who you're going to have a kid with. She just does that beautifully. And we heard that there was supposed to be a red wave against her. She beat the crap out of her opponent, and so did her secretary of state, who was running under her, who took the same kind of approach. I think she's a model for how Democrats should run.

Ralph Nader: Okay. David?

David Feldman: I have a psychological question. The GOP has weaponized a psychological process known as "projection" where they project their own venality onto the Democrats. The GOP accuses Democrats of being election deniers, of being violent, of being racist, of being rich elitists. How can Democrats combat this projection?

Drew Westen: It's a really good question. And I think the first thing that you have to do is to call it what it is, and then you have to go right back at them and flip it back around. I'm trying to think of a good example. Is there an example you have in mind of where they projected in this election?

David Feldman: Yes, they've accused the Democrats...

Ralph Nader: Stop the Steal.

David Feldman: Yes.

Drew Westen: Yeah, with Stop the Steal, part of the problem we have is we did not from the start brand that for what it was. And I mean, January 6th was after-- January 6th was just the middle of a process of what they were trying to put in place. The fact that we didn't from the start brand that as an attempt to steal the election, shame the crap out of these Republicans like Kari Lake, who would say, when somebody says, "No, I'll see what the election results are, and then I'll decide if they were fair," you come right in at them and you say, "you know, I think we went to different kindergartens or maybe you missed kindergarten." When I was in kindergarten, we learned about sportsmanship. The other side wins and what do you do? You don't say, "No, you didn't. The referee was unfair." You might feel that way. You might feel you got a bad call, but you know what to do? You reach out your hand and you say, "Good game. And we'll have another game down the road." And we should be talking about those Republicans in really shaming ways because they do respond to shame. Donald Trump responds to shame. And I suspect they would as well. You just simply say, "wait a minute, did you miss an entire week in kindergarten? Because we learned about that." And you don't seem to have there's a term we call that. What was it? Oh, a sore loser. He just seemed to be the party of sore losers. If you don't win, you just want to take your marbles and go home. Well you know what? Go back to kindergarten and when you get your certificate saying you finished, then you get to run again.

Ralph Nader: Unfortunately, we're out of time. But Drew, do you have a website where people can get more information about what you and your colleagues are doing?

Drew Westen: Sure. It's www.westenstrategies.com.

Ralph Nader: That's W-E-S-T-E-N strategies.com.

Drew Westen: Thank you for putting that in there because you've got to hold your finger back from trying to turn it into "western" strategies. They always want to put the "R" in.

Ralph Nader: On that note, thank you very much. Thank you for all your work on political phenomena from all angles of the social sciences over the years and the many students you've taught. Thank you, Drew.

Drew Westen: And Ralph, thank you for all of us you've taught all these years.

Ralph Nader: Well, you're very welcome. Onward now.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Drew Westen. We have a link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Up next, we take a closer look at how we treat our veterans. 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, November 11, 2022. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

This year's United Nations climate summit is brought to you by Coca-Cola. Soft drink giant Coca-Cola's sponsorship of the flagship U.N. climate conference, known as COP27, sparked an online backlash and highlighted broader concerns about corporate lobbying and influence. That's according to a report from *Reuters*.

The COP27 negotiations aimed at limiting global temperature increases that are set to kick off next month in the Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh. The Egyptian organizers cited Coca-Cola's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and key focus on climate when they announced the sponsorship deal in September, which triggered immediate outrage on social media.

Activists slammed the company for its outsized role contributing to plastic pollution and pointed to the deal as an example of corporate "greenwashing."

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. Now we're going to talk about the disconnect between patriotic celebrations of veterans and how returning soldiers are actually treated. David?

David Feldman: Steve Early is a lawyer, organizer, union representative, and labor journalist. He is the author of *Refinery Town: Big Oil, Big Money, and the Remaking of an American City*, and co-author, with Suzanne Gordon and Jasper Craven, of *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs*.

Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Steve Early.

Steve Early: Thanks for having me.

Ralph Nader: Welcome back, Steve. Some years ago, a few decades ago, we put out a book called *Discarded Army* on Vietnam war vets, which you mentioned in the book, by Paul Starr, who now teaches at Princeton. And whenever there's a book written on veterans, I always ask what's the broader context? The broader context is the war machine, the military industrial complex empire that in effect takes advantage of lower-income youths in our country who want to make some money, get a little training so they can go to college, like community college, and sends them abroad to die or kill in criminal wars of aggression. They're not declared wars; they're wars that violate our Constitution, international law and often, federal statutes.

Now, I know it's hard when you're focusing on the Veterans Administration, the mistreatment of veterans by the larger society, how hard it is for them to get a job, the homelessness, it starts with a broader context. But that doesn't mean, given all that you've read over the years, we can't have that as a discussion starter. Now I'm a member of Veterans for Peace, which I think is one of the better veterans organizations at the small level. You have quite a bit of criticism on the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars and others in the book over time. But the Veterans for Peace members hailing from World War II, Korean War, Vietnam War, and all the wars since, a lot of them do not like to be greeted by civilians in our country with the sentence "Thank you for your service." Can you explain that to our audience?

Steve Early: Well, I think that "Thank you for your service" mantra is often offensive or off-putting, particularly to post 9/11 veterans, because military service, for better or worse, depending on how you view it, is no longer a universal obligation. The draft has been abolished for 50 years and we have a so-called all volunteer force, which you just noted is drawn disproportionately from poor and working class communities throughout the country. So you have 1% of the population providing the man and the woman power for our forever wars. And I think there's a lot of disillusionment among younger veterans. We interviewed many of them for our book about their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, \$8 trillion blown on two disastrous military adventures.

And people came back, many of them not feeling so great about what they had been part of. So that's very much part of the story we tell in the book, though, what we think is unique about the book, is looking at military service as a job, not necessarily wrapped in the flag and patriotism and desire to serve some higher cost. But as you noted earlier, a lot of young people need stable employment, they need health insurance coverage, they need access to job training. And sadly, in our society, the best and quickest way to get that with the best funding is by enlisting in the military.

Ralph Nader: Well, you go through some history, and I think our listeners need to know that this has been a recurring theme in American history; the vets are given a lot of huzzahs (shout of acclaim) as they go off to war, World War I, for example. And when they come back, well, that's a different story. But after World War I, a number of years passed and veterans weren't getting their promised bonus by the federal government. So they started a Bonus Army and walked from the Midwest, sometimes further, all the way to Washington and they encamped there. Why don't you describe what happened and by who?

Steve Early: We describe it in the book. It was quite a famous moment in military history. You had 30, 40, 50 thousand very unhappy veterans of World War I who'd been promised bonuses. It was in the onset of the Depression in the early 1930s. People were unemployed. They were desperate. They needed their bonus money now, not 10 or 15 years later. So they marched on Washington, set up an encampment, put a great deal of pressure on the Hoover administration, Republicans, to pay the bonuses immediately. They were for the most part disavowed by the online veterans organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion. They were heavily red baited, Hoover refused to meet with them and he sicced the US military on them, destroyed their encampment, killed a number of the protesters, and drove them out of the city.

Ultimately the bonuses were won ahead of schedule. Policy changes for the better were made under the Roosevelt administration, but I think this was, as you point out, part of a reoccurring

pattern where younger veterans come back, they feel mistreated, they feel forgotten, abused, abandoned, and they have to organize and form new organizations because the old ones are not speaking up for their generation of veterans.

Ralph Nader: Of course, even worse situations, when African American veterans came back from World War II, for example, they were confronted by the Southern police. I mean, all kinds of terrible things happened to them when they were just trying to stand up modestly for equal rights. Will you describe some of that?

Steve Early: There was an enormous amount of post-war discrimination against African Americans who had served in greater numbers than ever before in the military during World War II. But I think one improvement in that post-war situation was that the powers that be learned a little bit about the discontent among veterans in the 1920s. They didn't want to see a repeat of that in the late 1940s. So you had passage by Congress before the war even ended in 1945, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, the GI Bill. And that provided a year's worth of unemployment benefits and access to higher education for both Black and White veterans, and really was a great emancipatory piece of legislation, which many years later, is now being held up as a model for what should be free higher education for all, but certainly benefited 10 to 15 million returning World War II veterans, even though those in the South, who were Black, faced a lot of local discrimination, harassment, and actual violence directed against them. But the federal intervention on behalf of veterans was much better after World War II than World War I.

Ralph Nader: Steve, one thing that's really good about this book, which is called *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs* by Suzanne Gordon, Steve Early and Jasper Craven, is the way you debunk all the malicious slanders about the Veterans Administration, and for a long time that was basically the principal healthcare for veterans. Then the privatizers, the corporatizers, started coming in over the last 20 years. And under Trump and Bush they started passing laws that allowed veterans to go to private treatment under certain conditions. And pretty soon, what started out as sort of an emergency alternative has become a takeover drive. So in your book on page 232, where you quote Phillip Longman in his 2016 book, *Best Care Anywhere: Why VA Health Care Would Work Better for Everyone*. He proposed going the other way, the public option for healthcare to a wider range of veterans, as well as non-veterans in communities where healthcare choices are currently limited. I'm quoting them. And he then adds, and listen carefully listeners to this, because it's not what you're hearing on the mass media. "The VA model of care continues to outperform the rest of the US healthcare system based on key metrics, including patient safety, wait times, cost-effectiveness, avoidance of racial disparities, and adherence to evidence-based protocols of care. Rather than shuttering under-utilized VA facilities, we should be opening them up to as many Americans as possible."

Now that was written in 2016 before the Trump regime started shredding the VA, attacking it in public, taking examples as if they were representative rather than episodic of VA neglect or miscue, and it's really remarkably continuing under the Biden administration. So can you give our listeners a little history of how the VA was founded, what its budget is--it's a cabinet level federal agency--and the current push to privatize or corporatize?

Steve Early: Certainly, yeah, the Department of Veterans Affairs is the third largest federal agency budget wise, workforce wise. About a third of that budget, 100 billion a year, goes to the Veterans Health Administration, which operates a nationwide network of hospitals and clinics currently serving, unfortunately only about half of all veterans--nine million rather than the 19 million that we have in the US--but it's a great system. It's an island of socialized medicine in a sea of for-profit healthcare, a model, very much like the UK health service. All their doctors and nurses and all their caregivers are salaried. There is no fee-for-service involved. It's not an insurance system. They're providing direct care and they're doing it in an integrated holistic fashion as part of the largest public healthcare system in the country.

It's not a model that people on the right, people in corporate healthcare like. And so they've devoted a lot of resources to what you just mentioned, push for incremental privatization that began actually under President Obama, accelerated under Trump, and tragically is being continued under President Biden. So we're at the point now where about a third of the VHA's annual direct care budget is being diverted to reimbursement of private hospitals, private medical practices, all kinds of for-profit healthcare industrial complex entities that are seeking ever bigger market share in the veterans' healthcare field. And veterans have always been able to go outside the VA based on medical necessity, but this is just a dismantling of one of our best single-payer healthcare system models. It's been a bipartisan effort, a lot of resistance to it by the VA unions and their allies and some vets groups like Veterans for Peace. But it's an ongoing struggle and one that we write about a lot in the book and very parallel to the trajectory of Medicare Advantage plans undermining and weakening traditional Medicare.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. I was just going to add, you have a nice section on Medicare. We call it Medicare Disadvantage with narrow networks and a lot of preauthorization obstacles on the backs of doctors before they can treat their patients, a higher level of denial of claims than traditional Medicare. But they're flooding, as we speak, the media, the Postal Service with propaganda luring people who are considering enrolling in Medicare. The Medicare period ends in early December, so it's just a flood of propaganda that is unrebutted. The press is hardly reporting it. The Department of Health and Human Services is in on the gradual takeover. They have aided and abetted it. And the big insurance companies got their hooks into both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill. And now almost 50% of all Medicare elderly beneficiaries have been deceptively lured in to Medicare Disadvantage, which is not good. When you really get sick, that's when the insurance is the most important. So they're doing the same to the VA. Why wasn't this an election issue?

Steve Early: Well, I think a few candidates did raise it. Sadly, a lot of Democrats have bought into the idea that veterans should have choice. They don't use the P word. They don't describe it as privatization. They don't mention outsourcing, but that's what it is. And it's on track to very shortly consume 50% of the VA's direct care budget, which means that President Biden, who promised two years ago when running for office that he wasn't going to defund, dismantle or privatize the VA, has not lived up to those promises. Because you can't continue to operate a system with 300,000 employees and a \$100 billion budget by cannibalizing that budget to send people unnecessarily outside for care that's more costly that they have to wait longer for, and is provided by people who are often less experienced in treating veterans.

One of the great things about the VA is that a third of the workforce, the VA caregiving workforce, is veterans themselves. So you have this unique culture of solidarity and empathy connection between patients and providers. You don't find that at Kaiser, or Sutter, or UnitedHealth, or any of the other big for-profit or nonprofit healthcare chains. So this is a real national treasure that needs to be defended. We need more Democrats. Nancy Pelosi, to her credit, has been one. Bernie Sanders, of course, to stick up for this system because otherwise it's not going to be there for the veterans who need it.

Ralph Nader: Well, they're not only eroding morale of the staff at the VA, they're complicating healthcare. The information technology system at the VA was way ahead of anything else years ago in terms of recordkeeping, et cetera, and developing patterns that they describe further policy in health treatment and care. And then they're shared. "What about the doctor in this other town? Is that doctor skilled? How did he treat the veteran? Why is the veteran coming back for help here?" And we don't know about how he was treated and what drugs he was given, et cetera; it's a nightmare for these people.

This is the constant corporatization of the public dialogue and public campaigns, and I'm glad you pointed it out, but we need to go up the ladder to the Democratic Party right to the Biden administration. He appointed a former assistant to President Obama in the White House, Mr. McDonough, as the VA Commissioner, and he has now listed some VA facilities that are going to be closed, and he seems to be continuing the corporatization shift. They have a euphemism for that right?--community something. Why don't you describe that and what's going on under Biden?

Steve Early: Yeah, they call the outsourcing network--the doctors, the hospitals they refer veterans to--the community care network, as if veterans hospitals or the public healthcare system is not part of the community. Of course it is. It's a euphemism and they should call it the corporate care network. But just like they don't use the P word because they know privatization is unpopular, they don't want to call something by an actual descriptive label. McDonough, you know, where's the administrative state when we need it? The Republicans are always complaining about the federal agencies expanding and exceeding their rulemaking authority. Well, when they take over a cabinet agency, they're pretty quick to reverse whatever rules they didn't like that the previous administration enacted. And Secretary of Veterans Affairs McDonough, for two years now, could have revised the standards governing outside patient referrals to shut down on this huge, costly and destructive drain on VA resources. He hasn't done that. He describes privatization, partial privatization of his agency, as healthy competition between the VA's own superior direct care for veterans and the healthcare industry competing for veteran patients. It's not sustainable, as he himself has noted. And hopefully in the two years that they still have, they will shut down on this.

But the threat, as you mentioned, is going to be facility closings. And earlier this year, the American Federation of Government Employees, National Nurses United, the unions you know well, and other VA unions rallied veterans, their organizations, their patients, their families and they blocked a major Biden administration VA facility closing plan that was nationwide in scope. But they haven't given up on pieces of that plan and the Save Our VA campaign has to

remain at high alert because this is the administration that cannot be trusted to do the right thing with veterans' healthcare.

Ralph Nader: I like the way you develop the connections between really sensitive veterans groups and labor unions and VA staff. This book is very clearly written, listeners. It even has what most books don't have. At the beginning, it has a list of abbreviations that are used and spells them out. Tell us about bad paper discharges and what is the consequence for those veterans.

Steve Early: Well, one of the strengths of the VA system is that unlike our state workers' comp programs, when people have a job related injury or illness, service related condition and they can qualify for partial or full disability benefits at the VA, and they can get into the VA healthcare system to get their healthcare, you're much better off than many civilian workers, when they get hurt on the job because, even after a big fight with their employer's insurer, they got some workers' comp benefits, they lose their job. If they're sufficiently disabled, they lose their regular healthcare coverage.

The one flaw in the VA system, and it really is a product of the employer, the Department of Defense, is that a lot of people are flushed out of the military for performance issues. They encounter sexual harassment, they're injured, they're exposed to toxic burn pits, they come back, they get sick, they're not able to do their job, they get suicidal, they're no longer a good soldier. Well, if they get kicked out of the military, with that's called an other than honorable discharge, and I won't get into the weeds of all the ramifications of that. But the big downside of being discharged, getting so-called bad paper, is that you're denied, depending on your status, access to either GI Bill benefits or VA healthcare. So those are the two big promises that are made to people by recruiters. If you serve in the military, you'll get out with GI Bill benefits, you can go to college, and won't end up in debt. And if you need it, you'll have VA healthcare.

So there's hundreds of thousands of people who, in many cases were good soldiers, but because of a traumatic brain injury, because of PTSD, started drinking, they acted up, they got into fights---the kind of things that would get you fired from any job, but shouldn't disqualify you from promised long-term healthcare, particularly when you have a serious service related condition. It's not going to be well treated in the private sector and you may end up, as a result of your bad paper discharge, not being able to get the decent civilian job with good pay and decent health coverage.

So it's an issue that some veterans groups have worked on. It's something that VA Secretary McDonough should be doing more to address through his rulemaking authority. And ultimately responsibility lays at the door of a very bad, callous, reckless employer, the Department of Defense, which casts people aside when they're no longer usable like a piece of old rusty equipment.

Ralph Nader: Well, we've heard a lot of descriptions of that phenomena you just alluded to. You spend some time in the book on the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and you compare them with smaller, more progressive veterans groups like Veterans for Peace that I mentioned earlier. What's with the American Legion and VFW? It seems like they've never met a

war they didn't like, they've never met a military budget they didn't want to expand, and their sense of patriotism is quite distant from any sense of waging peace. What's your description of them?

Steve Early: I think that's an accurate description thumbnail sketch of the two of the oldest veterans organizations to their credit, and we try to be fair about their multiple roles in the book. They do function like organizations of injured workers have in a lot of high hazard industries like the coal industry with the black lung associations. One function of these traditional veterans organizations and their veteran service officers is to help people with their individual disability claims, deal with the claims processing bureaucracy of the VA and help people access GI Bill benefits. So that part of their function is very much like a good community-based union, helping members access individual services they're entitled to.

As you noted, their policy advocacy on foreign and military policy issues has for many decades not been progressive, quite conservative, quite hawkish. And for a different perspective on those issues, you have to look to some of the younger veterans organizations, certainly Veterans for Peace, which have been around for 40 years, got three or four thousand very feisty active members, anti-imperialist, anti-militarist. But other newer veterans groups, like Common Defense, About Face, have more post-911 veterans. And Common Defense, in particular, has done some great partnering with labor unions. Like my union, the Communication Workers of America, identifying union members who are vets, doing special trainings for them, developing their leadership capacity. There's a million trade unionists who served in the military, and they're often not tapped by the unions they now belong to for organizing purposes, for political action purposes, for leadership development purposes.

Ralph Nader: Well, Veterans for Peace, based in Saint Louis invites your participation. You don't have to be a veteran to be a member and to contribute to their nonprofit efforts of waging peace. They have chapters, as Steve pointed out, all over the country. But they need an infusion of more civic engagement. So look them up, Veterans for Peace. The only people who could really reach the conscience of the American public are the veterans, and they're really told to shut up in so many ways when they come home. There are a few who speak out, a few who write great books, but the mass media doesn't want to really hear about it. It's one of the tragic underbellies of empire.

Well, we're out of time. Steve Early, one of the co-authors of *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs* published by Duke University Press. And how would people reach you if they wanted to find out more?

Steve Early: We have a great website created by a Veterans for Peace member, Jeff Paterson in the Bay Area. It's ourvetsbook.com. The book can be ordered directly from Duke University Press by Googling Duke University Press and Our Veterans.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, Steve. I hope that more people will pay attention to the book and you get more media.

Steve Early: Thanks so much, Ralph.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Steve Early. We will link to his book, *Our Veterans*, at ralphnaderradiohour.com. I want to thank our guests again, Drew Westen and Steve Early. 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."

A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website 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. Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody.