

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 452 TRANSCRIPT

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

David Feldman: Good morning.

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

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody.

Steve Skrovan: For anyone who's considering new nuclear power plants as a viable alternative to fossil fuels, I'm talking to you, Oliver Stone. Our first guest has a sobering reminder. We're still cleaning up our old nuclear messes. First up today, we'll be speaking with journalist Joshua Frank. In his new book, *Atomic Days*. He shines a light on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State, the most toxic place in America, and an environmental cleanup site with a \$677 billion price tag so far. For nearly 40 years, Hanford produced plutonium for America's nuclear arsenal. Today it's home to 56 million gallons of poorly stored radioactive waste. It's already contaminating groundwater supplies. And an explosive accident there would rival Chernobyl.

We'll speak to Mr. Frank about his book and the strong bonds between nuclear power and atomic weapons, the land they destroy and the people they exploit. That brings us to the second half of the show. On a good day, immigrating to the United States is a tricky process. When Donald Trump took office in 2017, his administration rolled out more than 400 policy and regulatory changes to make immigration as painful as possible. Trump may be a one-term washout, but those punishing policies continue to impact stakeholders despite the best efforts of advocates who mobilize to stall implementation and represent the people caught in the middle.

Our second guest will be immigration attorney Susan Cohen. We'll speak to her about her work over the last three decades, helping prospective Americans navigate our complex and confusing immigration system, and about her book, *Journeys From There to Here*, which profiles some of her clients and tells the human stories at the heart of immigration.

We're also going to take some time out to talk about the upcoming midterm elections. And as always, somewhere in the middle, we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, how would you like to find out you live in the most toxic place in America? David?

David Feldman: Joshua Frank is an investigative journalist and the managing editor of the political magazine *CounterPunch*. He is also an author. His latest book is *Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Joshua Frank.

Joshua Frank: Hi, thanks for having me.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, welcome indeed, Joshua. This venture of yours on the Hanford Reservation in Eastern Washington State, now start with the geography, Joshua. How large is this reservation and how did it become a federal entity?

Joshua Frank: Yeah, well, it's about half the size of Rhode Island. It is a huge land mass that's in eastern Washington. The location was basically picked because of its remoteness during the Manhattan Project. It's along the Columbia River. In order to have nuclear power, you have to have access to clean, ample water. So they had a lot of water, and the and constant electricity because of the dams. But it was also out of sight, out of mind. It was easy to have this big covert operation happening out there. And of course, the indigenous population and others, typically poor farmers, were easy to remove from the landscape so that they could erect this atomic beast that ended up churning out plutonium for decades.

Ralph Nader: Explain the Manhattan Project.

Joshua Frank: Sure. The Manhattan Project was a covert military operation. Different locations were chosen around the country to develop a nuclear bomb, and from that, Hanford was the site that was chosen to produce plutonium, which became the fuel for the bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki, and then, over the course of four more decades, was churning out virtually all of the radioactive fuel for our nuclear arsenal in this country. And now we're dealing with the aftermath of that.

Ralph Nader: Well, the Hanford Reservation now is soaked with radioactive waste. They have all kinds of gigantic tanks. Some of them are leaking and they're perilously close to the Columbia River. How close are they to the giant Columbia River?

Joshua Frank: Some of them are only five miles away. It's hard to wrap your head around how much waste is out there. There are 177 underground tanks, 149 of which are single-shell tanks. These tanks were only supposed to last 20 to 25 years. We're going on 80 years. We've had upwards of 67 known leaks. I would argue there's probably been a lot more. Two of those tanks are leaking now. Those tanks hold 56 million gallons of radioactive bubbling, hot waste that will be bubbling well past our lifetimes. And right now they're trying to figure out what to do with it. The two tanks that are currently leaking are being allowed to leak because they don't have an answer for it. It's unbelievable. It's really a perilous situation. For the book, I interviewed some DOE scientists, one of which was Dr. Alexander who went on record with me and talked about his concern for a potential explosion in one of these tanks. If the hydrogen buildup happens, you could see a horrific explosion that would be unlike anything that this country has ever witnessed before. So it's a really dire situation, and this doesn't even talk about what else is going on out there. For example, there was a million gallons of waste that has leaked out of these tanks while it was operating. There's billions and billions of gallons of chemical sewage that was literally just dumped into the soil. All of this is making its way into the groundwater supply which feeds the Columbia River. So it's a very dire situation.

Ralph Nader: Let's back up a bit. What's the federal agency that's in charge and who's the contractor? They always privately contract out this administration of Hanford. Is anything actively being produced there, or is it just the legacy of waste from the atomic bomb programs and from nuclear power plants?

Joshua Frank: Well, the cleanup is allegedly being overseen by the Department of Energy, and the big contractor out there that's making most of the money is Bechtel, which has a very horrible track record, as we all know, with many projects over the course of its lifetime. It's a private corporation not accountable to anybody, and it is reaping the spoils of US ventures all over the globe, from Iraq to Syria. And right now it is doing a horrible job in Hanford. The current estimation for the cost of the cleanup is \$677 billion.

Ralph Nader: How much have they spent so far?

Joshua Frank: They are, I believe, Bechtel's contract is somewhere between \$50 and \$60 billion. So the plan is to vitrify or turn into glass the waste that's in these tanks. That plant is called the Vit Plant, the vitrification plant. And that plant right now has run somewhere like \$44 billion, the last estimate that I've seen. And right now it's done nothing. It's the biggest construction project in the country. They have not vitrified any glass and, in fact, they just started up a test run for vitrification for low-level waste and they were very excited about it. It lasted about a week and it started overheating. This is costing taxpayers billions and billions of dollars and the estimates just keep going up. And the Republicans and Democrats are both wanting more and more funding. But funding isn't the problem; it's the lack of technical staff that the Department of Energy doesn't have out there; it's a lack of oversight; it's a lack of action among the unions. We can talk about the money, but I think everybody would agree that any amount of money should be spent to clean this place up. But if it's lining the pockets of private corporations and the job is not getting done, then something is wrong.

Ralph Nader: The estimate of between \$600 and \$700 billion by the government to clean it up-- billions, we're talking, not millions--is always a lowball estimate. It always ends up more. This is a staggering figure that can zoom over a trillion dollars. Who are the two senators and the representative from that area, can you name them? And what are they doing in Congress? Are there congressional hearings reviewing this, or everybody wants to try to shove this under the bed and keep delaying and delaying?

Joshua Frank: Well, both of the senators... locally you have some really right-wing representatives that are in Washington and they are in bed with Bechtel, but they've been pushing for legislation that will continue to have these profits rolling in and they are absolutely successful at that.

Ralph Nader: Name the senators and representatives, Joshua.

Joshua Frank: Sure. Maria Cantwell is the Democratic senator from Washington that represents the state there. And the other senator, Patty Murray has a history of being involved with Bechtel and she herself has been out to the site a number of times. And each time that these senators go out, they do these little press conferences and they all talk about how successful the cleanup is going. They all talk about how Bechtel is doing such a great job. None of them want to hold Bechtel accountable. The funny thing is, to me, the agency that's holding anybody accountable is actually the Washington State Environmental Protection Agency. They're the ones that seem to be going after Bechtel more than any of these politicians are. Even Governor Inslee, who ran for president a couple of years ago and was unsuccessful and is rather progressive on a

lot of issues, when it comes to Hanford, is a complete failure. All of the governors on the West Coast should be getting together to work on this issue.

Ralph Nader: Who's the representative from the eastern state of Washington, which is a huge wheat growing area?

Joshua Frank: One of the representatives is Congressman Dan Newhouse who represents central Washington; Senator Patty Murray and Dan Newhouse are leading an effort. They signed a letter last week to President Biden asking for more funding. And Murray carries a lot of clout because she sits on this Senate Appropriations Committee and Newhouse sits on the House Appropriations Committee and they're both strong advocates for increasing the budget.

Ralph Nader: Joshua, the reason why I want our listeners to know who the key people in Congress are from the State of Washington who have responsibility for the high-risk Hanford Reservation is because the first step here is to have full-throated congressional hearings in the Senate and the House. I mean, you got a potential liability of almost a trillion dollars here, not to mention the potential of a huge disaster the likes of which the United States has never seen, which we'll discuss in a moment, and you could have Congress put on the public record the full contract between Bechtel and the Department of Energy. You haven't been able to get that contract, have you?

Joshua Frank: No, I haven't. And if your listeners want to go after any representative out there, Dan Newhouse is the one that they need to go after. Jaime Herrera also is a representative out there and Cathy Rogers is another representative. But Newhouse has a long history and as the representative who is basically in bed with Bechtel and has for a long time advocated for more funding, and has fought worker-protection legislation. Basically he, along with the other representatives in the area... so Hanford has about overlapping four or five different districts at the Washington state level. The entire region has four representatives in the state that all have a stake in Hanford. It's important to also understand that a lot of these companies that work at Hanford have offices in Seattle; they have offices in Spokane. So it's really a whole entire state apparatus, not just the representatives locally there.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Joshua Frank, author of the new devastating book titled *Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America*. Why is it untold?

Joshua Frank: Well, it's not told. The history of Hanford really hasn't been told from a grassroots people perspective. There's been a lot of books written from the top down that talk about the scientific and engineering feats that went into developing Hanford. But there hasn't been a lot of text written about the aftermath--the poisoning of the planet, what it did to the indigenous communities, what it did to the Japanese. And a perfect example is when you got to Hanford, you can visit Hanford, but you can only really go to the B Reactor, which was the first full-scale plutonium reactor in the world, which I did a tour of. And I'll tell you, there's no mention of what Hanford is today. There's no mention of even what this facility did in producing plutonium that was used in a bomb that was dropped on Japan. The only thing that they talked about is American superiority, American patriotism, and it runs through the veins of most of the people who work out at Hanford. And I wanted to write something that countered that--that

looked at the dark side of nuclear technology, that looked at the dark side of our weapons industry and the environmental devastation that it has caused.

Ralph Nader: You certainly did that. You're a very meticulous reporter with a heavily footnoted ~~This is a~~ 200-and-so-page book. Tell us in some detail the nature of the risk in terms of a disaster, sort of the worst case scenario, but before you do that, is any more radioactive waste being shipped regularly to Hanford or is this just dealing with all the past radioactive waste?

Joshua Frank: Well, to answer your last question, there's no more nuclear waste that's being shipped there and stored. However, there are parts of things, like nuclear submarines, that are laced with radioactivity that are being shipped out there and stored, which just has happened within the last month. So I would argue even though there's not any high-level radioactive waste being shipped out there, there's still radioactive materials being shipped to Hanford.

But to answer your other question about the most dire situation that could develop, as I mentioned, Dr. Donald Alexander who is now retired, but is an amazing scientist and an amazing person who explained a lot of details to me over the years. And his concern is that if you have a hydrogen buildup in one of these underground tanks, which they have had happen in the past, and fortunately there was not an explosion. But he envisions it happening--if there was an explosion, there would be radioactive material spread across the country. If you think back to when Mount St. Helens blew there was ash that spread for something like 20,000 square miles and radiation was detected across the globe. Just a couple summers ago, we had massive forest fires in Oregon, the smoke of which was all the way out to the East Coast.

If there was an explosion at Hanford, radioactive material would spread far and wide. And he explained that there would be so much radioactivity that people wouldn't want to live in cities like Boise, Idaho; Missoula, Montana and Spokane in Washington. And this isn't to even mention what it would do to the Columbia River, which is the lifeblood for many farmers, salmon and commercial fisheries. It would devastate the entire Pacific Northwest, the economy of which would collapse, sending shockwaves across the world and probably crashing the markets globally. And then of course the aftermath, the toll that it would take to clean this thing up. It's a really dire situation. And a lot of people just aren't aware of the grave danger that it's in. You got to know that these tanks are literally bubbling with radioactive sludge and they will be doing that for the next hundreds of thousands of years. Plutonium has a 250,000-year lifespan. So they have to figure out how to keep this stuff safe. And when you have a for-profit corporation handling this mess and really poor government oversight, the risks are great. There's no other power source. There's no other energy source that poses this kind of risk-taking about nuclear power. This radioactive waste was produced in nine nuclear reactors. And we still have people promoting nuclear power as an answer, but the same problems exist with nuclear power; it creates nuclear waste. And the situation in Hanford, as far as an explosion goes, is very real. It's entirely likely that it will happen. It might not happen for 50 years or 100 years, but as the clock keeps ticking, the risks go up.

And then of course, you have the toll that it's already taken by billions of gallons of radioactive sludge and chemical waste that have seeped into the groundwater supplies, and that's leaking

towards the Columbia River with plutonium, cesium--all sorts of really nasty stuff. And the workers that are tasked with cleaning it up are constantly coming down with ailments and sicknesses. And the whistleblowers that speak out are often silenced. And if they don't have the resources to fight back, we never hear about it.

Ralph Nader: Well, is the technology available to minimize the risk? What would be the technology to deal with radioactive waste?

Joshua Frank: Well, it's pretty interesting. So they don't have an answer for the two tanks that are leaking right now; they do not know what to do. What they've done is essentially covered these things with tarps so when it rains, the rain doesn't push the radioactive waste further down towards the groundwater supplies. That's their answer - tarps. They don't have an answer because it's a very technical, very laborious process. And, I would argue, it takes more ingenuity in figuring out how to clean this up than it did to produce it in the first place. And you have very, smart, intelligent, well-intentioned people working out there. So this isn't to minimize the work that they're doing. However, when they're wrapped up in a very corrupt system, it's hard to get things done, and it's hard to push forward ideas that might not be as profitable to the bottom line for these corporations. And the Department of Energy has been gutted over the years and they simply don't have adequate technical staff to manage this gargantuan project.

Ralph Nader: Tell us about some stalwart citizen activity here, in particular, Tom Carpenter, and the person he's been working with from a Native American tribe, Alfrieda Peters of the Yakima Nation.

Joshua Frank: Well, so Tom, I would argue, is one of the best and most well-renowned advocates for workers, whistleblowers at Hanford and has been for decades. He recently retired but he's still involved with the organization that he helped to found which was the Hanford Challenge. They're based up in Seattle and they really focus on worker protections, and they've worked really hard, and they've defended a number of whistleblowers, the few that I read about, among them was Walter Tamosaitis and his story was excruciating. He came out and talked about the work environment that he was under and being essentially fired for speaking the truth and won a pretty nice settlement.

So the organization that he helped to found focuses on worker protections. As far as the environmental side goes, the Yakima Nation, which as you mentioned, Russell Jim, an elder who passed in 2018, really was the first who spoke up for indigenous rights. He led the effort to stop any future radioactive dumping at the Hanford site. And to this day, no major decisions can be made at the federal level without the Yakima Nation and indigenous voices having a seat at the table. So with the work that he's done, I think from an indigenous perspective, no one's done anything greater than Russell Jim. And his legacy lives on with the Yakima Nation now to this day that they're still working and fighting to have a voice and a seat at the table locally because most of the decisions that are made are not making it publicly; they're being made behind closed doors. So trying to fight for access and accountability is a difficult process.

Another organization, the Columbia Riverkeeper, focuses on the environmental impact that's happening along the Columbia River, and they're strong advocates as well. But outside of the

northwest, Ralph, there's really no awareness. None of the big green environmental groups are even talking about this--Sierra Club, Nature Conservancy. Hanford is not even on their radar. And perhaps it's because it's a complicated saga; perhaps it's because they don't have access or maybe it's because they all support nuclear power and nuclear technology. I'm not sure. But I would hope that this book can bring a national spotlight to this situation, because everybody's paying for it.

Ralph Nader: Let's hear it on the maximum risk here. You don't shy away from technical details. How would an explosion occur?

Joshua Frank: Well, I'm not a nuclear scientist. My understanding is that if you have an enclosed encasement, like a tank, and these tanks are bubbling, so they have to release steam; they're hot, they're boiling. There is a cooling mechanism in these tanks; they keep them relatively cool so that they don't overflow, just like if you're boiling water on your stove, right? So they do have to release some of that steam heat. In the case of this radioactive soup, it's producing hydrogen. Hydrogen, if it builds up, can produce a lot of pressure, basically, and explode out the top. This happened, which is one of the reasons that Dr. Alexander is so concerned about it. In the late '50s this type of explosion happened in the Soviet Union at a facility known as Mayak, which was the sister facility to Hanford. This explosion decimated entire villages. It was, just like Hanford, a covert operation so it wasn't public. And even when the CIA found out, it didn't tell the public in the US about it, because of course it would probably cause a little concern for those that lived near nuclear facilities in the US. But the devastation of that was horrific.

Going back to Donald Alexander, who I interviewed, he was sent over to Russia in the '80s as part of the US delegation to research the damage that Mayak had done. And he was deeply concerned that a similar accident could happen at Hanford where a cooling mechanism could fail, or if the pressure builds up, an explosion could happen, which could cause a potential chain reaction if power were to go down. And this isn't even... this is just what could potentially happen if things are going correctly and things just malfunction. Just imagine if there was some kind of terrorist attack, or if there was some horrific storm that could happen, or an earthquake. There are a lot of different scenarios that could result in a really horrific event.

Ralph Nader: Well, we've ended our conversation here. I hope people will be alert to something like this, especially in the western part of the country. And it's really a great book that you put out here. It's very level-headed. It has no histrionics. It's called *Atomic Days: The Untold Story of the Most Toxic Place in America*. Thank you very much, Joshua, and stay with it.

Joshua Frank: Thanks so much for having me.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Joshua Frank. We will link to his book *Atomic Days* at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Up next, we're going to cover the real human impact of a broken immigration system. 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 4, 2022. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

A manslaughter trial set to begin in Los Angeles for a fatal crash caused by a Tesla autopilot system presents a first of a kind test for the legal responsibility of the human driver in a car that was partly driving itself. That’s according to a report from Reuters. The trial, set to begin November 15th, comes as civil cases come to trial next year over accidents involving Tesla’s autopilot and adds to scrutiny of a system that Tesla’s co-founder, Elon Musk, has touted as a step to fully autonomous driving. Critics say Tesla’s claims and autopilot have contributed to accidents and deaths by making drivers inattentive. The Department of Justice is investigating whether Tesla itself should face criminal charges over its self-driving claims. 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. Most of us come to this country from somewhere else. We are a land of immigrants. Our next guest is going to share the stories of the most recent wave that has had to endure unprecedented hardship and even atrocities to brave their way here. David?

David Feldman: Susan Cohen is an immigration attorney and founding chair of Mintz Immigration Practice. She is president of the board of the Political Asylum/Immigration Representation Project, also known as PAIR, and led a team working with the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts to obtain a temporary restraining order on Trump’s 2017 Travel Ban. She is the author of *Journeys From There to Here: Stories of Immigrant Trials, Triumphs and Contributions*.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Susan Cohen.

Susan Cohen: Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

Ralph Nader: Yes, indeed, Susan. You've described the immigration laws almost as complex as the tax laws, which is really saying something. So we want to cover a lot of ground here in terms of the various ways that people can enter our country legally, gain green cards, permanent residence, ultimately citizenship. Because you are one of the most preeminent immigration lawyers in the country and you've experienced so many cases, each one different than the other, and you have 11 wonderful profiles of people who you've represented in your new book, *Journeys From There to Here*, published by River Grove Press, let me ask you two questions.

One is, why does it take so long to process asylum cases? And second, what are the criteria that prove an asylum case as verifiable and therefore allowing the people into the country?

Susan Cohen: Those are good questions, Ralph. It didn't use to take nearly as long as it does now to process an asylum case. But the backlog in asylum cases has grown exponentially over the last five or six years. And what used to take six months to a year is now taking upwards of five, six, and seven years just for those people, even those who enter the country legally and then

request asylum. Asylum is a benefit that can be requested by anyone who comes to the border to one of our airports. And by law, if someone requests asylum, they have a right to at least what's called a credible fear interview to determine whether it seems more plausible than not--that their story holds together and that they may have a well-founded fear of persecution. You can demonstrate that you do if you can show that you have a well-founded fear of persecution on a number of different grounds, including political opinion, membership in a particular social group, nationality, religion, that kind of thing. But the problem with the time frames that we have in the United States now, with it taking so very long both for affirmative asylum seekers who claim it without being put into removal or deportation proceedings first, as a first order request, and those who are requesting asylum defensively, which is something that people can do if they are put into deportation or removal proceedings; they can request asylum as a defense to deportation. The backlogs have just grown so much because we don't have the infrastructure in place to handle the size of the populations that are fleeing and seeking to enter the United States and many other countries. And that simply is because the asylum system and program that we have was introduced into the law in 1980. And life and the world was very different then and the expectations for the numbers that would be coming were very different then, and the infrastructure hasn't kept up. So we don't have enough officers; we don't have enough budget. And we have a backlog as a result.

There's over 400,000 affirmative asylum cases in the backlog, meaning people who had come legally and requested asylum in front of an asylum officer, which is not the kind of setting that one claims asylum as a defense; it's an affirmative, non-adversarial process with an asylum officer. And those by themselves are upwards of 400,000 right now. And the backlog in immigration court, which is where these cases get played out as a defense to deportation, it's about 1.7 million. To put it in context, when President Trump came into office, the backlog in immigration court was about 500,000 and it just skyrocketed under the Trump administration. We don't have the infrastructure to keep up the judges and the budget to hire more people.

Ralph Nader: Well, people should know that there are millions of people who are turned away. Obama turned away a lot. It isn't all one way. And then it ends up in immigration court. But what do you say about people who assert that asylum seekers can claim anything? Such as persecution, violence, repression, perils. But does the law just recognize official government violence, discrimination, bigotry, threats, repression? Or can an asylum seeker say, well, they're being threatened by a private gang in Honduras and that's the reason that they have to flee and seek asylum? What's the criteria there? People are very puzzled about that.

Susan Cohen: It's actually very tight, very narrowly applied criteria. A huge number of asylum applicants are denied their claims and removed from the United States because it's so very difficult to prove an asylum case and it requires corroboration as well as making statements in support of one's own claim. So it's just not accurate to say that if you fear generalized crime or generalized oppression from your country that you could win an asylum case; you absolutely would not be entitled to it.

During the Trump administration, Attorney General Jeff Sessions actually had--the attorney general has the ability and the power under our system to be able to overturn precedent in asylum

and immigration rulings and to reverse two very important cases relating to: 1) gang violence and 2) domestic violence victims who claimed asylum.

If you have been victimized by a gang, if they have tortured you or attempted to kill you or hurt you and you report the incident to the local authorities and they're either complicit with the gangs, which happens in some instances, or they ignore your requests and don't try to help you or try to hinder your attempt to get justice in your own country--under those narrow circumstances you can seek asylum, but it's a heavy burden of proof - very, very heavy and difficult burden of proof to win an asylum case. And it requires--in order for it to be a fair process and for due process to apply--it's important that people have access to counsel, because the difference in approval rates for someone who is represented by counsel and someone who isn't is dramatically different.

Ralph Nader: For sure. Where does the category of domestic violence fit?

Susan Cohen: That's social group category. There are a lot of victims of domestic violence who have reported the abuse. Sometimes they've barely survived the attacks. They've been crippled by them. All kinds of terrible things that happened to them; they've reported them to their local police, and unfortunately, in some of those cases, they are totally ignored. In some cases, they're attacked again. You can show that if you are in a group who's been victimized as a victim of domestic violence and you have sought relief but have actually been further harmed by the law enforcement in your own country, that could be a social group category.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Susan Cohen who is the author of the brand new book, *Journeys From There to Here*, which profiles 11 people from different countries that she has represented around the world, not just through the southern. The profiles are really gripping and most of them turned out very well. And these people raised families, became highly educated, made real contributions to society. We'll talk about one or two of them shortly.

When I'm asked about immigration on the campaign trail, Susan, I start with most people don't really want to leave their native land for all the reasons that are obvious and that our foreign policies, especially south of the border, have been so brutally supportive of dictators in Central America, the Caribbean, South America, and oligarchs who have repressed their people into abject poverty and danger that these people say there's no life for them. They have to go the arduous journey up and try to get over the border in the United States. And both parties don't really pay enough attention to that. This is a long standing provocation, so to speak, where they force these people either to suffer death, despair or destitution, or to come to this country seeking a better life. Why do you think there's not enough attention to that ~~in the~~ inside the immigration debate when it's discussed in the media?

Susan Cohen: I could not agree more with you, Ralph, about that point. And I don't have the definitive answer as to why it's not discussed more. But I would suspect because it's complex and implicates so many other aspects of government and relationships with other countries, which involve very complicated calculations a lot of the time in terms of trade and other things that it's probably just too much for people to try to wrap their arms around it. But I totally agree with you, and I've seen it directly in my own practice.

Like I said a few minutes ago, the fact that there are so many authoritarian regimes and corrupt regimes that we have had a hand in supporting over the years where people can't get justice when they've been egregiously harmed, or where the facts are evident and there's not a question about what happened, is just another indication of the kinds of intolerable life situations that people face in these countries where they truly have to escape for their very lives.

And I also agree, and I have seen it through the lives of the thousands of immigrants that I've had the privilege of representing. You're right that most people would much rather be with their loved ones and their own support system if they had one in their own country; what they know they don't want to leave behind.

Ralph Nader: The other side of this is even more despicable is we invaded Vietnam, an unconstitutional and undeclared war. When we invaded, through Bush and Cheney, Iraq that again was an unconstitutional, undeclared war, we created a lot of refugees. And with Vietnam, I think we allowed in almost 200,000 of them after they were expelled, in effect, by the North Vietnamese army. But in Iraq, it's been particularly vicious in terms of the exclusion of Iraqi refugees, even those who worked with the US occupation, same with Afghanistan.

Susan Cohen: Yes.

Ralph Nader: And Trump was particularly bigoted on this point. I remember when he was campaigning in 2016 in South Carolina, he pointed to two recently arrived poor refugee families from Syria. They just got here and he pointed to them as potential terrorists. I don't think there's been more than 25,000 refugees coming in from Iraq alone, and now they're all backed up and they're in danger. So they not only have an asylum argument, they have an argument under the refugee section of federal law. Is that true?

Susan Cohen: Yes, so the standard for asylum and refugee status is exactly the same. The only difference is that refugees are those who seek the status from outside the US and are processed outside of the US, usually in a refugee camp run by UNHCR, UN High Commission for Refugees. And asylum seekers are those who reach the border or have entered the United States and requested asylum. But the legal standard for the relief is exactly word-for-word the same. The same standards apply. We have just been struggling in this country to welcome sufficient numbers of refugees. The ceiling has been up to 125,000. It was a little bit over that when the Refugee Act was passed in 1980. But over the years, presidents have the ability to raise and lower that number and it dropped down. It was pretty high during the Obama years. And then when President Trump took office, it dropped to the lowest historical levels in the history of the program. And President Biden says that he wants to raise the numbers up again to the highest amount it's been historically, which has been about 125,000. But because we're so backed up and everything is backlogged in the world of immigration and processing inside the United States, and in processing outside the United States at embassies throughout the world started slowing down during the Trump years.

Then because COVID created the perfect storm; everything has become extremely backlogged. So the waiting list for refugee processing is that much worse. It was always long for refugees. It's

ridiculous how long it takes a refugee in a refugee camp to ripen his or her case to be able to come to the United States. Once they've already been approved, and very carefully vetted--more than any other kind of process, so many background checks, and to eliminate any risk of a bad actor being allowed to come into the United States. But a lot of people don't realize the average waiting time in a refugee camp is 15 to 17 years. It's like a generation almost for a case to ripen and to come into the United States, except for certain fast-track type of cases that we have separately approved and special programs. But everything is horribly backlogged.

Ralph Nader: And I want to get into some of your profiles in the book. The one that really was pretty stunning was a woman called Rana from Egypt. Can you describe your experience as representing her?

Susan Cohen: Yes. Rana was a postdoc at MIT. She'd done her PhD in the UK. She grew up in Cairo in Egypt and she's a brilliant computer scientist who had decided that she wanted to try to stay because she had an idea for a company that she wanted to co-found with one of her other colleagues at MIT, actually her mentor, around a wearable device that's based on AI technology that they had invented that would help children and others with autism to wear this device. And then as a result of the signals they would get from this bracelet, be able to detect the expressions of the people with whom they were having a conversation to help them to understand the mood. Because lots of people with autism really have a hard time understanding the context of a conversation with another person. And so that's what they were working on at the time that I first met Rana. And then she founded a company around that and I helped her to get one of these extraordinary ability, temporary work visas, to stay temporarily to be able to work for the company that she founded.

And afterwards she decided she wanted to stay permanently and I helped her get permanent residence, green card status, again, on the basis of her extraordinary ability as a pathbreaking research scientist. She went on to invent many other incredible technologies. And she's one of the foremost women in AI technology today in the United States. She has been very well recognized, profiled in *The New Yorker* and things like that. But she had a very difficult experience that I think people could read about if they get the book. I don't want to do a spoiler alert. But she had a really difficult experience once coming into the country, which demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the interactions that people have when they're on a proper visa, which comes up so often. And I have a lot of examples of that in the book of people on proper visas with immigration inspectors at airports trying to stop them from coming in when it's their right to enter. Their visas are actually all set. They have the right documents, they have the legal right to enter, and yet the immigration inspector has a misunderstanding or makes a mistake of interpretation of the law and she had to call me.

Ralph Nader: And now she's pioneering a really tough new field on Page 34 of your book. She is talking about a humancentric artificial intelligence. And we don't hear that very often in terms of the arrogance of the algorithms and impact on everybody. But her quote caught my attention. She was talking about her small company, "We have very strong core values and we advocate for ethics, which I think is unusual for a small startup like us to prioritize the ethical and moral implications of the technology in building a productive ecosystem." So the benefits never end.

The story of Peng from China is really, it could be a movie. You want to describe that? You represented Peng.

Susan Cohen: Yes, I was just reminded of his story a week ago because I was walking through Chinatown, which is right next to my office in downtown Boston. And I was reminiscing about him and his case. He was an illiterate peasant farmer from the south of China who had to flee the country because he and his wife violated the one-child policy in China. And he had an odyssey just to be able to get to the United States. But his life was really in danger. All the people that I've filed asylum cases for really faced life or death situations, tremendous risk of persecution if they would have been sent back to their countries--really gripping potential danger that could have befallen these people. And he had to flee. They didn't have enough money actually to have relatives help him raise money to help him leave the country. He was smuggled out over the mountains of what was then Burma, Myanmar. And it took four months for him to finally get to the United States. He didn't speak a word of English. He had a little piece of paper with an uncle's phone number who had a Chinese restaurant upstate New York. And it was written on a scrap of paper that had survived the four-month journey over the mountains and everywhere else before he could get here, which amazingly, he still had when he arrived. And he needed an interpreter and it was very, very difficult to find someone who spoke his dialect because it's a very rare dialect in China. So his case was challenging for so many reasons, but communication was really challenging.

And they let him out after he passed his credible fear interview in detention, because he was detained right after he got off the plane. And I was called by PAIR and I volunteered to take his case and I went down to the detention center and they had an interpreter on the phone there, which we used for his credible fear interview. He passed that because his case was strong. And so they told me they would let him out after informing me so I could go meet him there. And then, of course, what happened was they let him out of detention without informing me. He'd never been in a big city in United States before. He didn't speak a word of English, couldn't read any signs because he couldn't really read or write. And I had to try to find him.

I was livid that they had let this man onto the streets who didn't know a thing about where to go or what to do. I didn't know what was going to happen to him, so I had, a whole team of people fanning out across Boston to try to find the guy. And I'm the one who ended up finding him at a bus station. And we ended up not being able really to talk very much. I checked to show him to come in with me to my office. He remembered me from the credible fear interview so he knew who I was. He knew I was trying to help them. But he couldn't understand a word I was saying to him. I was, like, using sign language and holding him by his jacket sleeve to say, please, come with me to my office so we can help you figure out what to do next with the case. And he didn't know what I was saying. So we ended up, a bunch of us, my assistants – the interns that we have working and a friend went with him door-to-door through Chinatown to try to find someone who spoke his dialect. And it took about an hour of knocking on the doors of all these Chinese restaurants. Finally we found someone who spoke his dialect and we begged that person to come with us to dinner so we could talk him through what was going to happen next in his case and someone could interpret for him. So that was the very beginning of his case. The man really was a little surprised and didn't know what we were doing, why they would want a stranger to come

with them to a restaurant. And it was Peng's first time ever in a restaurant his whole life and he didn't know how it worked, to order; he didn't know anything. But the man helped us that night to communicate with him, and we were able to get in touch with his uncle in Upstate New York, and we put him up in a hotel.

His case ended up taking years and years and years through a number of different hearings to prove that he merited asylum. And in immigration law the hearings are continued, sometimes the continuance by themselves last a year. So you can have a couple of hours of a hearing testimony and you have to go another year until you get in front of the judge again. This is what it's like in immigration court. So his case went on for quite a few years so we could get all the evidence in and then we were able to win his case. And I'm still close with his family and with him. He is able to bring his wife and family members along. He learned some very tragic information from the conferences we had in our office where we were able to place international phone calls on his behalf. And he really learned devastating piece of information when he was on the phone with us in my office. And witnessing him learn that information and see what had happened back home for the first time with us, witnessing his reaction was a very powerful experience because it was a very, very tragic thing that had happened.

Ralph Nader: How is he doing now, Susan?

Susan Cohen: He's doing so well. He's a grandfather thriving like all the other clients, just so grateful to have a safe place to go home to, to not have to look over their shoulder wondering what's going to happen next. And he was also brutally attacked. So many people are brutally attacked and it's just such a relief for them to finally be in a safe country.

Ralph Nader: The book is *Journeys From There to Here: Stories of Immigrant Trials, Triumphs and Contributions* by Susan J. Cohen with Steven T. Taylor. Thank you very much, Susan.

Susan Cohen: I really have enjoyed being on with you, both of you, and I really appreciate the focus on immigration because it's a huge issue and there's a lot of misconceptions out there about the nature of it. It's good to get the facts to the people.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Susan Cohen. We will link to her book, *Journeys From There to Here*, at ralphnader.com. So we're in the last few days coming up to the midterm elections, Ralph. Any last comments, observations, queries?

Ralph Nader: Well, some very important issues are finally getting some visibility. I don't know why the Democrats took so long. One of them is highlighting the minimum wage, which 25 million workers would get if the \$15 an hour minimum wage that the Democrats passed in the House, but was blocked in the Senate, were to be enacted into law. You would think that all the candidates running--local, state, national--for legislative seats would really be ballyhooing this and urging people to go vote for a raise. It's long overdue and they've earned it, for heaven's sake. It's been frozen at \$7.25 an hour federally, though some states have higher, but basically the federal government under the GOP has frozen it.

The second issue that now is getting more visibility is the GOP policies attacking children. I mean, it's unbelievable when you add it up. The assault on children's interests--health, safety and economic well-being--has never seen such a widespread persistence as by this worst GOP in history since it was founded in 1854. Their motto, once a child is born, is "you're on your own baby." They don't support adequate neonatal aid. They oppose universal healthcare. The Republican governors in southern states have been sitting on all kinds of available Medicaid money that could go to the children, and they've blocked that. They blocked the extension of the \$300 monthly child tax credit that went to 58 million children, including children in conservative Republican families; they blocked that. They're obviously blocking the minimum wage, which could help children.

They pushed under Trump, more junk food--fat, sugar, salt--in the school lunch program. Imagine the crassest advocacy for the junk food industry that gives them money in campaigns. And of course, they've been against what all Western countries have provided their people: paid family leave, paid sick leave, and paid childcare. Instead, the GOP, like too many Democrats, I might add, have pushed forever gigantic increase in the Department of Defense budget, more than the generals asked.

So in the last few days, there's a lot that can be done. And one of the best is something the AFL-CIO I think is starting to push, which is recognizing the work of over 23 million workers in this country who are on the midnight shift from 12 to 8. And they keep the country going while we're asleep. And I think some candidates are going to start campaigning all night before election--before hospitals, nursing homes, fire, police stations, all-night third-shift factories, emergency repair--all the things that really are so critical during the third shift. And no candidates pay attention to these workers. So I think if candidates would pay some attention in close races, it can easily make the difference if they put out a release respecting and recognizing the various occupations and professions and saying they're going to campaign. So those are some things that can be done. And for more details, just go to winningamerica.net.

Steve Skrovan: That's great, Ralph. And now, as you probably know, we've gotten some feedback, some reaction from listeners who question your support for Democratic candidates, which is a departure for you. How would you answer those critics who say, what are you talking about the Democratic Party for or Democratic candidates?

Ralph Nader: The stark choice on November 8th is between a fascist party and an autocratic party that supports a major social safety net for tens of millions of Americans and their children. For anybody who says, "What about third parties?" I say, "Go for it." But you know what's going to happen on November 8th. It's either going to be the Republican or the Democratic candidates for the duopoly. And there's never been a bigger gap in domestic policy--they're very similar on empire--than at the present time.

Steve Skrovan: That's our show. I want to thank our guests again, Joshua Frank and Susan J. Cohen. 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." There's a lot more Joshua Frank on nuclear. And Susan Cohen shares more inspirational stories of asylum seekers.

A transcript for this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted. Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Our guests will be journalist, labor organizer and author, Steve Early, to discuss his book, *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody, and make sure to vote.