

## **Ralph Nader Radio Hour**

### **Episode 519**

#### **“Labor for a Ceasefire/Trump’s Cult of Personality”**

**February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

**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:** Morning.

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

**Ralph Nader:** Hello. The program includes the transformation of American unions on the matter of foreign policy in Israel and Gaza. It could be historic, listeners. Stay tuned.

**Steve Skrovan:** That's right, Ralph. Working people of the world are uniting against the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Our first guest today will be Gene Bruskin, a veteran of the labor movement as a local union president, an organizer, and campaign coordinator for numerous local and national unions. He has done extensive international labor solidarity work, including with Iraqi workers and unions, and is a founder of US Labor Against the War.

Mr. Bruskin has joined more than 1 million workers in a National Labor Network for a Ceasefire [laborforceceasefire.org](http://laborforceceasefire.org) Their call for a ceasefire in Gaza has been signed by chapters of the American Postal Workers Union, Amazon Labor Union, American Federation of Teachers, United Auto Workers, and dozens more local and national union chapters. We look forward to speaking with Gene Bruskin about the impact of labor mobilizing on issues of foreign policy.

In the second half of the show, we'll welcome historian Rick Perlstein. Mr. Perlstein has done deep-dives into figures like Barry Goldwater, Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and the political movements and social forces that brought them to power. He is now working on a new book about Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, and we're going to get his analysis of why Donald Trump appears to have a stranglehold on the American right that defies all logic.

As always, somewhere along the line, we'll check in with our unwavering corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, in our continuing coverage of the Israeli government's ethnic cleansing in Gaza, we turn now to how the labor movement is joining the fight. David?

**David Feldman:** Gene Bruskin is a veteran of the labor movement as a local union president, an organizer, and campaign coordinator for numerous local and national unions. He has done extensive international labor solidarity work, including with Iraqi workers and unions, and is a founder of US Labor Against the War.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Gene Bruskin.

**Gene Bruskin:** It's a pleasure to be here, David. I've been a long-time follower of Ralph's.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you very much. Gene. You've been quite active in reaching labor unions on the genocide going on in Gaza, and it hasn't gotten as much coverage as it should because traditionally organized labor unions have been very pro-Israeli government policies, and now there's a change underway. What has changed in the labor movement? This is rather remarkable. Give us your take. And in the last two months since this statement, has it been expanding?

**Gene Bruskin:** Yeah. The good news in terms of the labor movement, who, in general, I believe, are in a new moment, both as a labor movement, but here in this case around the international solidarity in the period of time, beginning around that time in December until now, we have unions representing over 9 million workers who've called for a ceasefire.

We're talking 10 national unions and we're also talking 220 local unions all over the country and some central labor councils, which are the area combinations of unions that are technically part of the AFL-CIO. We're talking the Texas AFL-CIO, called for a ceasefire. And even finally, with all this bottom-up pressure, the AFL-CIO itself has come out for a ceasefire. Not a powerful statement, but nonetheless, they broke their silence.

In my experience, Ralph, and my having studied the history a little bit, never in the 140-year history of the labor movement, starting with the AFL formation in 1885, has there been such broad scale resistance to US government policy in the middle of a conflict like this.

**Ralph Nader:** Are these unions also trying to block the \$14 billion of additional aid that Biden is pushing through Congress to provide even more weaponry for the Israeli military assault on Gaza? We call it the genocide tax, 14 billion. Where are the labor unions who have taken a stand on this bill, which is now about to be put before the House of Representatives, having passed with a Ukraine aid bill in the Senate?

**Gene Bruskin:** I can't speak for every one of them because they play somewhat different roles. But in general, the breakthrough has been from silence to demanding the ceasefire and the humanitarian aid in the democratic or diplomatic process going forward. That next step going forward is on the table now in a different manner.

We've never been able to have these kinds of conversations. I went to the occupied territories in, I think it was 1988, as part of a labor delegation that was sponsored by the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee, a moderate Arab group. We were there to investigate the conditions for Palestinian workers. When we came back, we conducted a hearing at the Commerce Department protesting the fact that Israel was given special tax preferences.

I think it's the GPS or some government act that says that if the country violates labor rights, you could lose some of your tax preferences on trade. We lost that argument of course. And the AFL-CIO was on the other side advocating for Israel in this situation. When I came back, I tried to talk to the labor movement, and I was resoundingly rejected. Nobody would talk to me, or when we met, they would more yell than talk.

So the idea of Israeli bonds, investments, the defense that we're providing, the money, et cetera, wasn't on the table. Now we are moving forward into a position where the whole relationship between the United States and Israel can be reexamined. And this ceasefire, as urgently as we need it today, yesterday, regardless of the outcome, this issue is going to be on our table for months and years to come.

We're in a position to advocate in a different way, and I intend to work with folks to see if we could change things really dramatically and also understand our own role as a labor movement in facilitating these problems. 95% or more of members of the labor movement have no idea that our movement is a big investor in Israeli bonds. So that's a conversation that needs to be had.

**Ralph Nader:** Tell our listeners who may not know this, also the decades of meetings, banquets, boosterism by the pro-Israeli government, lobbying this country for unions to buy with union funds, Israeli bonds, which have not produced the kind of returns that these funds would have received if they invested in US treasuries or bonds that produced money to improve local communities.

**Gene Bruskin:** In the same way that Israel has had a very active network of bringing young Jews over to Israel, giving them the guided tour, and wining them and dining them, and trying to build their support forever, they have consistently, year after year after year, taken labor leaders over to Israel. They meet with Histadrut, which is the Israeli labor organization, but really, in many ways, part of the Israeli government, not really in any traditional sense, an independent labor movement, and give them the guided tour. And parts of Israel look very impressive if you only see sections of it. They also have traditionally had these dinners sponsored by the Jewish Labor Committee and Histadrut in this country where Jewish labor leaders are honored. The constant effort to secure the support of Israel has been ongoing and unchallenged in the labor movement for many years. So for those labor leaders who themselves are very connected to Israel, it might have been an easier sell, and for other labor leaders who really weren't, maybe they got on a tour, or maybe they just thought, "Okay, I got no problem here."

It existed under the radar. I don't have the figures, but we're talking hundreds of millions, maybe billions, and that's part of the influence we need to weld going forward, both with Israel and also with our president, who we're going to be very actively advocating for his election, whether you disagree with him or not, because we don't want Donald Trump, and he depends on the labor movement.

We formed this new labor for ceasefire effort that is combining most of these unions that have taken positions for ceasefire and bringing them together in a series of conversations to begin to

pressure Biden and the Congress. We're going to be releasing in the next couple of days, a public press release and it's going to point people to the website, [laborforceceasefire.org](http://laborforceceasefire.org).

That's going to be a founding place with all the official support of these national and local unions for local members to go, to be educated, to have toolkits. We're also working on the possibility next week of having a labor for ceasefire webinar, where we hope to get on thousands of members across the country to advocate for them, to speak up, to organize and to put pressure on Congress and the President.

**Ralph Nader:** We're talking with Gene Bruskin. Gene, why on Capitol Hill is this transformative movement in labor on the Gaza massacre and the demand for ceasefire and hundreds of trucks of daily humanitarian aid coming in, which is not happening, changing any of the votes? It's almost like people on Capitol Hill don't want to recognize the change that's going on in the organized labor movement. They don't want to admit that this is going on. How do you read that?

**Gene Bruskin:** It is astounding, but we're in this moment where it's almost inconceivable to try and figure out what's in the minds of both President Biden and in the minds of so many members of Congress.

What a lot of the labor leaders were doing previous to this, before we formed [laborforceceasefire.org](http://laborforceceasefire.org), is leaders of these large national unions—and we're talking SEIU with 2 million members, we're talking the Auto Workers, very prominent these days, National Education Association with several million members—have been calling the president, calling the White House, talking to the campaigns and saying, please—not only for moral and humanitarian purposes, but there's an election coming up. For instance, in Michigan, where you're losing the Arab population, you can't win without them. Many of our members are Arab. We're losing some of our best young activists. These are the people who we ask to get on the phone and phone bank for you and who are most excited.

Everybody sees the younger Jews, who don't have that historical attachment to Zionism, have been leading a lot of these fights. So the message has been given again and again, just on a strictly pragmatic basis, that we can't do that.

It's a combination of the years and years of effective lobbying by Israel, and ~~of course,~~ Congress is frequently on trips to Israel. The influence of the Jewish institutions and mainstream Judaism and groups like AIPAC, who've been able to wield a lot of money, and the ironic combination with the Christian Zionists, who are the most dedicated Zionist and pro-Israel group almost in the country, who are total Trumpers, but who weigh in powerfully on all these messages, even though the ultimate thing for Christian Zionism is that when the Messiah comes back to Israel, everybody will go to Israel, and you either convert and go to heaven, or all the Jews and everybody else will die.

If these are our friends, speaking as a Jew, this is pretty ironic, but they wield an incredible amount of weight. So Congress, with a few exceptions, is opting to take the conservative road. And AIPAC, interestingly enough, that weighs in and has prevented a lot of progressive congresspeople from winning in these recent years. When they oppose a progressive congressperson who they

know is bad on Israel, they often don't do it based on their position on Israel. They find some other reason, because they know that in general, that's not a way to defeat somebody because the popular sentiment is very mixed.

**Ralph Nader:** Here's something that will fortify your effort, Gene Bruskin. On February 13th, the Veterans for Peace, which has members who are union people as well as veterans, put out a public letter to the State Department's inspector general to investigate illegal shipments of weapons and numerous violations of federal law involving Israel at the present time. And what's so amazing about this is that this detailed letter is more than just a declaration or a demand. This detailed letter, which our listeners can get by going to [veteransforpeace.org](http://veteransforpeace.org), It lists all the federal statutes that are being violated by the State Department's unconditional transfer of weapons to the Israeli military at the present time, and also the lack of enforcing these laws from the White House and Congress.

What do you think this can do to improve the alliance of your unions with Veterans for Peace?

**Gene Bruskin:** I'm pretty sure I signed on to that letter, and I was part of a grouping of labor activist folks that combined with Veterans for Peace to move that. Here's partly what's going on, Ralph. Right now I'm speaking for myself on behalf of the labor network, and speaking as someone that's been active in the labor movement for a long time.

Labor initially, back during from the FDR period, tied itself to the Democratic Party, lock, stock and barrel. And it's gotten to the point where, on the one hand, although it would almost be impossible for the Democratic Party to win without the deep support of the labor movement, not just of our money, but because so many thousands of our members are mobilized to do the phone banking and the door-to-door work and all. Yet, despite the fact that the party completely depends on the labor movement, the labor movement has made itself in many ways dependent on a party and has been very, very reluctant to break with the leadership of the party, or the Democratic president, on almost any issue except very quietly.

And that is a mode that we have to breakthrough, because the changes that we want in the labor movement are not going to be led by the Democratic Party. They just aren't. The UAW strikes and the position and the perspective of Shawn Fain and the perspective of Shawn Fain where he had that same view toward the employers, where rather than saying, your prosperity is my prosperity, he said, "No, our interests are not fundamentally tied together. Our interests are in conflict, and we're going to stand for the workers."

The labor movement has to understand that there's a lot of contradictions in the Democratic Party, and we cannot allow the party to define our interests. And on foreign policy, the idea has been long-time proposed in the labor movement that our national interests require us to do this kind of foreign policy or this war, the Vietnam War or Iraq.

But really, what we did in our organization, US Labor Against the War, during the Iraq War, was we actually built real solidarity with Iraqi workers and brought them all over the country here, was we said the national interests of the corporations is not the same as the national interests of the average worker. Our interests don't necessarily, in many cases, align, and they can be the opposite.

These lessons that started to come out during the UAW fight and some of these other independent labor fights, and now, through this activity of the public speaking out of the labor movement, is opening up the doors where we can begin to refine and define our interests much more sharply. And the kind of things that you're laying out here and the way we see foreign policy has to be completely redefined.

I'm hoping that we can now have these discussions and the link, understanding that foreign policy and domestic policy are inextricably bound. We see right now, when there's a huge amount of needs in this country for healthcare, housing and everything else, what are we doing. We're spending all our time and money on war, and we're not talking about those issues whatsoever. We have to flip that, and I'm optimistic that we can. do that.

**Ralph Nader:** All empires, including the US empire, eventually devour themselves domestically. As we have funneled trillions of dollars in destructive wars overseas, we have starved the public funds that would otherwise address the necessities of all the American people, including families and children here at home.

I see this new energy coming out of your work and others, Gene, as possibly spilling over. So someday we will see that when unions endorse Democratic presidents, they make demands in return. They should not have simply endorsed Biden, as the UAW did, and others, without demanding a public commitment to card check, to facilitate union organizing around the country, to universal health insurance, to an authentic support of a higher minimum wage, instead of just rhetoric. SEIU led the way in that, not the Democratic Party at the state level.

What do you think of this early endorsement of Democrats—and this has happened in other years as well—without making any demands?

**Gene Bruskin:** As a retiree, I'm helping with the organizing, but I don't have an official capacity to speak for all these unions.

But it's part of what I was speaking about before, that we completely underestimate the enormous power that we have and where we see on the right that they're not going to endorse a candidate unless they make their position clear and being anti-choice and so on. We haven't done that. But in this particular movement, what has been interesting, Ralph, is the groundswell of activity for workers in their locals all across the country.

At the same time, this movement at the top, where the presidents of these unions and their leaders are beginning to reconsider. And in every one of these decisions, like the National Nurses Union, for example, they got a couple hundred thousand workers spread out in Texas, Florida, everywhere. They couldn't just come out for a ceasefire, no matter what the president thought. They went through these processes and these conversations.

And same thing with the NEA, which just had a meeting of 175 of their leaders last weekend before taking this position. So the engagement and the conversation about foreign policy, about Israel, about the Democratic Party, is all underway right now in a way that, at least in my memory, it

hasn't been. And the question, challenge for us is going to be, whether we can build on this and change our stance going forward.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, this is very promising. It could be historic, too, because labor has been far too quiet, labor unions and their leaders far too cozy with the Democratic Party because they always say the Republican Party is so much worse. But that doesn't mean they can avoid their duty for the rank and file to really influence the Democratic Party all the way down to candidates at the state and local level and get really aggressive.

The younger generation seems to be listening to your call, Gene, and that's very encouraging. As you say, it's all interconnected. It's a seamless web. When injustice gets entrenched at the highest levels, it affects people at the lowest levels. And you can get a lot of left-right support around the country because when they are abused and disregarded and ripped off, all people bleed the same color, regardless whether they call themselves conservatives and liberals.

**David Feldman:** What would you say to the rank and file who might say to you, union membership in America is hovering at a hundred-year low? Aren't there members of the rank and file who might say, unions shouldn't have a foreign policy, unions shouldn't even have a domestic policy, unions have a fiduciary duty to focus solely on worker safety and good-paying jobs? Aren't there members of the union who might say, this is a wedge issue that hurts solidarity?

**Gene Bruskin:** Absolutely. This has been one of the fundamental debates, at least in my time, during the 30, 40, it's actually getting on 45 years that I've been involved, but especially more recently during the forming of US Labor Against the War, that came up again and again. *Wait a minute, I'm in a union here. You're supposed to represent me in the workplace and negotiate my contract. What does this have to do with me?*

So, first and foremost, during the Iraq era, we said, *first of all, you're paying for this. Second of all, you're much more likely to die for this war.* And people stood up and said, *for example, I just want to say my brother is in a hospital, just lost his leg in Iraq. And so you can't tell me I have no right to take a position on this.*

So the idea beyond that, that the priorities of our government being tied to a lousy foreign policy where, for example, during the '80s when there was agitation and labor support for solidarity in Central America, labor jobs were being shipped to Central America, to low-wage factories there, while at the same time we were blocking the support for those kind of movements for higher wages and against the US exploitation. So, unions jumped in and opposed that.

The education of members that it is not unpatriotic and, matter of fact, it is necessary for the average working person. And that you, member, have an organization with a voice. You are paying dues to an organization that might have 300,000 members, and you have an opportunity to have a voice that most citizens don't, so we have to speak out. This is our country and our foreign policy as much as it is anybody else's.

**Ralph Nader:** We've been speaking with Gene Bruskin, one of the leaders of transforming labor unions into a wider arc of struggling for justice and standing up for those who are succumbing to

violent assaults, especially now in Gaza. We hope that we'll have you on again, and we hope that you'll get far more visibility and get a congressional hearing in the House and Senate. Because positions of labor unions on this issue have represented millions of workers around the country, they deserve a voice on Capitol Hill.

Thank you very much, Gene Bruskin.

**Gene Bruskin:** Thank you for having me.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Gene Bruskin. We will link to his work at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Up next, we're going to visit Trump World. But first, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

**Russell Mokhiber:** From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute* for Friday, February 16, 2024. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

A sweeping recall of cheese and other dairy products linked to a lethal Listeria outbreak is expanding to include snacks, dips, dressings, wraps, salad, and taco kits sold at major retailers, including Amazon, Costco, Sprouts Farmers Market, Trader Joe's, and Walmart. That's according to a report from CBS News. The still growing array of products impacted began more than a month ago on January 11th with a Modesto, California based Rizo-López Foods announcing a nationwide recall of 344 cases of aged cotija, Mexican grating cheese, after Hawaiian officials found Listeria in a sample. At least 26 people in 11 states have been stricken in the ongoing outbreak.

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 Hannah, and Ralph, and the rest of the team.

The author of *Nixonland and Reaganland* is going to help us figure out Trump World. David?

**David Feldman:** Rick Perlstein is an historian and chronicler of American conservatism. He is the author of *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America, Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, and *Reaganland: America's Right Turn 1976-1980*.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Rick Perlstein.

**Rick Perlstein:** Thanks, David. It's truly an honor.

**Ralph Nader:** Yeah. Welcome, Rick. Your past biographies portray that the Trump phenomena was preceded by a lot of breakdowns of norms and qualities of campaigning, and Nixon's violations and Reagan's sweet-talking fantasies and so forth.

Mark Green and I did this book on Donald Trump in 2020, called *Wrecking America*. And in the last chapter, we tried to address our remarks respectfully to Trump voters, and we basically asked,

Look, what do you want from politicians? Why do you think he has such a large number, maybe 40% at least of the voters who turn out, for starters, of diehard supporters who totally disregard lying, corruption, shutting down health and safety agencies, protecting workers, scuttling child protections, behavior of sexual harassment against women, and just jeering at the protections for the tens of millions of poor people in this country. And there are poor people who support Trump. As a scholar of American presidents, why do you think he has this grip on them,?

**Rick Perlstein:** Yes. Thanks, Ralph. That's a great question, and it's a very complicated question that could and probably should have a very complicated answer. But there's also a very simple answer to give, and it really only requires one word. And that's that you need to study in order to understand this, fascism.

Fascism is something that is pretty much diametrically opposed to the premise of the question, which is that what one does to choose a leader, let's say hire a leader, is find the person using your reason and logic and evidence, who's most competent, who can most achieve the goals that you want here on the ground. That's the enlightenment. That's the way, traditionally, liberals think and modern people think.

But there's also an atavistic way of thinking about politics, a way that goes back to the primal past, one in which the leader is really just a symbol of restoring a fictionalized, mythologized, lost greatness. And that's a fascist tradition.

And what fascism really means at base, and why I use this word not as an insult, but as a descriptor, and the question you ask and the examples you give are a perfect example of why it's so important to get your mind around this concept, even though it's an ugly one, is that it's a mythos. It's a myth space. It's literally a space of lies. It's a set of lies that make people feel good. It's a fairy tale.

And the more you go down the list—he's done this wrong, he's not achieved this, he's incompetent at this, he lies about that—the more people can stick their fingers in their ears and go back to these primal feelings, like of the father is going to protect us, the mother is going to nurture us, almost like a regression back to a political childhood.

That's one reason you can also say that people who support Donald Trump might acknowledge that he lies, that he cheats, that he steals, but since fascism divides the world into an "us" and a "them," a heroic group of people and their enemies who are out to destroy them, they'll say, Oh, well, he's lying and cheating and stealing on behalf of us, on behalf of the normal people. And he does so in order to defeat this transcendent evil.

Look at how they speak about Democrats, liberals, competent, expert bureaucrats who use scientific expertise to answer the hardest questions in order to govern in the public interest. He calls them the deep state, and makes it seem like they're monsters, literal monsters. This idea that he is lying in order to tell the truth, lying in order to defeat evil, is also part of this, quite frankly, fascist way of thinking.

**Ralph Nader:** Let's look, Rick, at his powerful short messages and see if you can explain them.

In the last days of his campaign against Hillary Clinton in 2016, he kept saying, "This is our last chance." And now he's saying to his crowds again and again, "They're not coming after me, they're coming after you. And I'm just standing in their way." And those are quotes. What does he mean by that? Who are they? And what does last chance mean?

**Rick Perlstein:** Yes. Also, a very nonscientific, nontechnical, non-logical, nonsensical way of thinking. They is they. You wake up in the morning and you feel some force out there is getting in the way of some mythicalness, and it's they. Traditionally, it's been Jews, it's been financial elites who are not understood as people that public policy can defeat, but that some kind of magic superhero, the führer, can defeat. This is a perfect example in the last few weeks.

We're talking about starving, vulnerable people from places that American foreign policy have turned into charnel houses, people from places like Venezuela and Guatemala. And these are the best kind of people, the courageous people who are so determined to make a life for themselves and their family that they're willing to endure the most unimaginable hardships to get themselves to America. Just like the Jews leaving Germany and the USS St. Louis, 800 people who sailed from Germany in the late 1930s were the best kind of people.

Well, in the Trumpian frame, which, of course, has been adapted by 25 Republican governors, they are, quote-unquote, "invaders". It's like they're people in landing boats on Normandy Beach. They're going to kill you. And if you listen to people like Steve Bannon, if you listen to people like Alex Jones, if you listen to every right-wing talk radio host, these mothers and children, these families who are just like our families' generations ago. I like to say on Twitter, when these right-wingers go after me, "If America had the same policies that you want now or that we had in 1924, when it comes to migrants, I'd be a bar of soap."

This idea that these people who would obviously be the best Americans, the best people to have in a society, are the worst people and invaders, and are all criminals, and, of course, another quote, "They're sending another rapist." That was Donald Trump's introduction to American politics. And there's a lot going on there psychologically.

The fact that migrants work so hard and are so determined, they're scary because you have to compete with them. And these feelings of dispossession, of vulnerability, of weakness, really get at the darkest and most easily manipulated parts of the human mind that are based on the most primal fears, stuff like fears of snakes, fear of cockroaches, fear of dark things that go bump in the night. Those are there in the lowest parts of our brains.

What the Republican Party has been doing for decades, you can even take it back to Joseph McCarthy or even the Ku Klux Klan, even though the Klan was bipartisan, is they're exploiting that kind of animal part of the brain in order to aggrandize their own power. And it's really, really scary.

Again, one of the things that makes it so scary is it is precisely not amenable to rational persuasion. So trying to make these arguments, the Trumpists, maybe you've done it to your friends and neighbors and coworkers, can feel like trying to pedal a bicycle when the chain won't catch the gears.

**Ralph Nader:** How about the Democratic Party providing a vast vacuum? Instead of filling it in with the New Deal bread and butter issues, they pushed for corporate-managed trade. They love the idea of all these factories hollowing out communities and going to China and Mexico. But that's creating real resentment among blue-collar workers. The Democrats on the East and West Coast seem to have forgotten about rural people. They've lost the contact that Harry Truman and Franklin Delano Roosevelt had with blue-collar workers. Thirty-some percent of AFL member unions actually voted for Trump in 2020. This has gotten so bad that Trump is shaving off some percentages of black and Hispanic voters from the democratic voting tally. What about the Democratic Party's responsibility here?

**Rick Perlstein:** They share it. Now let's give credit where it's due. I'm a very big fan of taking yes for an answer. Joe Biden has done a lot to repair this wound. Something like the CHIPS Act is literally building factories all over the country, and they're focusing on building high-tech factories with good jobs in southern red states. But you can't just repair a breach that has taken 30 years to build in one election cycle, in one year.

When Bill Clinton passed NAFTA and he signed it, this is a quote, I have it right here in my book manuscript. He promised, "2000 new jobs in the country by 1995 alone." But a 2010 study estimated that, in fact, 700,000 jobs were lost. So that's a trauma. This is hollowed out communities. You've seen them. I've seen them.

And it was a real abdication of basically the magic trick that generations of Democrats have used to win the loyalty of working-class voters, which is basically, vote for us and we will increase your chances of having a secure middle-class life. Now we have the CHIPS Act on one hand, and someone like Lina Khan, who's doing great work breaking up monopolies. But on the other hand, it was basically proven that the government can spend lots of money to make people more economically secure in just the way that happens in places like northern Europe.

During COVID you had things like checks being sent to families. You had broadband access that was a lifesaver to a lot of communities. And the Democratic Party is not the kind of party that says, *Wow, we can use this and sustain these things that we were able to put in during an emergency to shore up our power forever.* Instead, as soon as they had the chance, they took them away. So on one hand, the Democrats giveth, and on the other hand, they taketh away.

And you all know the history of how that happened. I write about it in my book *Reaganland*, A lot of it was—and this is why it's such a pleasure and an honor to talk to you, Ralph—specifically a reaction to the success you were having delivering security and safety and decency to ordinary people.

So to take it back to the dark ages, the way the Democratic Party responded to the shocking success of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was, wow, maybe we need to give them some of what he's giving them.

And Ralph, you remember Dan Rostenkowski who was the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, very, very powerful Democrat from my hometown of Chicago, who spent decades basically spreading the wealth in that New Deal fashion. When Reagan won in 1980 and said, he

was ~~Im~~ going to exercise his mandate by liberating the animal spirits of the economy by cutting corporate taxes, Dan Rostenkowski didn't say, "No way." He tried to outflank him on the right. He said,

That kind of response, and you're seeing that same kind of response, unfortunately, among a lot of Democrats who say, "Well, they're doing pretty well in this immigration issue. What if we promise we can incarcerate more immigrants or we can do it better?" Literally, the Lincoln Project has a new commercial out today in which they say, "If you think that aliens are invading the country and stealing your jobs and are raping your daughters, vote for the Democrats because our bill is really strong in fighting that and Donald Trump tried to stop it." It's almost like kind of coopting fascism.

That's not the way to go either. You need a strong, bold alternative, and you don't build that overnight. You build that over a generation.

**Ralph Nader:** One of the amazing contrasts between the Democrats and Republicans was student loans. Biden was pushing for student loan forgiveness for millions of adults who are long from college days. There are 42 million people in this country who have student loans, some of them in their 40s, 50s, 60s, even 70s, as they keep rolling over the loans and the interest rates.

Trump wanted to prosecute a lot of these student loan borrowers because of defaults. And he protected the private university scams of these commercial universities that were ...

**Rick Perlstein:** Why would he do that, Ralph? Why would Donald Trump university scams, I wonder?

**Ralph Nader:** And why isn't that getting across?

**Rick Perlstein:** That's a very interesting one. Everyone should get as much education as they can if they want. Probably college should be free. But unfortunately, the Democrats have been pushing a little bit of a raw deal for a generation, going back to Clinton, saying, please, please get a college education, shoving loans in their face. In a lot of ways, they shoved loans into farmers' faces saying buy bigger and bigger tractors.

But when the market conditions that reward college education began to recede, suddenly people got stuck with these loans, just like farmers were stuck with their farmers' mortgage to the gills when crop prices collapsed because of overproduction. That's almost like a Marxist crisis of overproduction of overeducated people with \$100,000 loans.

I'm sure a lot of young people feel cheated by that message in itself. So just like it's great that Biden is coming in on the ninth inning and saying, let's build factories to replace the ones NAFTA destroyed, a lot of the student loan relief is a drop in the bucket compared to the frustration people must feel at having mortgaged their future to a promise that didn't pan out in the first place. It's great to do. It's really important to do. The Republicans will never do it. I'm sure that there's a lot of that really grim Republican style of class politics behind it. When Biden used an executive order to do loan relief, they all made it seem like everyone who was getting their loan relief had majored

in gender studies at Wesleyan or something like that, and hadn't gone to places like Trump University or DeVry or community college, et cetera.

So that's another part of that mythic dream space. There's good guys, there's bad guys. The bad guys are these rootless elite cosmopolitans who want us all to be woke and want boys to be girls and girls to be boys, and then there are these sturdy, blue-collar Americans with flannel shirts, and I'm the one who's going to protect them. You can almost take it back to that whole fascist aesthetic.

**Ralph Nader:** Here's another contrast that doesn't make sense in terms of not getting through to millions of people. He wants to get rid of Obamacare, and he wants to get rid of the expansion of Medicaid for millions of people during the pandemic, quite apart from what he did during the pandemic, to delay and deny and cause the deaths of tens of thousands of people. And he doesn't have anything to replace it in terms of health insurance.

It's one thing saying you're against Obamacare and Medicaid, and then you have nothing to replace it. So why isn't this striking fear in the minds of Trump voters? Because there are Trump voters in red states and blue states who would lose out on health insurance, and his policies are not reducing his polls. Why?

**Rick Perlstein:** Because they're not thinking rationally. If you think about it, the idea that giving people stuff that doesn't cost anything to them, why would they not like that? It's Santa Claus.

But that's not how right-wing thinking works. In fact, when Barack Obama decided that the expansion of Medicaid was the best way to subsidize Americans who weren't below the poverty line but were near it, and he was going to appropriate federal funds to make it free to governors, it cost nothing from their state treasuries, they thought this was a magic bullet. They thought this would be accepted in the spirit which it was given, which was basically a gift by Republican state governors and legislatures. But of course, we know what happened. Republicans said, we refuse, we refuse this free money. We refuse this free gift.

Why does that happen? This weird ideology that we all make it on our own, we all pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Somehow if you're in a hospital bed, you're supposed to be negotiating for the best price or something. I don't know. It makes no sense. It's weird. But this goes back before Trump.

**Ralph Nader:** You wrote an article for the *Washington Post* about how the Democratic Party is forsaking young voters. Explain that.

**Rick Perlstein:** That's a really important one. There's a wonderful book by the absolutely superlative political journalist Ryan Grim, who really is the guy in Washington who knows where the bodies are buried in terms of both Democratic and Republican sins against the working class better than anyone else. And it's called *The Squad*, and it's about the young 20- and 30-year-old class of Democratic members of Congress that first started to be elected in 2020, 2022.

What's really shocking and striking about it is, again, this gift. The Democratic leadership didn't say, Isn't this a wonderful gift that we have, this new class of young Democratic politicians who

are activating young people around the concerns that animate them, things like student loans, things like global warming, things like climate change, things like the precariousness of trying to make it in today's economy. Instead, they saw them as threats, Nancy Pelosi especially.

She mocked Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC). She said they're into the green dream or something, referring to the Green New Deal, which really was, like the New Deal, it is this unified vision of how our economy can be rebuilt and jobs can be created around converting the economy. It was a very expansive, bold vision. And instead of saying, wow, these young people who we want to become Democrats for the next 50 years love this stuff, basically they were seen as annoyances, as irritants, as things to swat away.

And that's the thinking of a decadent class of leaders, a decadent class of leaders who, and I'm going to make apologies for my superannuated friends, who I all love, who decide that they're not going to step aside for the next generation. The fact that we have a guy in Joe Biden who, if he's reelected, will be president until he's 85 years old, that's just not a good way to build for the future. Even if he looked like a 50-year-old Adonis. That is just, you have to build for the long-term when you're building a political party.

And the way you do that is that you pass the torch to a new generation of Americans. The people who became Democrats in 1960, because they were attracted to the torch being passed to their generation, are still holding on to power like grim death. And that's decadent.

**Ralph Nader:** We're talking to Rick Perlstein. That gets to your forthcoming book, in which you talk about the last 25 years being afflicted by, "the infernal triangle." What's the infernal triangle?

**Rick Perlstein:** We talked about two corners of the triangle. We talked about the authoritarian Republicans, who are now literally fascists. We talked about the Democrats who have not provided a clear and compelling alternative and fought this with all their worth. The third term is the media that's supposed to explain what's happening but give people a picture of this actual reality that isn't all that much better than Soviet citizens got from Pravda.

They don't learn what the Republican Party is up to because they have to read about the Democrats and the Republicans as equally responsible for what's happening in America. That's the fundamental professional value that journalists take into work every day, that if there's a problem in America, we have to balance the scales. That's seen as the fairest way.

It's like when a kid goes to a restaurant and he's only three or four years old, and he gets put in a booster chair so he can see eye-to-eye with the grownups. That's what the media does for the Republican Party. They lie, they cheat, they steal. I'm talking about the Republicans. On the other side, we have this party that are pretty much Boy Scouts when it comes to the rules. Their answer to lying and cheating and stealing is saying, well, we should lie, cheat and steal less. The media basically has to make both sides look just as bad.

Now, isn't that a bias, Ralph? Isn't that a bias in favor of the party that's most willing to lie, cheat and steal? Isn't that a way to systematically deceive the American people about the nature of the problem? The fact that the *New York Times* has only now, in the last few weeks, been willing to

use the word "racist" to describe Donald Trump when his introduction to the American political scene in 2015 was, if you see a Mexican, you can assume they're a rapist. That's also decadent, and that's an equal contributor to the mess that America is in now as the authoritarianism of the Republicans and the wimpiness of the Democrats.

**Ralph Nader:** You told Amy Goodman in your interview that the superannuated class of 70, 80-year-old Democrats, I'm quoting, you, believe that the world, when it comes to what's going on in the Middle East, makes any sense to voters in their 20s. It's just a terrible, sad situation. How do you get out of this situation?

**Rick Perlstein:** There's no way to answer that question without sounding like a jerk, Ralph. Old people die and young people take their place, frankly.

The next generation of Americans, you meet them, I meet them. When you were trying to change the world, you found these idealistic college students. They were the salvation. And right now, the answer, basically, is you have to empower young people.

Right now, in my book, I'm writing about the Howard Dean campaign, which was treated... one of the Democrat consultants called Howard Dean, "a pimple on the ass of progress." But Dean was literally the guy who had 200 college clubs for his political campaign. How many did John Kerry have--one or two?

This was the guy who very explicitly built his appeal upon what made sense to young people, one of which was that this war in Iraq made no sense. And the Democratic Party, just like they consider AOC, now, considered him a problem. Literally, Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton drafted Wesley Clark as their magic bullet, dark horse to sabotage the campaign of Howard Dean. Now, the fact that all these people had supported the Iraq War and were part of the problem shows that maybe they were just trying to save face. Maybe they didn't like having this guy going around every day during 2004 and pointing out the ways that they, as Democrats, were wrong and part of the problem.

**Ralph Nader:** Howard Dean had the effrontery to say that you can't be a national Democratic party and concede half the country to red state Republican governors. You've got to run in all 50 states. And the Democratic establishment in Washington mocked him, mocked him for saying the most obvious thing about political success. You've got to campaign in every state.

**Rick Perlstein:** Yeah. They mocked me today. And you know of all people that state attorneys general are probably—no one knows this—some of the most powerful people in the country when it comes to making life livable for most Americans. They're the people who sue the bad guys, support the good guys.

The Republican candidate for attorney general in Missouri just did a campaign commercial in which he took a barrel of forbidden literature, like books, books about people who don't love the way that supposedly normal people love, put them in a barrel and shot at them with a flamethrower and said, this is what I'm going to do as attorney general. The Democratic Party has not run a candidate against her for attorney general. So there's going to only be one candidate on the ballot in Missouri.

When I pointed this out on Twitter, all these super sophisticated know-it-all Democratic partisans and consultants said, well, don't you understand Missouri is a Republican state. It's a waste of resources. No one wants to run a losing campaign.

I'm like, it's not this campaign we're worried about. It's the ones 20 years from now. People got to get used to the idea of thinking about the Democratic Party as a group of people that are on their side. And that doesn't happen overnight. It's a long-term project, and that's what Howard Dean's 50-state project was all about. And it really was an intraparty civil war between the elites run by Rahm Emanuel and the insurgents run by Howard Dean, who was, by the way, not a radical, not even a leftist in a lot of ways. He was a balanced budget guy who the DLC used to love in the 1990s.

They just decided that a lot of this was venality on the part of consultants who didn't want their business model to be ruined. And this is when the die was cast for this decades ago. In the 2004 election, Howard Dean was supposedly not electable, and they chose the guy who supposedly was electable. And of course, he wasn't elected. So la-di-da, as Annie Hall would say.

**Steve Skrovan:** Rick, you wrote a book called *Nixonland*, so you know a lot about Nixon. Compare *Nixonland* with Trump World for us.

**Rick Perlstein:** A lot of the resentments are similar. A lot of the political energies that he was animating were very similar, as I point out. A couple of things are different. The kind of things you hear on Fox News every day or talk radio every day, you would hear then, but you would hear them in kind of letters to the editor. Right-wingers didn't have that kind of platform for their kind of stuff.

Regarding that kind of institution building, Roger Ailes specifically built Fox because he dreamed of what they could have done had they had media to fight against the prosecution of Richard Nixon for being a criminal. So that's one difference, the advancement of right-wing infrastructure.

The other is that Richard Nixon was a master dog whistler. A dog whistle, as we all know, means something racist or nasty that you say to appeal to racists that only they can hear because you're saying it in code. Silent majority was a perfect dog whistle. It's such a good dog whistle that I didn't even realize it was a dog whistle until about 10 years after I wrote the book. What do you call people who are African American or Hispanic in America? They're "minorities." He said, I'm for the majority, means I'm against the minorities. It's perfect racism.

And through a story that's kind of complicated, maybe not, it has a lot to do with just the personality of this one guy, Trump, who said, wow, we don't have to do this anymore, the dog whistle became a train whistle. And he would just say it. He would say, they're not sending their best. They're sending their rapists.

At the 2016 Republican convention, it was like something out of Orwell's 1984. Up on the scoreboard, they would show the pictures of these beautiful, innocent white women who had been murdered by the invaders. Now, we all know that immigrants have lower rates of committing crime

than native-born Americans. So this is just nonsense. It's fascism. But a lot of it is just like taking the stuff that was always at the fringes of Republican conventions outside the walls and putting it inside.

**Ralph Nader:** We've been talking with Rick Perlstein and the author of books on presidents like Nixon and Reagan. And he's coming out with this forthcoming book called *The Infernal Triangle*. When is that book coming out?

**Rick Perlstein:** Next year. It's in the oven.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, thank you very much, Rick, and to be continued.

**Rick Perlstein:** Thanks for all you do, Ralph.

**Steve Skrovan:** I want to thank our guests again today, Gene Bruskin and Rick Perlstein.

For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up," featuring Francesco DeSantis with "In Case You Haven't Heard." A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

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

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

**David Feldman:** We have a new issue of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*. It's out now. To order your copy of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, "Democracy Dies in Broad Daylight," go to [capitolhillcitizen.com](http://capitolhillcitizen.com).

**Steve Skrovan:** Remember to continue the conversation, after each program, go to the comments section at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com) and post a comment or question on this week's episode. We read them all.

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

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

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

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you, everybody.