

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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Where Do We Go From Here?: The Isikoff and Klaidman Interview

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Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the best-selling books, *The View from Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker, and a writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones* about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine.

Sarah Kendzior:

And this is Gaslit Nation, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

We're here with Michael Isikoff and Dan Klaidman, co-hosts of the podcast, *Skullduggery*. Michael Isikoff is the chief investigative correspondent for Yahoo News, where he is also editor-at-large for reporting and investigations. He digs into national security, money and politics, and whatever else strikes his fancy. Previously, he was an investigative correspondent for NBC as well as a staff writer for *Newsweek* and the *Washington Post*. Isikoff has written several bestsellers, including *Uncovering Clinton*, and with David Corn, *Hubris*, about the selling of the Iraq War. He is also the author of *Russian Roulette* with David Corn, the inside story of Putin's war on America and the election of Donald Trump, which features the story of my sister, Alexandra Chalupa, the DNC consultant who tried to warn both Democrats and Republicans about Paul Manafort, then-chairman of the Trump campaign, and his long history working for Kremlin interests.

Andrea Chalupa:

Dan Klaidman is editor-in-chief for Yahoo News. From 2006 until 2011, he was *Newsweek's* managing editor. Before that, he served as the magazine's Washington bureau chief Middle East correspondent, and as an investigative reporter. He is the author of *Kill or Capture: The War on Terror and the Soul of the Obama Presidency*. Welcome *Skullduggery* to Gaslit Nation.

Michael Isikoff:

Great to be with you guys.

Daniel Klaidman:

Thank you so much.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. It's a long overdue conversation and, of course, you also have *Conspiracyland*, right?

Michael Isikoff:

Yes, yes. With a new season coming up in about another six weeks or so.

Andrea Chalupa:

Fantastic. And what was your last season on?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, the first season was about the Seth Rich conspiracy. You remember that one. Seth Rich was the Democratic National Committee staffer murdered on the streets of Washington in what Washington, D.C. police quickly concluded was a botched robbery, but it became the source of a giant conspiracy theory that just captivated the alt-right and Trump allies for years into the future, and elaborate conspiracy that he was gunned down by assassins hired by Hillary Clinton because he had leaked the emails to WikiLeaks, the DNC emails—hint, hint—point being it wasn't the Russians. That was the whole purpose of the conspiracy theory.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. Yeah, Assange even pushed it.

Michael Isikoff:

Oh yeah. Assange pushed it. Steve Bannon pushed it. Roger Stone pushed it. All your favorite characters.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. And that, I remember July, 2016, he was murdered and the murder remains unsolved.

Michael Isikoff:

Murder remains unsolved. And then the second season, which came out last year, was, remember when Trump was going on a tear about Joe Scarborough and how he had murdered a woman?

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh yeah, his intern or something. Yeah.

Michael Isikoff:

Yeah. So we dug into that one and—

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] Okay.

Michael Isikoff:

It was all nonsense, but it got a lot of traction. Trump had a field day with it on Twitter and then QAnon picked it up, and it was pushed by QAnon, so...

Daniel Klaidman:

Yeah, I will just say about this Conspiracyland series, which I think is amazing, is their incredible stories might tell us... it does a great job kind of explaining how these conspiracy theories take root and take on

a life of their own, but what's really powerful about them is the kind of human toll that they take on people. The innocent people who get caught up as victims of these conspiracy theories in both the first and the second series that Mike did, those are really tragic stories, and it gives you a sense of how dangerous this stuff is for real people.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, without question. And you also obviously uncover the kernels of truth and the conspiracies that give the movements—the cults that grow around them—sort of that air of validity, I guess.

Michael Isikoff:

Right. There's always grains of truth, little strands that then get magnified and twisted way beyond where the facts go, which is why it's important. We're reporters, we've been doing it for many, many years and we got to stick to the facts.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. Without question. So I guess, we have a whole list of questions for you guys, but I'm going to jump ahead because, off of that, the conspiracies and how they can really hurt people, and the horror of living inside one when you're a target of a conspiracy thread narrative... My sister, Alexandra Chalupa, is, as you know very well from covering her early. You're one of the few, unfortunately, one of the few reporters in 2016 that took the Kremlin threat seriously and as part of that, you interviewed my sister. What ended up happening with that is that my sister became a character of a very large, far-right driven narrative that she was working with Ukraine to hurt Trump in 2016. You got swept up in that as well. You were a target of the far-right. And it was just really strange. So I guess that is a big jump ahead, but—[laughs]

Michael Isikoff:

I'm the target of everybody.

Andrea Chalupa:

So I guess—

Michael Isikoff:

I'm an equal opportunity abuser and I get equal opportunity abuse.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. And you're so easy going and you sort of rolled with it, because I think what was really funny is that my sister is incredibly private and to suddenly become like in Devin... a big poster person for all that was really incredible. So I'm excited for Conspiracyland, your next season, and we'll talk more about that when it's out. So for both of you, your reporting in your books combined tell a story of institutional decline for America, from Bush's wars and the aftermath, the rise of the rabid Gingrich Republicans that really showed up leading up to Clinton's impeachment, the intelligence community letting Trump, with all of his corruption and his long dark nefarious history including, of course, real connections to the Kremlin come to power. Paul Manafort, who was known to the intelligence community, given the FBI's investigations in Ukraine, starting in early 2014 and all the dark money and so forth that fueled the GOP

in 2016. Could you both comment on how America's long, recent history of institutional decline helped get us Trump?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, that's a big one. Klaidman, you want to go first or?

Daniel Klaidman:

No, yeah. I was going to say you go first, Mike.

Michael Isikoff:

Okay, yeah. From the grand sweep of history, right? Look, institutional decline, that's an interesting one because there's a sort of common view where we always think, "Oh, we were so great back then and then we went downhill at a point X or point Y or a point Z." Look, our institutions have always been plagued by our many institutional faults. There was no heyday when democracy worked perfectly in this country and everybody had equal rights and equal access to the ballot box to have their voices heard. So I'm a little reluctant to say that things have gone dramatically downhill from a certain point in time, but what is clear is we are in a period of hyperpolarization in which our country is as divided as it's been for many, many decades.

Michael Isikoff:

I don't want to say too far 'cause I'm old enough to remember the Vietnam War era and how divided as a country we were at that point and how impassioned people were about that issue on all sides. But I think this hyperpolarization combined with the fragmentation of the media and the rise of the internet in which we all go into our silos to get the news we want to hear that reinforces our prejudices, has appreciably made our politics worse.

Daniel Klaidman:

Yeah. I mean, I was thinking along the same lines. I think there is a continuum that goes actually fairly far. I mean, you could probably go back all the way to the beginning of American history, but I think the decline in our institutions that I think you guys are talking about is not something that started with Newt Gingrich. I think it goes back to that Vietnam/Watergate period, this sort of realization partly uncovered by the press that the government was lying to the American people over and over and over again about literally the most important thing, which is a war that we were in and the numbers of people who were going to be killed and the numbers of people who we were killing.

Daniel Klaidman:

And that began kind of a descent into American cynicism about government, about politics, about what could be done, that has continued. And then all of these other factors that Mike talked about that led to the kind of polarization and fragmentation of media, the rise of social media platforms, this idea of filter bubbles and this idea that everybody has their own truth. There always ought to be robust debate in American society and political culture, but if you can't agree about a common set of facts then you're not going to be able to bridge any of the divides. And that's where we are right now. Everybody has their own truth. Everybody thinks they're right. And that makes it very, very difficult to find a way forward together, which I know sounds pollyannaish, but there was a time when I think it was a little bit easier to do that.

Daniel Klaidman:

I will say that there are a lot of people in our country who were always marginalized and left behind, and were not part of that in any way, shape or form. There are some good things that are also happening right now in this country, which we should talk about, and part of it is the rise of a kind of progressive, more open, more tolerant kind of thinking and some advances in terms of rights for all kinds of people in this country who had been marginalized. Unfortunately, the way these things usually happen in this country and around the world is those often coexist with violence and efforts to suppress and keep those people down. But it's important to look at the larger picture and sometimes see the good things that are happening.

Sarah Kendzior:

One thing I'm curious about since you kind of pinpointed the beginning of, I guess, a recent decline as the Watergate period, is that I've noticed when I look back on this period, I see the same people over and over committing the same crimes without facing any kind of accountability for their action. And specifically, I mean people like Roy Cohn and his proteges, Roger Stone and Paul Manafort, people like Bill Barr who were involved in Iran-Contra and re-emerged with Trump, John Bolton, who was involved in war crimes, in the Bush administration and then re-emerged with Trump. It's like this Celebrity Apprentice of criminal GOP operatives that just keep coming back. Since you both have studied all of these disastrous administrations over a historical time period, I'm just curious, why do you think these guys are seemingly immune to prosecution?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, wait a second. I mean, Paul Manafort was prosecuted.

Sarah Kendzior:

But now he's out. He's out running around, having fun.

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] In his ostrich leather jacket.

Michael Isikoff:

He had a president who... Roger Stone was also prosecuted and convicted. He just happened to have a friend in the White House who pardoned him. So, yeah, I wouldn't paint quite a dark picture as that. Let's distinguish between statutory crimes which Manafort and Stone clearly violated and what you would probably consider political crimes: John Bolton advocating for the war in Iraq, for instance, and being as bellicose as possible, or Bill Barr running the justice department in ways that—

Sarah Kendzior:

Were illegal? [laughs]

Michael Isikoff:

Well, no, I don't know that there were illegalities by Bill Barr. I know that he used his influence to politically put his thumb on the scale on a few cases. I think some of that was exaggerated. I don't think it quite had the effects that some of the critics said, but it clearly was a way of running the Justice Department that is not going to be run in that way under the current attorney general, Merrick Garland,

and wouldn't have been run under previous attorneys generals. I just think you've got to be careful and distinguish between people who promote policies that you and I might think are really dangerous and bad and mixing that with statutory crimes like fraud, which Manafort was convicted of, and clearly lying to Congress, which Roger Stone was convicted of.

Daniel Klaidman:

Mike, I think there's one more layer here that goes beyond just violating policies that people agree with. It is also—and this was said over and over again over the last four years—the shocking violation of norms in American politics.

Andrea Chalupa and Sarah Kendzior:

Mmmhmm (affirmative).

Michael Isikoff:

No, absolutely, yes. Right. Which Trump did everyday.

Daniel Klaidman:

Which Trump did every day, but Bill Barr did as well.

Michael Isikoff:

Yeah.

Daniel Klaidman:

And that is somewhere in between policies and actual crimes. And the violation of norms—accepted norms—was very troubling and very offensive to a lot of people, because what are norms? They're kind of what you think are accepted—

Michael Isikoff:

They're traditions that-

Daniel Klaidman:

Traditions.

Michael Isikoff:

... we have commonly accepted as a way to do the government's business, and that's the—

Daniel Klaidman:

Right, with a moral dimension to that.

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] Yes, exactly.

Daniel Klaidman:

This is the right thing to do. We are investing our values in these norms and those were blown through in ways I think that were very troubling. And again, some of this stuff was... You know, occasionally norms are broken, have always been broken, but never on the level of what we saw during the Trump years. And I think there wasn't much accountability for that, except that Joe Biden is now president and not Donald Trump.

Michael Isikoff:

Well, I think that is a form of accountability right there. The American public did not re-elect Donald Trump as president.

Sarah Kendzior:

I think that's a form of the public airing their voice, airing their preference and actually having it honored, despite the attempt of the Trump administration to reject those votes and go to the courts and attempt to stage a coup. I'm concerned about this because a lot of these same protagonists—people like Roger Stone, for example, or Michael Flynn—they recur again and again and then you end up with a siege on the Capitol. And so, I'm curious, do you feel like we're safe now under the Biden administration from these kinds of malevolent actors?

Michael Isikoff:

I don't know that I would go that far. They're still out there and we've done a number of shows recently on our Skullduggery podcast about QAnon and the hold that has on millions of people. In fact, we just did a show last week off this new report by the Soufan Center, which showed—surprise, surprise—the Russians and the Chinese fueling COVID content on Facebook. Something like 20% of QAnon-related content on Facebook over a 14-month period had foreign administrators and when the Soufan Center's folks looked into that, they were able to trace a lot of them from the Russians and the Chinese, with the Chinese picking it up in recent months.

Michael Isikoff:

Probably the most disturbing thing in that report is they did some new polling, which showed that when you actually ask people about particular QAnon beliefs, such as “there's a ring of pedophiles in the US government who are manipulating things,” you get some astonishing numbers of Americans who buy into that stuff. So yes, as long as that's out there and they believe that and it's being pumped and it's fueled from lots of different directions, then I think the danger continues to exist.

Daniel Klaidman:

I wanted to just pick up on something that Sarah was saying, this idea that these characters—malevolent characters, I think as you put it—have this ability to just kind of hang around. I think you're onto something important there, and it's a couple of things. We're now living in an era of kind of shamelessness that I think didn't exist in the same way before. And, of course, the personification of that is Donald Trump. But if you think about it, you know, when Richard Nixon resigned... First of all, he did resign because he in part I guess didn't want to put the country through the trauma of impeachment when he knew that he was going to be impeached and likely convicted, but he just sort of slunk away, went back to San Clemente or wherever, tried to rebuild his reputation as a statesman.

Daniel Klaidman:

And he was no longer functionally a presence. And then look how Donald Trump has behaved, where he's going on Hannity and flirting with the idea of running in 2024 and very much is this looming presence and has a huge impact on Republican politics. And then, there is the internet piece of it and the sort of fragmentation of media where, in the past, people did not have platforms and now they all do. So Roger Stone can keep his name out there, he can keep his followers and continue to build his brand such as it is. And I think that is a huge difference between now and decades ago.

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh yeah, I totally agree and Fox News was formed, in part, *because* of Watergate, *because* Nixon had resigned, because there was a culture of shame and they wanted to make sure that this could never happen to a Republican administration again. And then that became more and more divorced from reality, divorced from facts as the decades went on. I'm curious what you think about that, about developments in media since the '70s, developments on the internet. Is there any way of remedying this and sort of bringing Americans back to a shared reality where even if we disagree, we're at least disagreeing about something we all agree is there and exists?

Daniel Klaidman:

Just before the show, I was texting with one of our reporters, John Ward. I had asked him to cover this hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee this morning on algorithms, algorithms and transparency. And it's really about the social media platforms. A lot of people have identified algorithms and these recommendation algorithms that YouTube and others have that have created some of these problems: both the amplification, and then also the filter bubbles. There is legislation, I think, pending in the House that would regulate the social media companies and how they use these algorithms and then making them more transparent because they're kind of black boxes. That's one small thing that can be done, but it seems like there are a lot of things that would have to be done to get back to where we... We'll never get back to where we once were.

Sarah Kendzior:

Mmmhmm (affirmative).

Daniel Klaidman:

Maybe that's a good thing. We don't need to live in an era anymore where you have basically gatekeepers, you have three anchormen, a few big newspapers and a couple of news magazines. I mean, that era is over and it should be over. But there are things, I think, that can be done to help. And one of them is what I just referred to. Another one is media literacy. We have to teach people how to consume media in ways that they get outside of those silos and challenge their own ideas. And I don't know how you do that, but I think media literacy is at least a part of it.

Michael Isikoff:

But look, you know, you mentioned the algorithms and the algorithms are just basically designed to sort of maximize clicks by sort of figuring out what pushes your buttons. And inevitably, it's something that makes you angry about something somebody else is doing, right? Then the algorithms will direct stories to your Facebook page or your Twitter or whatever it is your social media is that maximizes your outrage and gets you angrier and clicking more. Well, guess what? It's the same formula that the cable networks use for their ratings. They give red meat and that's when their ratings go up. And Fox does it, but so does



CNN and so does MSNBC, and that contributes and worsens the polarization we are in right now that is, I think, the bane of American democracy at the moment.

Andrea Chalupa:

So speaking of the bane of American democracy, let's talk about your book, *Russian Roulette*. Why do you think you and your co-author, David Corn, were just a handful of journalists that were taking the Kremlin threat in 2016 seriously?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, this is one where your sister plays a role, in your sister, Ali. I mean, look, a lot of the data points were out there, right? I mean, when Trump started running for president, we knew that he had been trying to do business in Russia. We knew about his trip to Moscow for Miss Universe in 2013. We knew all the warm and cozy things he was saying about Putin. All of that was on the public record. Then gradually, we saw people like Manafort, which Ali was very astute on calling attention to, him being hired first as a consultant then as the campaign manager. And then you put on top of that what we learned in June of that year, the hack of the DNC by Russian intelligence. So a lot of it was out there, but it was like, how far did it go?

Michael Isikoff:

And Ali played a role again because on the eve of the Democratic Convention is when I learned and she confirmed and shared with me that she had been alerted that her personal email account had been compromised because she got an alert from security at Yahoo. And she had the screenshots to show it and I was able to confirm that, and that was an indication to me that things were going further than people understood, right? And more and more as I dug in—dug into Manafort, dug into some of the various players in the Trump orbit—it was clear to me that this was serious business and needed more attention. So my coauthor, David Corn, was very much of the same mind. We had done a book before together, *Hubris*, about the selling of the Iraq War, and we were asked to write a book about what was going on with Russia and we did, and that became *Russian Roulette*.

Sarah Kendzior:

So all this was in the public domain, as you just said, and then there were also people like Harry Reid who were warning the American public by writing open letters to James Comey saying, “You have to tell Americans that the election is vulnerable, that Russia may falsify results before they go to the polls.” So we knew, you knew, he knew, intelligence certainly seemed to know—the CIA, other intelligence agencies—why didn't they stop Russia from allowing Trump to become the president if they knew he was compromised?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, interesting because, clearly, President Obama did not want to do that. He made it very clear. There's a whole chapter in *Russian Roulette* where we talk about how people on the National Security Council staff wanted to push back a lot harder on Russia during the 2016 campaign and proposed all sorts of aggressive cyber measures and also other matters, such as exposing Putin's corruption and all his various bank accounts and the role of various oligarchs in his orbit, and they got shut down. Do you remember who shut them down inside the Trump White House? You talk about characters before who come back. It was Susan Rice and Lisa Monaco. Susan Rice, now the domestic councillor for the Biden White House and Lisa Monaco, now Deputy Attorney General of the United States. They knew where

their president felt comfortable doing, and he did not feel comfortable escalating a confrontation with the Russians during the 2016 campaign, figuring Hillary is going to win anyway, we'll let her deal with it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow. Gosh. Okay. So a lot of bad memories kept coming up from that year.

Sarah Kendzior:

A lot of bottled rage, but yes, go on Andrea. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

Yes. We're going to be polite. We're going to be polite because we have guests on this show, but if this were a regular episode, we'd be throwing things. Okay, so what was your whole experience like working on *Russian Roulette*? Because you basically wrote a book about a crime as it was happening. We saw when Trump won and Michael Flynn was talking to the Russians and Comey was fired and the Russians were in the oval office the next day. So all of this stuff was still happening out in the open in a way that was making people go, even the skeptics, go, "Wait a minute, maybe there is something between Trump and Russia." So what was that experience like in trying to uncover all this, put it all together, as it was all ongoing?

Michael Isikoff:

It was a puzzle. It was like, what did Winston Churchill say about Russia? A mystery wrapped in an enigma and there's some other part to that, right? And I think to this day, we don't fully understand all the nature of the relationships and everything that went down in 2016. So this is going to be an ongoing matter that historians are going to be debating for years. Clearly, you have hyper-partisans on both sides who go after you. I had plenty on the Right who went after me for *Russian Roulette*, but then when I came forward and said, "Hey, guess what? That dossier, the Christopher Steele dossier, it's not holding up. The sensational allegations don't check out." I had plenty on the left coming after me for that, right? And this is the nature of trying to call things as you see them. Unless it ratifies the prejudices that people have, they don't want to hear it and they'll attack you as a result.

Andrea Chalupa:

I remember when BuzzFeed first published the Steele Dossier, there was shortly after that a report out of a Kremlin TV by Putin's chief propagandist, Dmitry Kiselyov, saying that my sister then invented this whole Russiagate hoax. And I made an appearance. They found some old YouTube interview of me. I was the accomplice.

Michael Isikoff:

Oh, you went on RT or?

Andrea Chalupa:

No, they.

Sarah Kendzior:

No, she was put on RT against her will.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. They used some interview clip of me on Ukrainian Independent TV, Hromadske TV. So we look like a bunch of Ukrainian Illuminati, my sister and I, coming after Trump.

Michael Isikoff:

Hey, you guys led to Trump's first impeachment, right? That's what Trump wanted, and that call with the Ukrainian president confirmed this stuff about how the Ukrainians were the real actors behind the 2016 election.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. It's fun. It makes our Thanksgiving dinners really lively. Always a lot to talk about. But so, yeah, that was the start of 2017, what I described: Putin's chief propagandist doing that whole segment and teeing up what would become the Republicans' defense of Trump through that impeachment trial. We ran on this show a montage of Devin Nunes saying my sister's name a million different times, drawing attention to her, and it was this persistent narrative that Fox News, the Republican Party—including Johnson, including Lindsay Graham—were pushing, saying that my sister, Alexandra Chalupa, was the real Russiagate, but it's Ukrainegate! And it was really funny because she had... Okay, it's not funny. It was actually a nightmare, but I can talk about it now, thanks to therapy and catching up on sleep. And now Biden is president. We have a guy on the side of America as president. That's a huge change for all of us and for my family, especially. There's been a lot of breathing room we've been allowed.

Andrea Chalupa:

So it was a terrifying time. I'm not trying to make light of it. What you're hearing in my voice is relief, but what they did to her was so surreal. And the way a lot of big names in the media were stumbling all over her story, trying to report on it and getting things wrong as well. So, I lived what it was like to be in the center of a media sensation cyclone and just seeing a lot of journalists that I depend on personally for information get basic facts wrong and confuse things. So it was pretty horrifying on a lot of different levels, and what I thought was interesting was that some of these far-right targets were coming after you as well. And Michael, you were like getting dragged... You got your own little pin on the corkboard of this huge conspiracy theory that they were pushing. So what did that feel like for you? Did you ever feel a sense of danger? Did they ever try to hack you like they hacked her? What was that like?

Michael Isikoff:

I'm sure they tried to hack me and probably did. I don't know it for a fact. I've never been contacted by the FBI about that. But look, I mean, some of it, it just rolls off you. I think for somebody like your sister, Ali, who was not used to being in the public eye or being in the middle of Washington political food fights, it was probably a lot more jarring than it was for me who's been around the block a bit on these matters. I notice when people are going after me. I have Google alerts that let me know about that, but I don't think I obsess about it too much. My wife might feel a little differently about that but I probably paid more attention when Democrats were coming after me because I was debunking the Steele dossier than I did when the right-wingers went after me for writing *Russian Roulette*.

Daniel Klaidman:

It seems to me that it was even more intense back in the 90s when you were-

Michael Isikoff:

Oh yeah.

Daniel Klaidman:

... reporting on Monica Lewinsky, and when the Clinton knights were coming after you.

Michael Isikoff:

Oh, they were as vicious as any on the right-wing this time around were. And, in fact, not only were they as vicious, they were more artful in the way they went after you so that they made sure you paid a price if you crossed the Clinton White House.

Sarah Kendzior:

What was the price? What did they do?

Michael Isikoff:

Smear me with bogus charges and depicted me in an unflattering light in many different ways. But look, I can look back on it with some dispassion now, but at the time, that got a lot more unpleasant than this go around.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. That's true. The far-right clowns are clowns, but when the Left comes after you, they get a hit. They make sure to get a hit.

Michael Isikoff:

Well they have more access to friends in the media, and they're more artful about the way they spin things.

Andrea Chalupa and Sarah Kendzior:

Mmmhmm (affirmative)

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs] Andrea and I are both like mmmhmm, because we're going through this right now, ourselves, so...

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah.

Michael Isikoff:

What are they going after you?

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, because we don't think that Biden is like God on Earth and we would like some accountability for the crimes of the Trump administration, the Capitol attack. Yeah, I mean, it's basically, I feel like we have a problem of personality cults. It's obviously much worse than the GOP, with phenomenons like QAnon,

with the cult around Trump, we also have personality cults in the Democratic Party. There's obviously one around Obama. There are sort of fledgling ones around Biden and Kamala Harris and Bernie Sanders and basically everyone. We just don't want any part of the cult.

Andrea Chalupa:

And Pelosi.

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, and Pelosi, of course.

Andrea Chalupa:

I can't believe you haven't mentioned Pelosi, we got into a huge... Christine Pelosi used to follow Gaslit Nation on Twitter. She does not anymore. We've got on big public—

Sarah Kendzior:

Oh, she attacked me on Twitter. It was very reminiscent of when-

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, we had a-

Sarah Kendzior:

... for nothing! Because we wanted Trump impeached.

Andrea Chalupa:

We dared to take on Pelosi with impeachment. There was that big blue wave in 2018. There was this reporting saying that people are going to vote because they wanted to see Trump impeached. And you'd go to these protests, there'd be these big impeachment signs. And then we called out Pelosi when she shrugged off impeachment and said, "He's just not worth it." And then she had her foot soldiers like Hakeem Jeffries going on TV saying that the "voters did not vote overwhelmingly in 2018 for impeachment, they want healthcare," and they try to play down impeachment and make it go away. And Sarah and I would not let it go away. And we were relentless. We even created a thread on our Twitter which was an FAQ on impeachment. We had all these bots coming after us repeating these talking points and it turned out there was a bot room, somewhere, a DM with a lot of influential accounts trying to push these talking points to try to tamp down impeachment, or so we were told, right, Sarah?

Sarah Kendzior:

Well that and they smeared us and Pelosi staff banned volunteers on the Pelosi groups from reading my book, quoting our show. I mean, it was crazy. I heard from a lot of those volunteers and they were, like, freaked out.

Daniel Klaidman:

I guess your crusade worked because in the end, you got not one, but two impeachments.

Sarah Kendzior:

Lackluster impeachments, which is better than absolutely nothing, but—.

Andrea Chalupa:

All it took was a violent coup for the second one.

Michael Isikoff:

I mean, look, I thought Trump's conduct in the Ukrainian matter was grotesque and he needed accountability. I thought January 6 was awful and one of the low moments in modern American history. But that said, you know, ugh, when you go through an impeachment process where you pretty much know what the end result is going to be, and the end result is going to be the guy gets off and that that's likely to help him more than you've hurt him, does it still make sense to go through that process? Is that the right process to do when you know what the outcome is going to be?

Sarah Kendzior:

Yes, because it's upholding their duty to the public as elected public servants and it's educating the public about the extent of the crimes. Something I've heard a lot, especially living in Missouri, is a sort of disbelief that Trump actually did all the things he did, especially when it had to do with Russia-

Michael Isikoff:

But that's after... But Sarah—

Sarah Kendzior:

... and the Mueller probe. Listen, listen, just let me finish. The reason they say this is they say, "If-

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs] This isn't Crossfire.

Sarah Kendzior:

... "If he really did it, if he really did these things, Congress would act, Pelosi would act, the Democrats would act, Mueller would have done something," it's the lack of accountability that lets this lie endure. And then once people really do act and they clamp down Trump's ratings, his approval ratings would go down because people recognize it is not a rumor or a lie, but a serious offense. And there's so much garbage. Like you guys said, there's so much information silos and propaganda and conspiracy theories. It's very difficult for folks to figure out what's real, what matters and what's a threat. And I think a lot of people saw clearly he was a threat once people responded to him as if he was a threat, once officials did.

Daniel Klaidman:

I also, I mean, particularly for the second impeachment, I think a couple of things. You do create a historical record, which is not unimportant. Seven Republicans voted to convict, right?

Michael Isikoff:

Right.

Daniel Klaidman:

That is not insignificant either in terms of how people will look back at this. And then finally, Trump to some extent was defanged. I mean, when was he [crosstalk 00:37:59].

Michael Isikoff:

Before the impeachment, but yeah.

Daniel Klaidman:

But after January 6, right?

Michael Isikoff:

But after January 6, yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

After he attempted to overthrow the government from within, he was led off Twitter, yes. [laughs] That was his punishment.

Daniel Klaidman:

Yeah.

Michael Isikoff:

Well, given that that's mainly what the guy did for four years, it was not nothing getting him kicked off Twitter. But look, I take your point. I'm all for accountability. I still would love to see a January 6th commission that does a full investigation.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yes.

Daniel Klaidman:

Yeah.

Michael Isikoff:

I think that if they moved right away on that score, we would have gotten a fuller public record and accountability than we got out of the impeachment trial.

Sarah Kendzior:

Why do you think they haven't moved more vigorously on that?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, I think in part because there's a... You know, they won't *say* this, but they'll say, "Well, we impeached the guy, how much more do we have to relive all this?" Right? I think the commission idea would have been the smarter idea, the smarter move for long-term accountability, because I think if it had been structured right, you could have gotten sane Republicans on a bipartisan commission that

would have done a full investigation and would have put out a report that said, A, the entire stop the steal stuff was completely bogus. There was no fraud. And you'd have Republicans buying into that.

Daniel Klaidman:

And they would have had subpoena power and it would have been harder—

Michael Isikoff:

They would have had subpoena power and the whole testimony that the impeachment folks couldn't get. I still want to know what was going on in the White House that day of January 6th, that afternoon. And I would like to see McCarthy testify under oath and have that Congresswoman from Washington who spoke to him right after, have her testify under oath and see her notes. There was a lot we could still learn and, you know, I'm not overly optimistic we're going to get that commission now, but I think that the impeachment trial was fine. I thought Jamie Raskin was incredibly eloquent, but I don't know that it provided the kind of accountability that we all think is needed.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, it's a weird thing because so much of it was public. You had Michael Flynn, Roger Stone, Steve Bannon, all announcing that they were spearheading this insurrection. You had the insurrectionists themselves saying, "Hey, I'm going to go storm the White House today." Andrea and I did a Gaslit Nation's special on January 6th that we announced on January 5th because we knew all of this was coming, because it was all over the internet. We could just look at Lin Wood's Twitter account. So on one hand, there's all this stuff in the public domain. On the other hand, there are still questions that are unanswered—really serious ones—like who put bombs around the Capitol? Who took the panic buttons out of Ayanna Pressley's office? Who gave the tours to insurrectionists among representatives in Congress? Those just seem like absolutely essential questions we need answered now for the continued safety and security of our country. Why is there so much reticence in what seems to be an immediate, ongoing threat?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, some of that is within the orbit of the criminal investigation that's going on now. Obviously, the FBI is still trying to find who planted those bombs outside the Republican and Democratic Party headquarters. So that's clearly within the scope. But look, if they can flip some of these Oathkeeper guys and promise keepers or whatever, and get them to start talking, we may learn more through that route, but it's not going to get us the answers to the kind of thing I was talking about before, like what was going on inside the White House on January 6?

Sarah Kendzior:

What do you think could get us those kinds of answers?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, a commission, but, it doesn't look like we're going to get it. So we may never know and we may just be reliant on people's various self-serving memoirs when they write their books.

Andrea Chalupa:

Great. We're not going to get a commission, but people will get lucrative book deals.



Sarah Kendzior:

That's the story of our era.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's very true. So we have, obviously, big challenges ahead and one of the people tasked with confronting those challenges is Avril Haines, the Director of National Intelligence under Biden. She is coming in after we had a president of the United States openly waging war with the intelligence community. Dan, you did a big profile on her back in 2013, I believe, where you tell her incredible life story of growing up in New York City, taking care of her very sick mother while growing up. She went on to, as a young woman, open and own her own independent bookstore. She fixed up a small plane and attempted to fly it across the ocean to Europe, did a perfect crash landing on an airport, like, miraculous. So she really comes off in your profile, like a... Who's the guy that did Grand Budapest Hotel? You know that filmmaker?

Sarah Kendzior:

Wes Anderson?

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah.

Daniel Klaidman:

It is cinematic but also in the kind of surreal. I'd never thought about that-

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, exactly right.

Daniel Klaidman:

... but evoking Wes Anderson makes a lot of sense. Actually, the funny thing... I tell the, very briefly, the story of how I ended up writing about her. I knew nothing about Avril Haines until the day that Barack Obama nominated her to be the Deputy CIA Director, and there had never been a woman in the intelligence community at that high a level. So I kind of took note. I thought it was interesting. I was working at Newsweek and The Daily Beast at the time. And so I thought for a moment, "Well, maybe I'll write something about this," but another reporter was looking into it, and I said, "Fine." And later that day I guess we published his story and it was just basically a short piece.

Daniel Klaidman:

And all it really said was the woman who had just been nominated to be Deputy CIA Director in earlier mid-90s had owned an independent bookstore in the Fells Point neighborhood of Baltimore, and on Wednesday nights they did erotica readings. And that little item just took off. It's the only thing anybody... And so like, you Googled her name, it was the first thing that came up. So I got a call from Kathy Ruemmler, who at the time was the White House Counsel and had been friendly with Avril Haines. And she just ripped into me because we had written this story about Avril Haines who had all of these

accomplishments, who was brilliant, who was the first woman to be appointed to such a high level in the intelligence community and it was totally sexist of us to do this.

Daniel Klaidman:

And I was like, “I didn't do it. I had nothing to do with it, call Tina Brown!” who was the editor of the magazine at the time. And so she did, but then I thought about it and I thought, “Okay, if this woman is so great, maybe I'll look into her.” And within a few days I had learned this kind of remarkable personal story that she had. And so I wrote the profile. Now, the question you're asking is about her role now as the DNI, the Director of National Intelligence. She is now the head of the intelligence community and she takes over after a long period of controversy in our intelligence community. I started really reporting about all of this in depth during the Obama administration when I wrote a book about Obama's so-called war on terror, and that got me into his drone war.

Daniel Klaidman:

And when Avril Haines was a lawyer in the White House at that time, she was very involved in kind of looking at the legal foundation for those targeted killings. And she impressed a lot of people for a lot of different reasons. And then she rose up and ultimately ended up where she is now, and it's an unlikely rise. I have not spoken to her since she became DNI. Isikoff and I had her on our podcast. She is kind of an enigmatic figure to me in a lot of ways. She is a lawyer who, I think, does genuinely believe in international law. She was very involved in an effort toward the end of the Obama administration to take that drone war and kind of put more rules around it, something that was called “the playbook” to kind of lay out procedures for targeted killings.

Daniel Klaidman:

It was criticized by a lot of people as not going far enough and I think there are still legitimate questions to be asked about that drone war. There were a lot of civilians who were killed. On the other hand, there probably were a lot of lives that were saved because of targeted killings. That's not a popular thing to say, but I think it's a kind of complicated issue and a complicated kind of issue of morality and war.

Andrea Chalupa:

So you mentioned earlier in this discussion, we were discussing how Obama's team allowed this Kremlin threat under Trump's campaign to move forward. Susan Rice played a part and I think Isikoff mentioned that. From your experiences profiling Avril Haines and interviewing her on your podcast, do you get a sense that we're going to get the same foreign policy that we had under Obama?

Daniel Klaidman:

I mean, I think we've already seen in some significant ways that it's going to be a different foreign policy from Obama's. I think the best example of this is the decision to withdraw entirely from Afghanistan. I shouldn't say entirely because I'm sure there will be some covert kind of off-the-books operators who will still be there in some form, but I think a significant—and I'd like to hear what Isikoff has to say about this—but I think it's not insignificant that Biden was pretty furiously lobbied by the military to keep troops on the ground in Afghanistan. And he said, no, he's pulling them out and he wasn't going to be ruled by the military, or “jammed”, which was the term that Obama used about what happened to him back in 2009. That's not to say that there are going to be radical departures from Obama's foreign policy.

Daniel Klaidman:

And it may be that the world has evolved. There's more of a consensus among Republicans and Democrats in some areas of foreign policy, which Obama probably would have evolved to. So for example, Obama certainly would have been, I think, tougher on the Russians after everything that happened and much tougher on China after everything that has happened in that relationship and a lot of the things the Chinese have done. I don't know. Mike, what are your thoughts about?

Michael Isikoff:

Well, first of all, my thought is we talked about this with Dick Clark on Skullduggery a week or so ago. In some ways, Biden's move on Afghanistan is his revenge against Obama. Remember, this is what... Biden wanted to pull the troops out back in 2009 and just maintain a small counter-terrorism strike force if Al-Qaeda began to resurrect, and Obama chose otherwise. He went with Petraeus and the generals and did the surge, but he did it half-heartedly and announced when he did it that there would be an exit date. He gave an exit date for pulling the troops out, which is not smart if you're waging a war when the enemy can read, oh, well, you're going to be leaving at a certain moment in time, right? So, I mean, in some ways this is, I think, Biden following through on what he wanted to do all along. But other than that, I see a lot of continuity between the Obama foreign policy [crosstalk 00:49:43] and Biden's.

Daniel Klaidman:

I will say, I mean, just going back to drones for a second... It didn't get a lot of attention but Biden did, early on in his tenure, basically put a pause on what the military calls kinetic action or direct action in places like Somalia and Yemen and some of these kind of lawless areas where Obama was prosecuting his drone war to kind of review all of those issues and to make, I think, some decisions about whether they really want to pull back targeted killings and the use of drones. And I think part of that is because they would like to try to withdraw from the Middle East in that region as much as they possibly can and try not to get sucked back into it. And of course, trying to reenter the Iran nuclear agreement is part of that as well. And they want to shift their foreign policy priorities to China and Russia and kind of big power competitions.

Daniel Klaidman:

And also issues like climate change, which is maybe the most significant national security challenge that we are all facing. The question is whether they'll be able to do this. I mean, people will remember that the Obama administration also talked about this shift to Asia that was going to be the focal point of American foreign policy and boy, that didn't happen.

Andrea Chalupa:

So what was shocking about your book, Dan, when I was reading the coverage of it was there was a mention of a guy named "Roger"—that's his nickname, Roger in quotes—who had been there since 2006 as the drone guy. He was the guy that would basically essentially pull the trigger, whether through his decisions or whatever he did and he was the one that was pushing back against Avril Haines, this lawyer coming in and trying to put some brakes on the drone program. And I was just thinking, Roger? 2006, we've got this drone guy there that's just installed under Bush. It's shocking how the US government works.

Daniel Klaidman:

He was undercover. He was a clandestine guy in the counter-terrorism division at the CIA and he did run that drone program. He was a real hard-ass, chain smoker, a Muslim.

Andrea Chalupa:

Oh, wow.

Daniel Klaidman:

He converted to Islam. Most people don't know anything about him, but some of those who do know that he converted to Islam, which was kind of a surprising part of the narrative. I think he's retired. I think he's no longer there, but that was the question about Avril Haines, who didn't have a lot of experience in that kind of national security decision-making and was going to be going up against some pretty hard charging personalities like "Roger". Well, look, she's now head of the DNI and "Roger"'s maybe in retirement, fishing somewhere in Florida. So she clearly outlasted him, and the question, the larger question is what kind of influence has she had on our policies.

Daniel Klaidman:

I will say that we don't talk much about drones anymore. That's in part because, I think, Trump sucked up all the oxygen and there were so many other things to talk about and to write about and so many outrages that were coming so fast and furiously. But also, those wars and that targeted killing program is not nearly as robust as it used to be. And therefore, not as controversial because there just aren't as many people being killed and not nearly as many civilians being killed. So, whether Avril Haines had anything really to do with that or whether it was just the evolution of those issues and Al-Qaeda being kind of drummed out of those areas, I don't really know.

Andrea Chalupa:

But certainly no shortage of challenges for this new administration and we're just getting started here. We want you guys to come back on the show and keep giving us updates on your projects, and we're looking forward to the next season of Conspiracyland to see what you uncover there.

Michael Isikoff:

I'll be happy to come on and talk about that in the not too distant future.

Andrea Chalupa:

Fantastic.

Daniel Klaidman:

Thanks for having us.

Michael Isikoff:

Thanks. Great discussion.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher. We want to encourage you to donate to your local food bank, which is experiencing a spike in demand. We also encourage you to donate to [giveindia.org](https://giveindia.org) to help Indians battling COVID-19.

Andrea Chalupa:

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