

Gaslit Nation Transcript

14 July 2021

“Prince of Darkness”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/prince-of-53670987>

Speaker 1:

The voter suppression going on in Texas is just the tip of the iceberg. The clock is literally ticking on Congress to act to protect voters in Texas, and all across the country. We put everything on the line. The entire legislative branch of the Texas government has been zeroed out. Our budget has been zeroed out in an act of tyranny because we refused to pass a bill like they wanted to force through, a toxic piece of legislation. Now, the lives of thousands of Texas public servants and the freedoms of millions of Texas voters are on the line.

Speaker 1:

Now, I know this, we're here to fight.

Texas Democrats:

That's right.

Speaker 1:

We just hope we're not alone, because democracy itself sits at one minute to midnight and we need immediate federal action to turn back the clock.

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 the 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. What you heard at the beginning of our show was a member of the Texas Democrats who have left Texas to head to D.C. to fight for our right to vote, and this is one of the most high stakes battles that we have seen in this ongoing, multi-decade effort of the Republicans to take away the right to vote, and the refusal of the Democratic Party to meaningfully fight back.

Sarah Kendzior:

We applaud these Texas Democrats. We are very grateful to them. This is how it's done. It is such a bleak, dark time, and I'll warn you this will probably be somewhat of a bleak episode in points, but here is a ray of light. Here are people taking a stand, making a sacrifice, standing up not just for their state, but for the country as a whole.

Sarah Kendzior:

Just to summarize what's going on there, this is from The Guardian: "In flying to Washington, D.C., the Texas Democrats once again deny Republicans the required two thirds quorum needed to conduct business, this time in a special session called by the Texas Governor, Greg Abbott, specifically to pass a voting restrictions bill described by the left as 'Jim Crow 2.0.' The bill seeks to lower the bar for overturning an election, ban 24 hour and drive through voting, restrict the use of drop boxes and make it a state jail felony for a public official to proactively solicit or send vote by mail applications."

Sarah Kendzior:

Sp, this was not an easy decision for this group of Democrats to make. Representative James Talarico wrote a thread on Twitter, I'm just going to read one tweet from it. But I urge you to check out the rest. He says, "We're prepared to stay out of Texas for the rest of the session. This decision wasn't easy. Many of my colleagues left kids, elderly parents and sick loved ones. Many are risking their day jobs and their seats in the House. But we won't sit by and watch democracy wither on the vine."

Sarah Kendzior:

So, what is Joe Biden doing as the Texas House Democrats are taking this brave stance? Thus far, nothing. We're recording this on Tuesday morning, Biden is allegedly supposed to give a speech about voting rights later in the day. Maybe something will change, because it desperately needs to, by the time you actually hear this episode. I hope so, because what's happening now with Biden and the impasse over voting rights in the Senate is that there is a call from fellow Democrats for political leadership.

Sarah Kendzior:

Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, who was so essential to helping Biden clinch his win as the nominee, is calling on Biden to endorse a filibuster carve out that will allow the Senate to pass legislation related to voting rights. He has said over and over again what the stakes are. You're seeing more and more people, honestly, sounding how Andrea and I sounded back in January and February, where we were like, "Okay Democrats, you have the House, you have the Senate, you have the presidency, the first order of business is to protect the right to vote. Because if you do not protect that right, you are not going to be able to get anything done. You're going to be an anomaly between a Trump presidency and whatever hell is going to be unleashed post-Biden."

Sarah Kendzior:

Because it doesn't matter how good your policies are, it doesn't matter how good your candidates are, if people do not have the right to vote. That's why we had Adam Jentleson on early to talk about the need to get rid of the filibuster. It's why we had Ari Berman on to talk about voting rights. This is the issue of our time. Biden does not believe that this is so. He does not support, according to his Press Secretary, Jen Psaki, he does not support eliminating the filibuster. He has applied very little pressure on any of the Senate Democrat holdouts, which we have noted is not limited to Manchin and Sinema but probably Feinstein and others, who do not want to eliminate the filibuster and ensure the right to vote.

Sarah Kendzior:

This is preemptive surrender. Preemptive surrender in these circumstances is permanent surrender, and it's disastrous. So, I'm very grateful to this delegation of Texans for standing up for our country, but it is disheartening to see thus far the lack of action in response to their efforts. What do you think, Andrea?

Andrea Chalupa:

We need a new civil rights movement because we're rapidly losing the hard fought achievements of the last civil rights movement with the Supreme Court and Republicans gutting the Voting Rights Act. This is all deliberate to force America to become a hostage state, just like Missouri, just like, increasingly, Texas and Florida.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's just a new civil rights movement. It's a civil rights emergency and we have to follow in the footsteps now of John Lewis, who said, "You need to commit to good trouble," and that's what these Democrats in Texas are doing. They've committed to good trouble. They are following in the footsteps of John Lewis. That's the only way we're going to protect our democracy and move our country forward and break through.

Andrea Chalupa:

I think it was significant that this press conference of these brave and brilliant patriots, these Democrats from Texas, this delegation, was held in Virginia—in Sterling, Virginia—around 40 minutes outside of Washington, D.C. It was not held inside the beltway, it was held... It wasn't in the National Mall or steps from Congress, it was in the outer area, in the suburbs of Virginia.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's significant to me because Virginia got called early on election night, 2020, because Virginia is the trend that terrifies the far-right across America. Virginia was, of course, the birthplace of Robert E. Lee, the general of the Confederacy, Richmond was a capital of the Confederacy, and now Virginia is a blue state. Now, Virginia has diverse representatives across the state, in the state legislature.

Andrea Chalupa:

There's hope that Stacey Abrams and her coalition can make Georgia the new Virginia. There's hope that Beto O'Rourke and his coalition in Texas can make Texas the next Virginia, because demographics are changing, and there's a lot of really smart, grassroots organizing that's happening on the ground to make sure that those demographics shift towards progress. Because as Stacey Abrams has warned, demographics are not destiny. You still have to do the work. You still have to build the progressive infrastructure on the ground. You still have to invest time and money. You still have to invest training. You still have to invest time, to earn trust, election cycle after election cycle, and not give up and hold the long view.

Andrea Chalupa:

Virginia has done that successfully and now it gets called early on election night, and that's no small thing at all. That is the hope of the country. If we do the work, if we show up, if we have faith in each other, if we have faith in the best of America, we can break through. I can't emphasize enough that Robert E. Lee is coming down in Charlottesville and you have men and women of color, trans women and men fighting for progress and winning and pushing back the darkness in Virginia. If it can be done there, it can be done in Georgia, it can be done in Texas, it can even be done in that dark, dark underworld of Florida, okay?

Andrea Chalupa:

I just want to emphasize to everyone, it's time. It's time. It's go time. It's another civil rights movement. Let's just follow the lead of the giants that came before us and sacrificed so much—so much—to get us

here. We're not going to give up on them, they did not give up on us. So, it's our turn now in history to fight the fight and to show up and to embrace good trouble.

Andrea Chalupa:

I just want to say, you're not going to win Manchin, you're not going to win Sinema. There was just a mention in *Politico*, I believe it was, about Sinema seeing herself as a maverick, like John McCain, and they interviewed Megan McCain to see how she felt about this and she was all in favor for Kyrsten Sinema's obvious independent streak and how Sinema even did that thumbs down to vote down minimum wage in a flourish on the floor of Congress, just like John McCain did that infamous thumbs down against Mitch McConnell to defeat his effort to repeal Obamacare.

Andrea Chalupa:

The profound difference that super shallow Kyrsten Sinema does not get is that John McCain did his thumbs down in order to protect countless lives by protecting their health care. Kyrsten Sinema did the exact opposite of that by keeping countless people vulnerable, especially men and women of color who live on the fringes of socio-economic opportunity in America, by depriving them of a livable wage, a \$15 an hour minimum wage.

Andrea Chalupa:

Kyrsten Sinema in this report was also going around palling with members of Congress who are hardcore Republicans, who are all mobbed up with Exxon and all that dark money. She didn't go to Vice President Kamala Harris's house for a big women in the senate luncheon because her foot was broken, but you wonder, given her shallowness, whether it was more than that.

Andrea Chalupa:

The whole point is that the colleagues of Manchin and Sinema in the United States Congress must commit to good trouble themselves by taking on Sinema directly, take on Manchin directly, sit in their offices with your staff and confront them directly. Out their puppet masters directly. Push for your party to openly reject, as a policy platform, any money from Exxon and other dark puppet masters of Manchin and Sinema. Be bold. Be fearless. It's time to fight now, just like the giants who came before us.

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Sarah Kendzior:

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Sarah Kendzior:

The only thing I really wanted to add to that is the new civil rights movement is here and has been here and a lot of the Republican reaction and certainly the election of Trump and the acquiescence of the media to promote him and to ensure that win was in reaction to growing civil rights activism, particularly around racist police brutality, but also towards the use of social media to enlighten people about the actual history of the United States, about atrocities that were basically buried from view from White eyes, at least, not taught in high schools, not taught even in colleges.

Sarah Kendzior:

An obvious recent example of this making it into the news, finally, is the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre. Whenever people like to say, "Oh, don't worry about it, history will judge you, history will work it out," I keep thinking about the number of people who didn't know that this atrocity happened, who did not know about the Black Wall Street Massacre until this anniversary. Or sometimes, we had mentioned it on an early Gaslit Nation, soon after we launched, and people heard about it from there, and all sorts of other things; The Red Summer of 1919 or just the founding of this country, or all the work that Nikole Hannah-Jones did on her now deemed controversial *1619 Project* and the exploitation of that.

Sarah Kendzior:

We have people out there fighting, we have people out there documenting. We have activists like William Barber, like Bree Newsome, like Stacey Abrams, who understand very well the stakes here and are able to link our trajectory as a country founded on genocide and slavery, and also simultaneously founded with ideals and a rejection of monarchy and all of these other things.

Sarah Kendzior:

I mean, this is the thing that I think people struggle with, especially how it's taught to kids in schools, it's just that the principles did not match the practices. I think one of the things that truly terrifies people isn't an explicit, cartoonish villain, but the fact that people that say good things, or that might be nice to you, or that might be nice or good to other people, or that have high ideals, will go on to commit or cover up incredible atrocities.

Sarah Kendzior:

That is the history of America, that's the history of every country. We're not exceptional in this regard. That hypocrisy, that complicity, that willingness to stand around and be a bystander and let other people suffer, as long as you think it's not going to be you, that is the history of the world, and it's killing us. It's killing the world as we know it. We see it in relation to the growing rise of autocracy and to the climate crisis and the refusal of officials and powerful actors, corporate actors, to do anything to stop it, and the media manipulation and normalization of mass death, mass suffering, the commodification of that.

Sarah Kendzior:

There is a big, I think, civil rights movement that understands all this stuff and is bringing it to public attention, and that is why the republicans are so aggressive in these voting rights restriction laws, in their desire to make sure that people who do have a sense of justice, a sense of historical perspective, and a desire to serve the whole public, to serve everybody, are kept out of office and cannot maintain power

and cannot change the power balance, which has always shifted in my lifetime towards the wealthiest and increasingly towards a very, very narrow group of wealthy and elite and well-connected actors.

Sarah Kendzior:

It goes beyond race, it goes beyond geography. We are ruled by a very narrow elite who wants to protect their assets and their resources and their wealth, especially as the climate crisis worsens and things become more chaotic. They have constructed themselves a safety net and seek to deny the rest of that country a safety net. And a great way to do that is to deem great masses of this country as disposable people.

Sarah Kendzior:

That is what we're rejecting and I think we're certainly in no way alone in that. I think the majority of this country, in fact, rejects that kind of nihilistic, cruel, selfish, awful way of treating humanity, when it's taken that far. Obviously, this delegation from Texas rejects it as well. What sometimes boggles my mind is that I think we all see this happening, and of course, after a pandemic, a sense of paralysis can seep in, a sense of fear of, "What do I do?" and we're dealing with so many crises at once that it can be very overwhelming.

Sarah Kendzior:

I definitely see citizens pushing back in the ways that they can, but it's so rare that we really see elected officials taking a bold action in the way that these Texas House Democrats have. You're exactly right that that's what we need more of, and it needs to be directed at the other officials who do have the ability to make profound change in this country and are choosing not to. They're choosing to deny people the right to vote, they're choosing to uphold the filibuster.

Sarah Kendzior:

These are all deliberate choices that they are making that are going to affect hundreds of millions of lives, and they don't care, because they're only thinking about their own, and their own insular network.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. To be completely clear, when I'm calling for a new civil rights movement, I'm not speaking to Black/Brown communities who are living in a constant state of a civil rights movement in order to protect themselves, protect their children. The whole *1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones that terrifies the far-right, that terrifies the Robert E. Lees of today, that's the story of progress in America as told through Black and Brown communities defending themselves through constant, continuous movements for civil rights.

Andrea Chalupa:

Who I'm speaking to directly is the federal government, is Joe Biden and every single person around him, including his family, every single member of Congress, their staff, their family, their assistants, their assistants' assistants. It's the federal intervention that is needed. That is what we need when I say we need a new civil rights movement.

Andrea Chalupa:

Lyndon B. Johnson, that rat bastard from Texas, you can say what you will about him—he was a racist, he was ridiculous, he was over the top, whatever—he made civil rights a priority of his legacy. He said, "We are going to get her done." And he did. Biden now just gave a speech saying, what the Republicans are doing... He just gave a speech in Philadelphia, which is symbolic, of course, and he's saying that it's now time to build a coalition for voting rights, we need to fight the undemocratic authoritarian efforts of the Republican Party.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's all well and good. But that coalition needs to happen yesterday. This is beyond a moonshot. This is the federal government, once again, desperately needing to step in and stop the bleeding before it's too late, before America becomes Missouri. Because when you look at Texas, and when you listen to Beto give his explanations of what's happening in Texas, the votes are there. The voters are there across Texas. It's the horrific cage, the far-right Republican cage they're trapped under that is gaming the system against them.

Andrea Chalupa:

That can very well happen on a federal level. That's when you start getting emergency referendums from states like California and New York State saying, "We don't want this. We're hardcore blue states. We don't want to be a part of this. We don't want to be stuck under Mitch McConnell's Kentucky any longer. Why are we subsidizing them with our tax dollars?" That's when you get down a very dangerous, slippery slope of greater division and greater tensions.

Andrea Chalupa:

Greater voting rights for all is ultimately unifying for the country because it ensures that the majority voice is heard and that we're not suffering and trapped for God knows how long under a tyranny of the minority. The only way you achieve that, as has happened throughout history, is federal intervention. You need to have the president, his entire team, the staunchest allies across both chambers of Congress fighting tooth and nail for civil rights. That's how you get a huge wave of intervention, progress and hope. We're not going to get that without substantial effort and commitment and good trouble in the halls of Congress by the elected officials and their staff themselves. It is time for the good trouble to be spread to the highest offices of the land, or we're cooked.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, and just on the Missouri note, I just want to note in this regard that here, federal intervention to ensure voting rights is actually a states' rights issue. Like in my state, in Missouri, citizens of Missouri overwhelmingly voted for progressive ballot initiatives. Among these voters were people who are independent or Republican. Most people, including me, in this state are independent. We're not in either party.

Sarah Kendzior:

We voted for labor unions, we voted to clean up elections, we voted for a higher minimum wage, we voted to get dark money out of Missouri politics, and the GOP legislature disregarded all of our votes, all of our preferences, everything we did and just said like, "Fuck it, screw you, we're not doing it." That is what they want to do now with your actual votes in the next election. That's what's going to happen in Georgia, is that you will vote in an election and they will just decide, "We're throwing out your votes for candidates as well," not just ballot initiatives, but actual candidates.

Sarah Kendzior:

That is a violation of your state's rights. We're not saying that every state by necessity, by federal intervention, is going to turn blue. I'm pretty sure that if Missouri managed to get its voting rights back, which have been lost due to the way that our legislature base, our state wouldn't be as red as it has a reputation for being, it would be what it used to be, honestly, back in 2006, a purpley state with an increasingly red Republican bent.

Sarah Kendzior:

But that is not what we are now. We have done an entire episode about Missouri as a microcosm of the American future. We interviewed Lindsey Simmons, who's a woman who ran for office here and has a lot of insight on the situation. I wrote about this in *Hiding in Plain Sight*. Trust me, you do not want this situation, but also don't be tricked by this argument that somehow this is some broad, unnecessary federal intervention. It is a very necessary federal intervention to protect the rights of people living under oppressive state legislatures.

Sarah Kendzior:

We do not deserve to have our rights taken away, whether it's our policy preferences or our votes themselves. We absolutely don't deserve this and we're at the point where, yes, we do need the Biden administration to step in, because we've lost our democracy on a microcosm level and we're about to lose it on a national level in 2022-2024. That is the road we've been going down a long time.

Sarah Kendzior:

You can actually stop this and turn it around if you have bravery, if you have will, if you have regard for others, if you want to be something other than the transition president to autocracy. You can, in fact, do this and it's your obligation to, and hopefully they will. Anyway, on that happy note, you want to talk about Erik Prince?

Andrea Chalupa:

I want to talk about Lyndon B. Johnson for a second.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs] Okay. Get a little cleanser in there.

Andrea Chalupa:

Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote this great book on leadership, where she compares LBJ, Teddy Roosevelt, FDR and the traumas in the early childhoods and how that may have shaped their leadership styles and the big political battles they went and lost. In that book, she said how LBJ, because of his mother, was able to recite the alphabet at the age of two.

Andrea Chalupa:

When I read that, I was like, oh, hell no, I'm going to make sure my daughter can recite the alphabet by the age of two, so I've been competing with baby LBJ and that's how I've been passing my time during this pandemic is teaching my toddler the alphabet. I'm proud to say that today on her second birthday, she came up to me and she sang the alphabet song all the way through, for the first time.

Andrea Chalupa:

Take that LBJ, wherever you are. That's just my weird pandemic brain doing what I can to cope. All right, so on with the apocalypse. What's next?

Sarah Kendzior:

Erik Prince, dude. You have some Erik Prince news for us.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yes, the Prince of darkness. All right. From Simon Shuster, a great reporter who covers Ukraine and Russia. Simon Shuster is out with this damning deep dive into Erik Prince working with known Russian agents to try to gain a major foothold in Ukraine's defense industry. This is horrific, obviously.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm going to read from this now because it's important. I will emphasize at the end of this piece why it's so important. Reading now from Simon Shuster's piece in *Time*, which we'll link to in our show notes for this episode, which you can find as always on our Patreon page for this episode. Quoting now, "Erik Prince hoped to hire Ukraine's combat veterans into a private military company. Prince also wanted a big piece of Ukraine's military industrial complex, including factories that make engines for fighter jets and helicopters. His full plan, dated June 2020 and obtained exclusively by *Time*, includes a roadmap for the creation of a vertically integrated aviation defense consortium that could bring \$10 billion in revenues and investment."

Andrea Chalupa:

"The audacity of the proposal fit with Prince's record as a businessman. For nearly a quarter century, the former Navy SEAL has been a pioneer in the private military industry, raising armies in the Middle East and Africa, training commandos at his base in North Carolina, and deploying security forces around the world for the State Department and the CIA. Under the Trump administration, Prince's family, a powerful clan of right-wing Republican donors from Michigan saw their influence rise. Prince's sister, Betsy DeVos, was appointed Secretary of Education, while Prince himself leveraged contacts in the White House to chase major deals around the world."

Andrea Chalupa:

The article goes on to say that in the fall, in 2007, "a group of Prince's soldiers-for-hire shot up a crowded square in Baghdad, killing 17 civilians and wounding 20 others. Several of the gunmen were sentenced to decades in US prisons for their roles in the massacre. Trump pardoned four of them in his final weeks in office. Prince's testimony in Congress about the incident drove a national debate about the privatization of war, turning him, at the age of 38, into the defiant face of the modern day mercenary."

Andrea Chalupa:

"In the wake of those killings, Blackwater lost a \$1 billion contract to guard US diplomats and officials in Iraq. But the company rebranded and continued to thrive. The Obama administration granted major contracts to Prince's firm to provide security in conflict zones. Prince's interests expanded well beyond the military sector. He traded oil and minerals in Africa. He assembled a private army for his friend, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. He prepared a force in Somalia to combat pirates in the Gulf of Aden. He helped train a hit squad for the CIA."

Andrea Chalupa:

“When Trump took office Prince called on the new administration to privatize the war effort in Afghanistan, publicly pitching a plan that would let contractors handle many of the US military's functions.”

Andrea Chalupa:

Now, to get to the big horrifying nut of the story, this report in *Time*, which is based on several sources and documents, goes on to say, "The documents describe a series of ventures that would give Prince a pivotal role in Ukraine's military industry and its ongoing conflict with Russia, which has taken more than 14,000 lives since it began seven years ago.”

Andrea Chalupa:

[sigh] Right. Ukraine is under Prince's lobbying efforts. He's trying to get Ukraine to essentially hand over a meaningful chunk of its military to a guy who, reportedly, according to *The Washington Post*, "Held a secret Seychelles meeting to establish a Trump-Putin back channel. This back channel was a focus of Mueller's investigation and discussed in the Mueller report, complete with several redactions.”

Andrea Chalupa:

From *US News* with some additional color from me, "According to the Mueller report, George Nader, an advisor to the United Arab Emirates Crown Prince, arranged a meeting in the Seychelles between Erik Prince and Kirill Dmitriev, Head of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, in 2016 after the presidential election during the transition period.”

Andrea Chalupa:

Now, I want to point out, George Nader-

Sarah Kendzior:

Pedophile.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right, Mr. QAnon himself, the guy who set up the meeting, has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for child sex charges. Back to the *US News* article: “Mueller said Prince portrayed the eight years of the Obama administration in a negative light, and said he looked forward to a new era of cooperation and conflict resolution. Prince told Dmitriev that he often provided Bannon with policy papers. After the meeting, he told Nader that he would inform Steve Bannon about his discussion with Dmitriev and conveyed that, ‘someone within the Russian power structure was interested in seeking better relations with the incoming administration.’” There is your Kremlin back channel, courtesy of Erik Prince.

Andrea Chalupa:

Erik Prince, aligned with Trump, trashing Obama—which the Russians would have loved, given Obama sanctions—now wants to become a major player in Ukraine's military industry. He's still trying. This is like Rupert Murdoch, decades ago, coming to America and saying, "Hey, I want to start Fox News." And now, here we are. The massive amount of destruction Erik Prince would unleash on Ukrainians is horrifying. Erik Prince should be banned from Ukraine. He will profit from exploiting the veterans, the desperation of their situation, as veterans try to heal from their wounds, and he wants to go in and exploit them—to

not only exploit any adrenaline addiction they might have, their desperate need for money—to keep them in war as an evil mercenary. This is horrific. He's on both sides of the issue here. The article clearly shows how he's working with known Russian agents to land these big military contracts in Ukraine. More from this chilling, chilling *Time* article:

Andrea Chalupa:

“Prince's choice of allies in Kyiv, two men with ties to Russia raised particular alarm. His Ukrainian business partner is Andrii Artemenko, who made headlines in 2017 by offering the Trump administration a ‘peace plan’ for the war in Ukraine that envisioned ways for the US to lift sanctions against Russia.” Yeah, I bet that's definitely what the Kremlin had in mind for a peace plan.

Andrea Chalupa:

“Another Prince ally in Kyiv was Andrii Derkach, a Ukrainian legislator whom the US has accused of being an ‘active Russian agent.’ Both Artemenko and Derkach worked to advance Prince's business ventures in Ukraine last year. ‘We had to wonder...’ —This is a quote from the article—” “We had to wonder, is this the best sort of partnership we can get from the Americans? This group of shady characters working for a close ally of Trump?’ says Novikov, the former aide to Ukraine's president. ”It felt like the worst America had to offer.” This man speaks the truth.

Andrea Chalupa:

“Those concerns only heightened when, at a pivotal moment in negotiations, one of Prince's associates proffered in writing a ‘participation offer’ that Novikov considered an attempted bribe.” Now, I want to point out how remarkable it is that the Ukrainians resisted all these pressures, from Trump's extortion to Erik Prince's team bribing and all that. All the pressures... and Giuliani running amok throughout the country. I have to acknowledge Ukraine, a country that I have studied for many years now, including corruption. I've been outspoken against corruption in Ukraine, often getting criticized by other Ukrainians in the diaspora for peddling Russian propaganda, because how dare you call out Ukraine when it's struggling with so many challenges at the moment?

Andrea Chalupa:

I've always been angrily outspoken on the comical, surreal levels of corruption still plaguing Ukraine. Ukraine is an enchanting nation, it's a beautiful nation. The people are some of the most creative, resilient, inspiring people on the planet. I strongly urge everyone to go there as a tourist and experience the country. All countries have issues and corruption is the issue of Ukraine, as well as Russia. It's a very dangerous issue there as well.

Andrea Chalupa:

But tourists are largely safe there, because the war is on the very outer edge. With that said, I have had my moments of mental breakdowns over corruption in Ukraine and how frustrating it is, and how depressing. But major kudos to Ukraine for resisting all of this for so long.

Andrea Chalupa:

I think the reason why they're able to is because there must have been American and European officials who care deeply about democracy in Ukraine and countering Kremlin aggression who were urging Ukrainian officials to just hold on, to hold the line and not give in to this. I have no doubt that as this one source that I just quoted from the article said, Trump's Kremlin clown car trying to set up business in

Ukraine was probably so jarring, compared to what they were used to from the Obama days and for so long before that, that they were probably like, “Who are these clowns? They're more corrupt than we are. They're more comically corrupt than even we are.”

Andrea Chalupa:

I think also just the fact that Ukrainians have a very strong Spidey Sense when it comes to countering Russian aggression. And Trump and Putin being so deeply aligned—so clearly aligned—was also a major factor here. They were very careful. All those factors combined, Ukraine survived Trump, thank God. I just want to emphasize that for everyone, and they deserve full US and EU support for having withstood some immense pressure.

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm just so proud of that and grateful. Now, back to the article: “As the deals ran into resistance from the government in Ukraine, Prince's allies faced bigger problems in New York City, where both Artemenko and Derkach are now under criminal investigation. The US Attorney in the Eastern District of New York declined to comment on the investigation, which is reportedly focused on whether the two men were involved in a suspected Russian plot to sway the 2020 presidential election. Prince does not appear to be a focus of that investigation. But Artemenko tells Time that federal investigators have questioned him about his relationship with Prince.” Hmmm. That's very interesting.

Andrea Chalupa:

So, here's the bottom line. When you have your hands in both sides of the conflict and you're making a ton of money off of war and instability, you're endangering the entire planet. Anyone who stands in the way of peace, anyone who profits from conflict, cannot be trusted. I repeat: Erik Prince was working with Russian agents to try to gain a major stakehold in Ukraine's military, and he's still trying to get a foothold. He's continuing to push for some sort of deal.

Andrea Chalupa:

Even if you're an atheist, you look at a global mercenary like Erik Prince and think, “This guy is straight out of the book of Revelation.” This is Armageddon level evil, because Erik Prince needs war, conflict and instability. Peace is bad for business. Erik Prince is biblical levels of dangerous and I hope US prosecutors are on this guy.

Andrea Chalupa:

Why is this significant? Because, dear God, you have Putin who's still at it, who's not being countered enough by the West, who just came out with a big piece on the Kremlin's website, claiming that Russians and Ukrainians are one, they share a single history. History is very much a weapon on the frontlines against democracy. We see that very clearly with the Republicans and critical race theory in the US. Putin is doing the same thing against Ukraine. He wants to merge with Ukraine. He doesn't think Ukraine is a country. He wants to merge with Belarus. He wants to bring back the Soviet Union. He wants to bring back the Russian Empire.

Andrea Chalupa:

He's pushing all this, this unity narrative, even though Kyiv—the Jerusalem of the Slavs, because the big Christianity for Ukraine and Russia and Belarus sprang from Kyiv—Kyiv is centuries older than the existence of Moscow. Kyiv is the big brother. Kyiv is where the great Slavic kingdoms were born. Kyiv gave

birth, centuries later, to Moscow. He's reversing all that and trying to colonize Ukraine's history and claim it for its own.

Andrea Chalupa:

This is extremely dangerous because what Putin is doing here is what Erik Prince is trying to do business wise. It's the exact same concept. They're both essentially trying to colonize and invade Ukraine, furthering the Kremlin's interests. Whether Erik Prince sees this as a straight up business transaction and greed is good, whether he realizes this or not, this is what he is in effect doing by working with alleged Russian agents to try to set up shop and make himself right at home in Ukraine's defense industry. This is dangerous for Ukraine, it's dangerous for Ukrainians autonomy, it's dangerous for the stability of Europe, it's dangerous for the stability of the world.

Andrea Chalupa:

If we don't stop a rampant mercenary like Erik Prince, who is working with China across Africa, setting up operations with all types of authoritarian countries... This guy needs war in order to stay in business. Peace is against his bottom line. What are you guys doing, federal prosecutors in the US? Dig into him, bring him to heel, bring him to justice. He is a danger to all of us.

Andrea Chalupa:

Think about what we just went through with the Sackler family and opioids. They needed people to be addicted. They needed that money coming in for their products. Addiction is good for business. Greed is good. War is good. War is good for business. Think of Erik Prince as a Sackler family now, but please, unlike the Sackler family, actually bring Erik Prince to justice.

Sarah Kendzior:

Erik Prince has been a war criminal—a prominent war criminal—for a third of my life. He came to national prominence because of Blackwater and, in particular, because of the 2007 massacre when Blackwater soldiers fired on an unarmed crowd. They killed 14 people, including two children. In the midst of all the horrors that we have experienced over the last year, I had forgotten until you mentioned it, that one of Trump's many, many pardons that he gave at the end of his administration (this was on December 24th, 2020) was of four of those security guards from Blackwater who participated in this massacre, who were, just like Erik Prince, utterly unapologetic.

Sarah Kendzior:

When it happened, we covered it because we were trying to figure out the significance of it. Obviously, part of that significance is the obvious fact that the Trump administration approves of war crimes, wants to make war crimes not crimes. This honestly goes into broader US policy debate about the International Criminal Court, for example. Ilhan Omar's comments, which I think are very justified, about the fact that the US remains as impunity, remains immune from prosecution for a lot of this, but these guys were actually punished.

Sarah Kendzior:

Joe Biden actually had a role in making sure these guys were punished in 2015. Trump went on to pardon them. We were trying to parse the significance of it beyond the general embrace of a war criminal mentality. At that time, we were nervous about Trump going to war with Iran because there were a lot of indications of that from Pompeo, from Kushner, from Esper, the Department of Defense Secretary who

resigned very suddenly, and Barr, who had resigned very suddenly. We were like, “Well, they're about to do something extremely illegal and very violent, that even the worst people in this administration don't want to be involved in it.”

Sarah Kendzior:

It did not turn out to be a war in Iran, it turned out to be another thing we were worried about, in part because everybody participating in it was telling everyone they were going to do it, which was the violent, seditious attack on the Capitol on January 6th. One thing I've wondered the whole time is what involvement Erik Prince and his backers, his team of operatives, had in that. Because to me, it had a lot of the hallmarks of an Erik Prince operation. There were a lot of people involved in that attack that were former military, that are fans of Prince himself.

Sarah Kendzior:

Recently, there was news that broke about another Erik Prince operation which is that he had inserted spies—a network of ultra right-wing operatives—into Democratic campaigns, some of which were found out and ousted by those campaigns and some weren't. This was in Wyoming and other areas. This is a Jack of all trades kind of guy. This is a guy who is good at espionage, good at war crimes. He comes from an incredibly wealthy family. As Andrea mentioned, he is the brother of Betsy DeVos, and the DeVos family and the Prince family, this is a vast family fortune that he is part of. They wield incredible influence, and yet he never faces prosecution.

Sarah Kendzior:

He didn't face it over Blackwater. He didn't face it for the long list of illicit or illegal international interventions and war crimes that Andrea was reading about from the article. He was not thoroughly investigated for his role in the 2016 election, for his meetups not just with Russians but with operatives from Israel, from Saudi Arabia, from other Gulf states. It's a really long list. This is a central player.

Sarah Kendzior:

Even on our own show, honestly, on Gaslit Nation, I don't think we've covered him as much as maybe we should have, and it's in part because he tends to go even behind the headlines. He's not covered by the mainstream media as much as he should have been. And that is one of the reasons he gets away with it. But this is the time to look at him clearly, to put all of these pieces together. All of the worst actors in the countries that we discuss on this show are working in tandem. They have managed to get over differences that may have divided them decades ago and they are working as a syndicate.

Sarah Kendzior:

As I said just now, this includes Russia. It includes the most corrupt actors in Ukraine (the types of people who would hire operatives like Paul Manafort). It includes many of the Gulf states. It includes Israel (groups like Black Cube, Psy-Group, etc.). It includes the worst actors in the UK, as well as digital teams like Cambridge Analytica or whatever they rebrand themselves as. That's something else to watch out for, of course. Blackwater rebranded itself as Academy. They sprout out under different names, different corporations, different administrations, but they all are moving toward a common goal and that goal is annihilatory. That goal is profit for themselves, protection for themselves, living above the law, making elite criminal impunity, basically the official doctrine of respective nations, and leaving the rest of us to rot.

Sarah Kendzior:

It's profoundly dangerous. Why they're not prosecuted, why they're not taken more seriously as a threat to democracy, to sovereignty, to stability is a major question, and I wish more folks were asking it.

Andrea Chalupa:

You know how we're always checking in to see if Henry Kissinger is dead yet? It's like, how is everyone dying and Henry Kissinger is still alive? Death is not liberation. They keep multiplying and getting worse. The point is, these destructive knuckleheads are not going away, they're just getting started. And they are more potent than the Kissingers that came before them because they've done so much in their short lives to unleash so much destruction on the planet. It's about damn time that those we've entrusted with our votes, that we brought to power, did something—at this point, anything—to investigate them fully, hold them accountable, and contain these destructive forces once and for all.

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth Teller level or higher.

Sarah Kendzior:

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 Oil Change International, an advocacy group supported with a generous donation from the Greta Thunberg Foundation, that exposes the true costs of fossil fuels and facilitates the ongoing transition to clean energy.

Andrea Chalupa:

We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Syria. Donate at rescue.org, and if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to The Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org. If you want to see—confirm the fact—that orangutan is pronounced correctly, go to the Merriam Webster Dictionary.

Andrea Chalupa:

Gaslit Nation is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon, it keeps us going, and you can also subscribe to us on YouTube.

Sarah Kendzior:

Our production managers are Nicholas Torres and Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

Andrea Chalupa:

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Sarah Kendzior:

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Andrea Chalupa:

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