

Gaslit Nation Transcript  
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“Heading for the Light”

Sarah Kendzior:

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the best sellers, *The View for Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the upcoming book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, which is out on September 13th and available for pre-order now. And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world. Today, we are going to be talking to my fellow Missouri resident, Jason Kander. Jason Kander is a veteran of the war in Afghanistan and the first millennial ever elected to statewide office. He was the secretary of state for my state, Missouri, and ran for Missouri Senate in 2016. I voted for him enthusiastically—a rare moment for me—and was sad when he narrowly lost to Roy Blunt. Jason then contemplated running both for president and running for mayor of his hometown of Kansas City before leaving politics to take care of his mental health, which is what he discusses in his new memoir, *Invisible Storm: A Soldier's Memo of Politics and PTSD*. He has also worked for organizations protecting voting rights and veterans rights. And the royalties of his book, *Invisible Storm*, will go to the Veterans Community Project, a nonprofit organization serving homeless and at-risk veterans, so all of you should go out and buy this book now. It's a fantastic book and a fantastic cause. So Jason, welcome to *Gaslit Nation*.

Jason Kander:

Thank you for having me. Thanks for the very kind introduction. I appreciate it.

Sarah Kendzior:

So I just wanna say first, I told you this privately, but I truly loved this book. I was deeply moved by it. I was reading it in public one day and was crying in public openly. It's honest in a way that I thought was truly brave. It's very raw. It's very personal. For those who haven't read the book yet, *Invisible Storm* discusses the consequences of war and politics in a broad sense, but it is at heart a memoir, a memoir that is both relatable to anyone who has struggled with PTSD and also unique to the author's experience. So Jason, you've written books before, but none quite like this. What inspired you to write *Invisible Storm*?

Jason Kander:

Yeah. Well, first of all, thanks for saying all that stuff. I really appreciate it. It has been really gratifying the way people have responded to the book. Obviously, you know, the book's done well, it's done the whole bestseller thing, but what's more gratifying is to get responses like that, especially from... I've gotten from a lot of folks, not just veterans but just all sorts of different folks about the way they felt seen by the book, the way some people have told me that they felt like they understood a family member now in a

way that they hadn't before and that sort of thing. So the reason I wrote it is really for that exact purpose, which is that this is the book that I feel like I needed to read 14 years ago when I came home from Afghanistan, but it didn't exist.

And then it still didn't exist when I started writing it a year and a half ago, which is why I wrote it. I mean, I really think that had this book been available to me back then, I think I would've read it. I think I would've gone to get help then, and I think I wouldn't have allowed my trauma to be as corrosive as it was because, you know, I waited almost 11 years before I went to get help and that just made my mental health situation a lot worse. And so I really just wrote it because I figured there's people out there who, if they read it, they'll go get help after they read it. And that has been the case, which has been great.

Sarah Kendzior:

That's great to hear. No, I'm happy that it's gotten the response that it has. One of the things I wanna ask you about is obviously the book is particularly about your trauma and about veterans' trauma in general, but we're living now in this era of collective trauma caused by a number of external causes. I mean, for example, on the day you and I were originally supposed to do this interview, St. Louis was hit with a once in a millennium flood, the worst flood in St. Louis' history. And then other areas of the region were hit with similar climate disasters; Kentucky, Death Valley. That catastrophe was part of a broader climate crisis and it's about one of the existential threats that we're facing; a global pandemic, rising autocracy, an unpunished coup, rampant gun violence, deep institutional corruption, the worst income inequality since the Gilded Age, perhaps surpassing the Gilded Age. There are times where I feel like all of the crises of the 20th century are hitting us at once, revived in the 21st. And I just was wondering, you know, how is this kind of mass trauma of external factors affecting people, particularly given your own expertise, how is it affecting our national politics?

Jason Kander:

Yeah, I think you're right on, I think it's affecting it profoundly and I think it's because most people are not [00:05:30] digesting what's going on as trauma because they're looking at it and they're doing what so many people who have experienced trauma do regardless of whether it was something that happened to them individually or something like what we're seeing going on in our country right now. They're just sort of denying the idea that they've experienced anything. So for me, when I initially wrote this book, I felt like I was writing it for anybody who had trauma, right? Whether they had lost a loved one, been to war, been in a car accident, had a divorce, survived cancer. I mean, whatever, right? And I do feel like it's helped a lot of those people. What I didn't realize until after the book came out and I started to do the book tour and I started to hear from a lot of people who were reading it that it really also is important for this time we're living in, because the thing that is happening and that's affecting our politics is, look, it can be traumatic just to watch the news.

Jason Kander:

Like I have friends who... The day the book came out, I did *Morning Joe* and then I did the *11th hour*. So I did these two MSNBC shows and I had a few friends who texted me that night and they were like, "Man, I caught both of those. You were great." And I texted back, "Thank you. We should talk about your news diet" because if you're watching cable news from morning to late evening, it's affecting your mental health. And that's what I think is happening in our politics is, on a lot of these issues—gun violence is a good example—I think that there's a lot of avoidance going on. One of the things I learned about in therapy is that, you know, I had been avoiding my more traumatic memories and emotions and therefore not experiencing emotion, not processing emotion and memories.

Jason Kander:

And that was causing me all sorts of other problems. Well, when I look at conspiracy theories about gun violence, when I look at the way people just kind of either don't buy into a conspiracy theory or maybe just sort of won't talk about school shootings, pretend they don't happen and only wanna talk about the second amendment, I see a lot of avoidance in that. I see a lot of people going, whether they realize it or not, "I don't think I'll be handling that trauma. I don't think I will be addressing that trauma or acknowledging it because I don't want to feel it." And I think that profoundly affects our politics and limits our ability to talk about things.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, I agree. I think there's also... There's a deficit of empathy, but I think it's rooted in a sense of abandonment, because people are witnessing these things. They're witnessing how victims of school shootings are treated with cynicism, with denial or with a sense of futility, even from our officials who sort of throw their hands in the air and they're like, "Oh, another shooting. What are we gonna do? We've been through this before." But it's traumatic to witness that, too. It's traumatic to witness that sense of abandonment. I have more questions for you about the media, but just any comments on that?

Jason Kander:

Yeah. Look, I think it really does go back to the idea that of the lack of empathy. Certainly there are actors on our political stage right now who just don't have empathy. There's no question that there are just, as you said, autocrats. There's just bad people right now. Not everybody, but there are some. And then there are some, I think, like among average voters, look, there's plenty of people in our state who are just looking at it and going, "In order for me to have empathy, I have to feel that. And there's so much else going on and coming at me in the news or in my life," you know, you mentioned income inequality, that means that a lot of people are dealing with a lot of stuff at home. We just came through a pandemic, as you mentioned. And then on top of that, a lot of people are just like, "No, I'm not going to deal with that. I know it happened. I'm not gonna watch any of that footage. I'm not gonna acknowledge any of that. I'm not gonna read any of those articles." And that affords them the opportunity not to extend

empathy to it. And they're not doing it always on purpose, but I do think that's a big part of the lack of empathy.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think the way it's monetized, it's almost commercialized, you know, where we have these cycles of violence and then these kind of predictable portrayals, in particular for Black Americans talking about this, about the commercialization of Black death and instances of police brutality, and I think that that whole sort of predatory environment contributes to it as well. One of the things that I thought was really interesting about your book and it actually made me really trust your book, that this is a very honest memoir, is when you talked about the temptation of fame and you talked about the allure of media interviews and the kind of adrenaline rush that a person can get from being in the spotlight. Can you elaborate on that, on the dark side of that, on the dangers of fame and the pursuit of fame?

Jason Kander:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the things for me in the book is that I didn't want anybody to read it and go, "Well, what's wrong with me that Kander did this, and I did this other thing in response to my trauma?" So there are people who have read the book who, you know, their self medication was narcotic. I mean, they turned to using drugs. And I didn't want anybody to read the book and go, "Okay, well, how come I did that and Kander didn't do that? What's wrong with me?" So that's why I wanted to be really candid and honest about the fact that maybe I would have turned to that if I hadn't had something else right in front of me, because my career as a politician meant that I had that adrenaline rush available to me because I could go give a big speech.

Jason Kander:

I could go on TV, I could go give a high stakes interview. And what I ended up doing was piecing together, threading together one endorphin high after another from this, and I can remember at one point saying, as I was thinking about whether to run for president or just go ahead and decide to run for mayor instead, I remember saying out loud, "I just have to keep going. I can't stop" and it was because if I stop getting these endorphin highs, then I'm just gonna be alone with myself and my disruptive memories and my intrusive thoughts. I didn't have that language at the time. I just was like, "I have to keep going." I felt like if I don't keep going, I'll die. And had I not had that career and had that drug, so to speak, in front of me, who knows what I would've chosen to do instead. And so I wanted to, to include that to make sure people understood that though my experience is unique enough to afford me the opportunity to write a book about this and get people to read about trauma by telling them a story of somebody who pretty much ran for president with a secret psychological disorder, which, you know, gets people in the door to read the book, that at the same time my experience was still pretty universal.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's important, too, for that corrosive influence of media attention, of social media attention to be noted because we're living in this era where I think the kind of struggles that celebrities would deal with—and this sounds very *Behind the Music*, but, you know, it's a legitimate thing to be kind of dehumanized, turned into a virtual object—are things regular folks are also struggling with without the tools to manage it. And it's far more dangerous, I think, for somebody's soul than it's led on. That pursuit is encouraged and it's certainly encouraged through our political kind of stan culture, which I think has replaced the broader pop monoculture that our generation used to have [laughs], until the internet split it up.

Jason Kander:

Yeah, we didn't used to define ourselves by which politician was our favorite, right? Which, I don't know that that's good or bad, but you're absolutely right that that is a huge change. I think that the other way that this relates to everybody, whether they're engaged in politics as an activist, a politician, or just as a voter, is that we live in this day and age where, from Instagram to TikTok to Twitter, everybody has a public persona, it seems. There are some people who are—good for them—completely off of social media, but for the most part, everybody seems to have a public persona and so this plays out to some degree. And for me, I was in this sort of strange situation, I guess, looking back—or unique, I should say—in that because of the way my parents raised me and because they equipped me with this rimming Kander self-confidence that I now see in my son and I don't know if it's genetic or in the way our family raises kids, but it's there.

Jason Kander:

I still had that even when I was at my lowest point from PTSD, but what PTSD had done is it had given me such an incredibly low image of myself as a human being that I had these two parts of me going in opposite directions. I felt that I was an irredeemable piece of shit as a human and I was convinced of it by 10 years into untreated PTSD. But I absolutely at the same time simultaneously knew that I was the most talented politician on the planet [laughs] and I believed these things equally. And so the media attention, the fame, that sort of stuff, looking back, I was using that as a salve. I was taking my very high level of self confidence and trying to use it to sort of treat the wound that was my self-esteem. And eventually it just... It wasn't stopping the bleeding anymore.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, absolutely, and I appreciate you being so open about that. That's a tough thing, I think, to reconcile, just mentally. When you have that kind of high public profile, you get all that praise and then inside is another story. Speaking of false impressions, I definitely wanna talk to you about our state of Missouri and the kind of rhetoric that's been aimed at it lately. I've appreciated your tweets and interviews clearing a lot of this up. We've lived for years in a state with a very conservative legislature, which has led in recent years to folks from outside our state labeling us as “red state people”. It's usually liberals from states like New York or California that are doing this. We've seen them pushing for secession at the same time that right wing movements are also pushing for secession,

telling us that we should move, saying we deserve a dire fate simply for living in the state of Missouri.

Sarah Kendzior:

They treat us like a monolith, an inferior monolith. And this has just been amped up since the repeal of *Roe v. Wade* and that kind of rhetoric was certainly aimed in my direction. And it's just a tough state to live in, especially with a parent as a parent, especially looking to the future, you know? And so I was just wondering, what do you think about this and are you planning to hold down the fort out in the West as I am here in St. Louis in the East with no intention of leaving?

Jason Kander:

Yeah, no, we're not going anywhere. I mean, my kids are sixth generation Kansas Citians. And it is interesting. You and I have both sort of batted down some of this stuff on social media, sometimes like in tandem. What I think it all comes back to is the fact that most of the political conversation in this part of the country—basically in the Midwest and in the South, and people debate which one we are so I'll just say both—I think what most people are really interested in is whether or not their kids are gonna have to leave. Right? So while people are saying to us, "Why do you still live there?" We feel like... Everything is like... Like my kids are about to turn nine and two and I already have this unease, this nervousness, this anxiety about what happens when they go after college and then will they want to come back here?

Jason Kander:

Will there be opportunity? You know, I've got two of them and if they go to different places, where do we live? What do we do? I want to be around my grandkids. And so I think most of our politics in the Midwest comes down to people wanting their family to be nearby. And the problem with that is that what that gets digested as is a debate nationally, within the Democratic Party, of whether or not we should be more progressive or more moderate. And then people go, "Well, you've got Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi in charge of the House and the Senate and they're from New York and they're from California, so it must be a question of more liberal or more moderate." No. If there's a disconnect between the leadership of the party and what's really going on in the Midwest and the South, it's that our leadership is from the places that our kids go to for opportunity.

Jason Kander:

And so people miss the fact that if you want to talk about whether you're moderate or liberal or, it doesn't matter—on student loans, on healthcare, on guns—it doesn't matter. If you're gonna talk about that stuff, talk about how your side of the issue makes it more likely that people won't have to move away for opportunity. And so when people refer to us as—as you have lampooned appropriately—when they refer to us as flyover country, when they do things like that, well, it goes back to something David Axelrod has

said many times which is, “If you tell people they're not your voter, they will eventually believe you.” That's what I think we're doing over and over again, not by taking too liberal or too moderate policy positions, but by just not speaking to what most people are really concerned about.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right and it plays right into the hands of some of the cruelest and the most manipulative politicians, including our Senator, Josh Hawley. And one of the things you noted on Twitter is that this idea, proposed to us by people who don't live in our state saying that we should leave, that progressive or liberal voters or Democrats should simply leave this part of the country and abandon it—I don't exactly know how this works out economically, by the way. I look at the value of my home and then I look at like a California home or wherever they think I'll go and I'm like, Right. You know, great. I'll live in a tent. I'll live in a shack. Anyway, not the point. But Josh Hawley laid out the plan. He basically was like, “Yes, we want a permanent minority rule. We have the advantage of the electoral college” and if these states are drained of its more progressive residents, if St. Louis and Kansas city and also the liberals living in places in between who are generally ignored, if we move out, then yeah, then it's like a surrender and they get it. And that's what they want. How are people still recommending this as a pragmatic plan of action when it literally plays into the hands of the worst right-wing extremists?

Jason Kander:

I think that part comes from this really popularized... Well, this sort of sentiment on the left now that you can prove your moral purity by not associating with and in fact disconnecting your life completely from people who don't agree with you. I'm a very progressive guy, but I really can't get behind this stuff that exists at the sort of upper echelons of left activism that says you are morally compromising yourself if you remain friends with, if you engage politically with people who voted for Trump, people who have voted in ways that propagate racism. The reason I can't get with that is because I live in the middle of America where I have relationships with people who didn't vote the same as me. It's part of doing my job.

It's part of going to my place of work. It's part of living in my neighborhood. It's part of coaching my son's little league team, or I play on a baseball team. Just having friends in this part of the country means you're going to be around people who have voted in ways that you totally disagree with and don't represent your character, but where I differ... So when people are saying, “You gotta move, you, you can't compromise yourself” or people will say to me, “You shouldn't try to convince people who voted for Trump. There shouldn't be any of that. That is moral compromising.” And I'm just like, “No, it's not. It's evangelizing.” I'm not compromising myself. I'm trying to save souls. I don't see people who voted for Trump as irreparably racist, or, you know... I see them as people whose souls have been taken and obviously I'm using hyperbole here, but I just mean it's not falling in with the wrong crowd, it's missionary work is the analogy that should be used.

Sarah Kendzior:

Right. I think it also plays into this idea that people have grabbed hold of that somebody's vote in one election is somehow the culmination of their personality. It's everything about them, it's representative of something bigger, whereas in reality most Americans aren't even in a political party. Half of Americans don't vote. Of those who do vote, about half are independent and then you're left with about a 25:25 Democrat and Republican. And of course in our state, this fluidity, I think, is really pronounced. In the 2016 election where you had Greitnes versus Koster and they each had been in each other's parties at one point in time and they switched. This whole idea of, What does it mean to be a Democrat? What does it mean to be a Republican?

I don't think that that's the way most folks in Missouri define themselves at and it comes through in the ballot initiatives as well. In 2018, we had these very progressive ballot initiatives for higher minimum wage, for a clean Missouri, you know, all of these things, protection of labor unions, and everybody voted for 'em; Republicans, independents, Democrats. And then of course we then arrive at this situation where the Missouri state legislature simply ignores the will of the people and they shoot them down. And this has been happening increasingly since the time I moved here. I moved here in 2006. You're a lifelong Missourian. You've watched this state transform from a political bellwether to a bellwether of American decline. Can you explain to our audience what happened here?

Jason Kander:

Yeah. Well, first let's review the bellwether part, right? I mean, for I think a hundred years, there was not a presidential election save one where Missouri voted differently than the country and the only one where it did was Adlai Stevenson, who was from neighboring Illinois. And that was the way it worked. It was as goes Missouri so goes the nation, that kind of thing. And what changed is a couple of things. One, it used to be the case that you could take a population map, a population density map and demographic map of the United States, and lay it on top of Missouri and they almost mirrored each other. I mean, down to the fact that you had the most dense parts of your population on the east and west coast of the state, Kansas City, St. Louis or St. Louis, Kansas City, east and west.

Then with a bit of a population sort of bulge in the middle, which is Columbia, a college town. It looked exactly the same. And then demographically it looked the same. Age-wise it looked the same. And over the course of the last about 25 years or so, that has started to change. They've started to diverge. For one thing, the Latino population in the country grew. It did not grow in the same way in Missouri. The state of Missouri has aged in a way that the rest of the country hasn't, which has a lot to do with what we were talking about a few minutes ago: people moving out of the state for more opportunity and not coming back so your population is a little bit older. And then there's some cultural stuff. I mean, there's stuff like, I always say it half jokingly but I think there's something to it, that about a decade ago—maybe a little less, I can't remember—the University of Missouri officially moved into the Southeastern Conference with Auburn and Alabama and that kind of thing.

Jason Kander:



And I like to joke sometimes that it's like we joined the SEC politically, too. But there was a time, like when we were kids, when the idea of Missouri being in the SEC, people would've been like, "No." The states didn't move. They're in the same places they were. But as the culture shifted a little bit, it was like, when people thought of Missouri—including Missourians thinking of Missouri—they felt a little more akin to Arkansas than they did to Iowa, right? And so that's the sort of thing that has changed. Because I was Secretary of State, I was living in Columbia, Missouri when that happened. And I remember it going from, on football games, you'd see people dressing, you know, football Saturdays, you'd see people dressing a certain way and then the next year they joined the SEC and the uniform for women attending the games, for instance, became cowboy boots and gold dresses, which is very much more of an SEC way. So culturally—this is a lesser factor, but I just think it's kind of interesting—culturally, I think Missouri has started to see itself, particularly outside of Kansas city and St. Louis, as more Southern and therefore more conservative. But I do think that that is going back to the demographic shifts that just didn't keep pace with the rest of the country.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. I think that's true. And of course it's notable that it was Obama's election that threw off our modern day bellwether thing, although it was very close the first time around. It was like about 3,000 votes and then not close the next time. So I agree with all of that, but I think obviously there's propaganda from Fox News, there's the gutting of our local media, which causes people to go to Fox news.

Jason Kander:

I think it's good to dive in and underline for people listening who don't live in this part of the country what that really means functionally, right? Part of the reason that I think you and I feel like people are not beyond bringing back to the fold is that, to a certain extent, there are people voting Republican in this state who it is hard to see how they reach a different conclusion given their set of data that they're inundated with. Right? If you live in a rural part of this state and you don't see any yard signs for Democrats... I mean, often Democrats don't run and if they're on your ballot, they don't show up at your door. Too often, they're not running aggressive campaigns. So you feel like you don't know any, right? And then on top of that, when you turn on the radio, it is all conservative talk.

It's either conservative talk or it's religious radio or it's music. Sometimes it's the first two combined. And then, you know, every waiting room you go into, every living room you visit has Fox News on. And in your mind, you don't know any different. That's news. We see it as propaganda but if you see it as news, if you spend an hour watching Fox News and you do it with the perspective of, "I am going to accept that this is the news", if you do that, you could not logically reach another conclusion other than the one they want you to reach, because you'd be like, "Well, this is the news. This is what's happening" and you would take that data in accordingly. And so what happens when people actually do go make the progressive argument to folks, that's when you start to bend it backwards. That's when you look at states like Colorado, North Carolina and Georgia who, 20 years ago, put together a real progressive table and said, "We are going to do this over the long term. We're not gonna do it every two years. We're not gonna

look to a new candidate savior every two years and have them have to go out and define themselves, not like those other Democrats. We're going to make a sustained argument." And it can be done. I mean, those states are now swing states. Colorado is becoming, you know, less swing and more democratic now. And 15 years ago they were the opposite. So it's very possible.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, I agree. I've heard a lot of frustration, both from candidates in Missouri (Democratic candidates) and from activists and voters. They feel abandoned by the national Democratic Party. They see the situation the same as you described, that people can be reached and that our issues—our day to day issues—are often not addressed. And there are stereotypes and misconceptions about this state that really mar the ability of Democratic candidates to reach voters, especially because while on a national level states like ours tend to be ignored or demonized, places like Fox, they'll praise it. You know, we're like the glorious Heartland. We're Real America, you know, all this kind of stuff. And I think it boosts people's esteem. I'm wondering what you think the Democratic Party nationally could or should be doing in regions like ours and also what should they be doing about all of these platform issues, for example, that Biden ran on and hasn't been able to pass, either because of Senate obstinacy but also because of kind of a familiar pattern we see in Missouri, overruled by an extremist right-wing Supreme Court I think in a similar manner to the way that voters in Missouri get overruled by our extremist state legislature. People increasingly feel like they don't have a say anymore, they don't have real representation anymore. What can be done about that feeling of lost leverage?

Jason Kander:

So a couple of things. One, we have to lean into making our case about what we were talking about a few minutes ago, about making the case that the Democratic Party is the party that will make it where your family can stay together. When people look back at the 2016 election, they love to talk about how Trump came out against these free trade policies, as if people in Missouri had a spreadsheet of NAFTA and other stuff. And they were like, "Oh, well, you know, he made a lot of sense on..." No. Whether he did it on purpose or not, what they heard was him saying, "Your kids won't have to leave. And this is the reason your kids had to leave." Right? So we have to lean into messaging about what people are concerned about and we need to do it at the national level, because frankly it works nearly everywhere, but we need to focus resources here to do it.

The second thing is we have to have a sustained effort. There are people like Lara Granich, people like Stephen Webber who are engaged in this year round regardless of elections and they're putting together what I think of as the air cover in a campaign. That's the analogy to me. When you're a candidate and you're out there and the Republicans are gonna hit you on the Green New Deal, well, if there's not been any sustained messaging whatsoever about climate change in your state, then you're starting in such a difficult place. You have to either part with the national Democratic Party in order to try and grab whatever you can get as far as voters on the way down, or you

have to take it upon yourself to make the whole argument about the importance of addressing climate change, which is very hard to do for a candidate campaign because candidates have less credibility because they want something.

Jason Kander:

Whereas if you look at what the Republicans do, it's not just that they are constantly messaging over and over again in ways that we see, because they're overt. Every single time you tune into your TV and you see an ad from Amazon telling you how happy their workers are, or Walmart telling you how happy their workers are, or Koch Industries telling you all the wonderful things they're doing in the world, we need to understand that those are political ads that air year round. They are political ads for corporations and for corporate America saying corporate America is good. "You can trust us. It's okay that we have lots of power." What you don't see—because they're not resourced for it—is ads from the AFL-CIO talking not about being a member of a union, but just talking about working conditions, talking about how employees should be treated, right?

We need to take that upon ourselves. The left has to have sustained messaging year round. If you look at Georgia, it's awesome what Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock did. They're both great candidates. We act as if they just came outta nowhere and just ran these amazing campaigns. No. Stacey Abrams put in work for years to get Georgia to the place, in that case, it's the messaging piece but it's a little different because of the under-registration there, which is less of an issue here. But it doesn't matter. In Colorado, it's more messaging. In North Carolina, it's more messaging. If you put in the groundwork for years, you'll get to the point where the best candidate will win. But we have to put in the sustained work to do it and we do need national investment to get there.

Sarah Kendzior:

Absolutely. I'm gonna go back to what you were saying about families and about this being a major factor in how people vote and how people live their lives because I do think this is a deep and underlying fear and it kind of ties into some of the themes of your book, you know, where you talk about your own struggle—your mental health struggle, your political struggle—and the effect it had on your family to the point that you had your wife, Diana, writing about the situation that you experienced from her perspective. I was just curious why you guys decided to do that.

Jason Kander:

Yeah, thanks for asking. That's my favorite part of the book. In each chapter, there's a passage, like one or two pages, from Diana written by her in first person about her perspective on what was going on at that time, at the time in the story. It's my favorite part for a few reasons. One, you know, I'm not the only bestselling author in the family. My wife is too and we may as well take advantage of that. She's a great writer. She should be in the book, too. But that's the lesser of the reasons. I mean, the biggest reason is that we found out when I went to therapy that secondary post-traumatic stress

was a real thing and we hadn't even heard of it. And that's what prompted Diana to go get her own help for PTSD because even though she hadn't experienced the underlying trauma that I had experienced, just by living with me and being exposed to my symptoms all the time—my waking up in the middle of the night with night terrors, constantly feeling like we were in danger and the world was a very dangerous place—all of that contributed to the decline of her own mental health and she ended up adopting a lot of those symptoms. So we wanted people to know about that. We wanted to share her experience as well. Then the last reason was that the way the story is told in the book is I didn't want to avail myself as the narrator of the language that I had acquired in therapy because I knew that if somebody's reading the book and they haven't been to therapy, and I want them to be able to see themselves in the places where they should be able to, or see somebody they know in the places that I want them to be able to, then I can't use language from therapy.

Jason Kander:

I can't refer to feeling like you're in danger all the time as hypervigilance if I'm talking about something that happened to me before therapy. I had to return to my prior mindset and then write about it the way I would've written about it then because people can relate to the idea of like, oh, you feel like you're in danger or the world is dangerous, but hypervigilance is just a jargon. And I don't introduce that language until the third act when I get into therapy. Now, the shortcoming of that is that it means you're only getting the perspective of somebody who had untreated undiagnosed PTSD, right? And so in order to get the full picture, it's very helpful to have an occasional second narrator who can come in and say what it looked like. So when I'm talking about adjusting to life back at home, after coming home from Afghanistan and feeling kind of off and introducing a few symptoms and kind of downplaying 'em, because that's what I was doing at the time, Diana is able to come in and say, you know, "when we would get in a car, Jason, clearly his heart would race, the twitch in his eye would get worse, when we'd come to a stoplight," that I would be pressing down on a phantom gas pedal because I clearly didn't feel comfortable slowing down, it's important for her to be able to relate what I appeared to be like during those periods.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, no, I think it was really remarkable. I think it was brave of both of you to do that. And I do think that the way that you describe your struggle, I think it's gonna hit home with a lot of people. I mean, it hit home with me and I'm not gonna get into my personal stuff but there's certain passages, like when you wrote, "I felt I was destined, or more like resigned to a short life of consequence, one that mattered to others but was never really experienced by me." That hit home in a personal way. It led me to think a lot about my own life. And so I think that obviously it's had that effect on other people. You've heard that from your readers. What do you recommend, you know, for folks who are struggling with trauma or with PTSD, what is the thing you want them to know most? What would be steps that they could take now if they recognize themselves through your book?

Jason Kander:

To me, the most important thing is for people to realize, and this is what I want people to take away from the book most of all, is that posttraumatic growth is a real thing and that it's achievable, because when I think about the way we talk about trauma in this country, it is usually one of two paths, neither of which is really right. One is that PTSD is sort of a terminal diagnosis. And the reason we think that is because most media portrayals—whether they be fiction or nonfiction—of PTSD are what I refer to as PTSD porn. They are usually a combat veteran who is robbing a bank after shooting heroin and beating their spouse. And what is never portrayed is what is much more common and what I'm trying to portray through my own experience, which is, you know, if you're gonna use a combat veteran as an example, like for me, I went to treatment and I didn't kill myself and my career didn't end.

And I'm now in a phase of my life I refer to as post-traumatic growth because it's so worth it. Honestly, you have to read the book to understand how much better of a place I'm in and why I'm happy. Right? And so I want people to understand that that's a real thing, because then the other way that PTSD is portrayed is in an unspoken way where people don't show that it's PTSD and what they do is—and it's part of the American myth, I believe, that movies often, particularly the movies our generation grew up on the '80s and '90s movies—they portray the way to get over trauma as through singular acts of redemptive heroism. And as much as I love the *Top Gun* movies, I think of *Top Gun* because in the first movie Goose dies and Viper comes in and tells Maverick, he's like, "Goose is dead. You gotta get over it." And a week later, Maverick goes and he kills two bad guys over the Indian Ocean and then he throws Goose's dog tags off the deck and gets the girl and he's good to go. That's the kind of story we were told about trauma growing up, that you heal through redemption. And a lot of people, myself included, are unknowingly trying to heal themselves through redemption. I just thought, you know, if I can make this big a difference, if I can get elected to this thing, if I can accomplish this, if I can become president and save the world, you know, it was always something around the corner that was gonna offer me that redemption. But it was a Mirage. And the truth is that you've just gotta confront it and that you can go to therapy and you can get better.

And the majority of people who go commit to the treatment, the vast majority, they do get better. And like you mentioned having Diana in the book, it also makes an enormous difference in your relationships. The book is a lot of things. I think my favorite part of the book is it's really a love story about two people fighting this thing and making it through it. We've been together since we were 17. We were together before I went to Afghanistan and we've been together in the 14 years since I've come home from Afghanistan. And in that time we've been through a lot and we've come through it just as I've come through it. And so that's really the thing is I want people to be able to come to realize that you can get better. You don't cure it. It's an injury. You address it and then you manage it and there's nothing you can't do.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah. Thank you. That's wonderful advice and I hope people take that to heart. I hope they take your book to heart. We're about out of time so I saved the absolute, most critical, most important question of all for last, which is: best barbecue in Kansas City?

Jason Kander:

[laughs] The whole episode's been building to this moment.

Sarah Kendzior:

This is a Missouri hosted show. It needs to be asked.

Jason Kander:

Absolutely. Thanks. So I'm a Gates Barbecue person. I get there and I like to get asked 15 deep in line, you know, I like that experience at Gates where they say, "Yeah, you. You, what do you want? How may I help you?" And I'm always ready with my order, you know, that I want burnt end on bun with crispy fries.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yes.

Jason Kander:

So that's my number one. My wife is a Joe's Kansas City person.

Sarah Kendzior:

That's the gas station, right?

Jason Kander:

Yeah.

Sarah Kendzior:

I love that place.

Jason Kander:

I love me some Joe's Kansas City, but I have a real admiration for Mr. Gates and he's always been a good supporter, to be real honest. And I might be a little biased by that. Anyway... So I'm a Gates Barbecue

Sarah Kendzior:

Excellent advice. I think my St. Louis audience is disowning me even more than when they found out my husband was a Cubs fan.

Jason Kander:

Oh my gosh.

Sarah Kendzior:

Yeah, I know.

Jason Kander:

That is scandalous.

Sarah Kendzior:

Heresy, heresy. But yeah, I'm gonna have to check that out. I've been to Joe's. I've been to Arthur Bryant's, but that's a new one there. Well, thank you so much for coming on the show. And again, everybody get Jason's book, *Invisible Storm*. Hopefully we could have you on in the future, maybe in a more progressive and truly democratic with a small D Missouri. That would be the dream.

Jason Kander:

Awesome. Well, either way I look forward to it. Thank you, Sarah, for having me. I really appreciate it.

[theme music - roll outro credits]

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:

The St. Louis metro region has been decimated by record floods. My area, University City, was especially hard hit. To help flood victims in University City, donate at [ucityschools.org/flood](http://ucityschools.org/flood) relief. Another place to give aid is the St. Louis food bank at [stlfoodbank.org](http://stlfoodbank.org). Climate and economic crises are everywhere so continue supporting your local food bank as well.

Andrea Chalupa:

We encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine at [razomforukraine.org](http://razomforukraine.org). We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at [rescue.org](http://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](http://theorangutanproject.org).

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