

Gaslit Nation Transcript

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Artificial Intelligence and the Information Void

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/artificial-and-79369096>

[intro — music up and under, [‘Don’t Be An Asshole’ by Andrew Jones and Spirit House](#)]

Sarah Kendzior (00:42):

I'm Sarah Kendzior, the author of the bestsellers, *The View from Flyover Country* and *Hiding in Plain Sight*, and of the book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*, out now.

Andrea Chalupa (00:54):

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, the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to watch it.

Sarah Kendzior (01:09):

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

Andrea Chalupa (01:17):

AND, sorry. [laughs]. We have a song.

Sarah Kendzior (01:20):

Oh, okay.

Andrea Chalupa (01:21):

The song you just heard was, [‘Don’t Be An Asshole’ by Andrew Jones and Spirit House](#). Andrew wrote to us: “I was reading an interview a few years ago with Lucas Nelson, one of Willie Nelson's sons. He was asked what it was like growing up with his dad and he replied that his dad only had one rule: Don't be an asshole.” Very brilliant parenting advice. “In a world that has weaponized and monetized assholery until it is the unofficial credo of much of the political spectrum and half the population, it hit me like a revelation. Apparently it's a catchphrase that Willie has been associated with for a long time and he has lived it well. I wrote the first two lines, “Keep your head up, keep your head down” and the rest floated out from there. We recorded it at Spirit House Studios in North Hampton, Massachusetts live in one take.”

Andrea Chalupa (02:15):

“I've been writing and playing music with Spirit House for over 30 years. It's a collective of longtime friends and great musicians, mostly from Western Mass and the Boston area, who have been backing me up since I first started writing songs. I've also been living with HIV for all of that time, and especially in the early years, making music together was one of the things that kept me alive.” Andrew's statement about the song, ‘Don't Be an Asshole’ was simply, “There are just too many these days.” We'll post a link to our new unofficial Gaslit Nation theme song, ‘Don't Be an Asshole’ on our Twitter page and in the

show notes for this episode on our Patreon page. You can find more of Andrew in the Spirit House's music on Bandcamp at andrewjonesandspirithouse.bandcamp.com. Thank you so much Andrew and to the Spirit House for your music. If you have a song you'd like to submit, look for [the signup link on where to submit your music](#) on our Paton page for this week's episode, as well as our Twitter and Instagram. We'll be posting this stuff out there because we wanna hear from you, our wonderful listeners. And keep making music, keep making art. That's how we win. Don't let the assholes [laughs] hijack your mind, hijack your soul, hijack the love that is you. Thank you.

Sarah Kendzior (03:35):

Alright. Don't be an asshole. Sage advice and leading very well into this little introductory story that I wanna give to you. Over the weekend, I was rereading a story that I read when I was a teenager because my son, who's 12-years-old and very into sci-fi, had dug it up and he was reading it. And I wanted to take a look back because this story was written in 1967 and so much has changed since then. It's by Harlan Ellison and it is called *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream*, which could also be the new title of *Gaslit Nation*. I'm gonna read you a paragraph from it and then just discuss some of the things that I was thinking about after. So this is from *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* by Harlan Ellison.

Sarah Kendzior (04:24):

"We had given AM"—AM stands for Allied Master Computer. This is an AI sort of sentient... Well, they call it later, Aggressive Menace—"We had given AM sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But it had been trapped. AM wasn't God. He was a machine. We had created him to think, but there was nothing it could do with that creativity. In rage and frenzy, the machine had killed the human race—almost all of us—and still it was trapped. AM could not wander, AM could not wonder, AM could not belong. He could merely be. And so with the innate loathing that all machines always held for the weak, soft creatures who had built them, he had sought revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to reprove five of us for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve to diminish his hatred, that would merely keep him reminded, amused, proficient at hating man; immortal, trapped, subject to any torment he could devise for us from the limitless miracles at his command."

Sarah Kendzior (05:29):

"He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of the creature machine, with the all-mind soulless world he had become." And so I read this over the weekend and I was thinking about how it reminded me of social media tyranny, particularly in the era of Elon Musk, the era of Peter Thiel. But to my surprise, it made me think more of how much our human condition—or our anti-human condition, I should say—is self-inflicted. I reread that story thinking about AI and all the threats it poses, but what struck me most in that paragraph is that it reminded me of people, nowadays; people who have lost their individuality and their humanity in the digital age; people who have been in the belly of the beast for too long.

Sarah Kendzior (06:26):

We live in an era of artificial intelligence and fake news, and they feed off of each other. And what they devour is the human soul. We live in an era where human beings are often indistinguishable from bots, not always because AI has advanced, but because human beings are devolving. We live in a surveillance society that punishes people who express creativity and independence of mind and rewards people who spit out identical memes and hollow obedience. We live in an era of personality cults and the bot-brained or ideal conscripts serving politicians and tech lords not because they're forced to, but because they want to—for money, for attention, or maybe because they've simply forgotten how not to submit because over decades they've been incentivized to think of themselves primarily as brands. We

also live in an era of mass trauma and existential threats; from covid, climate change, authoritarianism, economic exploitation.

Sarah Kendzior (07:32):

And a lot of the time I wonder how much of the sense that people's humanity has become lost comes from a social push for people to hide that trauma. On the internet, you are punished if you reveal that you are in pain. You're punished professionally and you're punished socially. We're in an era of extreme backlash to social movements that prioritize acknowledging the pain of others, historically inflicted and ongoing wounds. We're in the fourth year of the Covid pandemic, a disease whose origins remain a mystery and which mutates to the point that it seemingly cannot be eradicated. And the response of our officials to all of this has been either, "That never happened," or, "It happened. So what? Move on. Move on and don't look back at those we're leaving behind." People may not want to present themselves as fully human in public in an environment like that because they know that in that moment of vulnerability they will receive not empathy, but derision.

Sarah Kendzior (08:39):

And so out of self-protection, people keep their pain and their humanity to themselves. But that isolation and anguish and loneliness, all of it contributes to the threat of fascism. It's weaponized by the actual fascists who prey on pain and it encourages a silent surrender among those who would normally fight fascists but are now exhausted and afraid of participating in a public sphere, privately owned by sociopaths. They are trapped in the machine. They don't rage against it, they rage within it, hearing nothing but an echo that over time becomes little more than a plaintiff cry. That is the juncture at which we are at now. *Gaslit Nation* is a show where we're supposed to report the news and since we launched in 2018, it's become harder and harder to do that. We've always seen our job as pulling apart the layers of propaganda and finding the truth within.

Sarah Kendzior (09:38):

We've always sought to contextualize ongoing political crises. And so many of our shows have involved reporting not on current events, but on the long-buried circumstances surrounding them; the history which we dug up when the powerful wanted it buried. Our first episodes in 2018 were a history of 2016. And in order to explain 2016, we had to dig into decades of prior history. We were able to do this because of the tremendous amount of information at our disposal, easily accessible through Google and through news websites that largely remained free of charge. We found communities of researchers looking into the same things we were, and people felt comfortable sharing with each other what they'd found, because the problems were so immediate and immense that a group effort was obviously needed. A group effort remains needed. But instead, what we have is deepening distrust and an informational void.

Sarah Kendzior (10:43):

For seven years, we've been hearing that we're in a "disinformation crisis." And I hate that term because it combines propaganda, lies and human error into one category. The same is true of the term "fake news", which was often a convenient way for biased media to pretend it had a record of sterling accuracy. And the same is true of the term "conspiracy theory," which throws theories about actual conspiracies together with weaponized propaganda framed as "conspiracy theory" and hopes you won't make a distinction between the two. And if you want an entire book about that, you can read my new book, *They Knew*. Back in 2016, the problem was not a disinformation crisis but a glut of conflicting information. That is not a terrible problem to have, especially if you're a good researcher with expertise and patience and you're willing to sort through it. The crisis we face now—paywalled news sites and free

propaganda, the siloing of social media, search engines that provide advertisements instead of answers—is much worse.

Sarah Kendzior (11:54):

We're not in a disinformation crisis. We are in a lack of information crisis. It makes our jobs much more difficult and leads to us reporting about our jobs instead of doing the reporting. I'm doing that right now because we are an honest show and I think honesty still means something. The autocrats don't slowly boil the frogs and water these days. They boil them in slime so that it covers our eyes. And I'm refusing to go along with any of it. Anyway, I've got topics I'm going to try to get to this week; the Fox News propaganda effort, the latest on the origins of covid; stories that all involve extremely blatant deception and a chronic lack of accountability; stories in which a multitude of people are to blame but I know it will be reduced to two sides because that is the way to simultaneously get ratings AND to let the roots of the crises remain unexamined. The criminal elite want their bought brained armies. They want their kleptocrat cheerleading squads. They want, as Harlan Ellison wrote, “belly slaves in the all-mind soulless world.” Do not let yourselves become one. It's one thing to be forced into the belly of the beast. It's another thing to enter it voluntarily. And so anyway, on with the show, unless you have some thoughts about that, Andrea.

Andrea Chalupa (13:19):

Very well said. Very well said indeed. I was just telling Sarah before we're recording that a book that has been bringing me a lot of very helpful insights and comfort is *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*. We had Deborah Cohen on the show. She's the author and history professor who wrote that brilliant page-turner of a book. And it's about the generation of journalists that covered the rise of fascism in the interwar period, and how the professional became the personal, and how what dictators ultimately want to do is to own your inner self, to own your inner world, and intrude on you at all times, basically. They want bodies, they want souls. It's this ego drive, this narcissism that they all had—Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin and so on—that couldn't be satisfied. They wanted the world and they were willing to destroy it in the process.

Andrea Chalupa (14:22):

Imagine covering that and just being around that all the time and the toll it would take on anybody personally. So that's a really gripping, gripping read because part of what I've been able to do, not so much in the Trump years because it was just way too on the nose, but with this sort of relative calm of the Biden years, I've been able to read a lot more World War II voices; novels, letters, all sorts of books of men and women grappling with fascism—either living in London during Hitler's terror bombing which is a lot like Putin's terror bombing of Ukraine—and how they grappled with it; the impact it had on their sanity, their mental health, their relationships, their marriages, their children, their own children. And it takes a toll. The times we're living in, trauma, compacting trauma obviously takes a toll... A toll.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (15:24):

A toll. It's all incredibly... [laughs] There's plenty of trolls to go around.

Sarah Kendzior:

That's a wonderful Freudian slip there.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, it takes a troll. We're living with the aftershocks of the collapse of the terror state of the Soviet Union. We're living with the aftershocks of the collapse of the terror state of South African apartheid. Those aftershocks. It's like the monster at the end of the movie you think is dead and then he reaches out for your leg and slams you down. That's what we're dealing with now. We've always said on this show, the history we get in school is processed food. It's so neatly packaged for consumption. It takes away from the chaos that history really is, and all the violent actors and the greed and the mirrors to today, right? For instance, in the years I was researching *Mr. Jones*, I was looking at, you know, why were so many idiots—especially on the left—enamored with Stalin and the great Soviet utopia?

Andrea Chalupa (16:22):

What predated that? And there really was this drive in the 1920s, this progressive error... [laughs] Sorry, this progressive—another Freudian slip, oh my God.

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

I do wanna point out that Freud was very much in vogue in the interwar period. He was *the thing*. And all of these journalists that were covering the rise of fascism—Dorothy Thompson, Francis and John Gunther, HR Knickerbocker and so on—they couldn't escape the Freudian discussions and these new languages, these new words that were given to everybody to analyze themselves. It was a big generational shift from how their parents went through life, you know, under the cover of religion and the church. But no, this new generation was very modern in the interwar period and they had Freud, Freud's disciples, and they could talk about things like the sex drive and the Oedipus complex and all these things.

Andrea Chalupa (17:13):

And they would then take Freudian framing and the psychoanalysis framing of Freud's disciples and apply that to Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, themselves, their marriages, dealing with all this stuff. It's really fascinating. One journalist interviewed some of Hitler's relatives in some backward village in Germany. What was really fascinating is that Hitler's mom was a maid to Hitler's future father. So Hitler's father was some brutal asshole, right? [laughs] Because we have this no-asshole theme of today's episode and every episode. So Hitler's father was some asshole. He had two wives; awful, drunken man. And when his second wife died, he drove to some village and picked up a maid that used to work for one of the wives and just took her in, married her. There was a massive age difference between them. And little Adolf was born and the mom clung to Adolf for any sense of... I guess relief in her miserable existence and, and pumped her son full of, "You must be great."

Andrea Chalupa (18:15):

"You must make me proud." And I don't know... All of these details that this journalist—I think it was John Gunther—got from these interviews at the relatives of Hitler's in some far-flung village, he tried to bring it to Freud to say, "Would you comment on this?" All of this is to say that we are living in these times where we have every right to be and we're obligated to focus on our own journey going through

this, as Sarah brilliantly called on us to write down what was happening back in 2016. Take note of it. Write a journal, be aware. That was like this first step of cling to your own humanity, make space for your own humanity, because that's how you're going to have the breathing room that you need to process and face and confront what's coming.

Andrea Chalupa (18:59):

It's not easy what's coming. It's not easy what's happened. It's not easy to go through trauma upon trauma. It's not easy to live your life with multiple genocides going on in other parts of the world, with the threat of covid and future pandemics, with massive income inequality, with Republican cult of deregulation and what that's doing to our drinking water, to the declining life expectancy in America and all of it, all those pressures. And obviously yes, the threat of nuclear war in World War III. It's a pressure-cooker of a time that we're in. But at the same time, there is a great deal of progress being made. And I wanna go back to my original point: Why were the 1920s such a rosy period of self-determination, of progressive movements, of so many marginalized communities finally getting their voices heard and their long fought and long sacrificed-for rights?

Andrea Chalupa (19:53):

And how was such a rosy, progressive inspiring period met by unimaginable mass death on a supercharged corporate scale as the 1930s? Remember, Put—[laughs] Putin, ha—Stalin got away with mass murdering millions in 1932-1933. Off the heels of that, Hitler starts building his first concentration camp in 1933 at the height of Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine. He saw Stalin get away with it so Hitler's like, "Okay, it's my turn now to mass murder and get away with it." So how the hell did we go from the progressive period in 1920s to the industrialized mass death of the 1930s? I'm going to tell you how, and this is an extremely important warning for today because we're seeing it play out in the United States. It happened because the elite—the people that hoarded the wealth, hoarded the opportunity, raised nepo children—what they did was they joined together with fascism to crush the left.

Andrea Chalupa(20:53):

And anything they saw as left, they labeled as "communism", they labeled as "communists", they labeled as "the threat of 1917 and the Bolshevik violent revolution", nevermind that Stalin betrayed that revolution by being a far-right extremist hardline asshole himself in so many ways. And whatever social progress was made under Stalin was done at the sacrifice of several millions of lives in several genocides. The trauma of which, and the damage and destruction of which, carries on today and drives Putin's current machinations in genocide in Ukraine and threatening the broader region. So my point is, the elites, the corporations that are funding the Republican Party, that are pushing for deregulation, the Norfolk Southern companies that gave us that train explosion that polluted our water and our air and very likely created a cancer cluster that we're gonna be living with for generations and so on, those forces, those death eaters that prop up the dancing orange clown of Trump and others like him, the Jared Kushners of the world and the corporate class, the genocidal corporate class that prop them up, the NRA, the National Gun Lobby and so on, and the Russian dark money that's intertwined with all of this, the George Santoses of the world, the Bannons, right? This whole class of corporate fascism and their useful idiots, they're the ones that are willing to go full fascist if it means crushing the left, if it means crushing universal pre-k, if it means crushing affordable medical bills so you don't have to go bankrupt getting into a medical emergency, if it means crushing public schools. You have the best public school systems in the world. You have citizens that are ready to tackle the challenges of today.

Andrea Chalupa (22:52):

I cannot tell you how shortsighted this pattern is. It is what led to the rise of fascism and contributed to the rise of fascism in the 1930s. You had a slaughter of the socialists in Austria, not by Hitler but by a

movement in Austria at the time that was actually trying to stay independent from Hitler and the Nazis. But they lost their independence when they went to the dark side and smashed the left, slaughtered apartment buildings of socialists that were building these rosy progressive movements of the 1920s, building healthcare, building schools, building better quality of life. I cannot tell you what a threat that is to the elites of any society. And they're willing to sacrifice democracy to stop it. Why is that? Why can't people be left alone to pursue happiness as we were promised, right? In the founding documents of the United States?

Andrea Chalupa (23:51):

Why can't we be allowed to improve our quality of life? Why do we have to go and become a fascist state just because, you know, Elon Musk and others don't wanna pay taxes to the very governments that subsidized the growth and expansion of their wealth and their power. Why is that? Because there's just something in some people. They're greedy assholes. They wanna take credit for their wealth as intelligence, as some sort of superiority. It's like wealth chauvinism, basically. And I'll stop here, Sarah, because I know you've written books about this.

Sarah Kendzior (24:22):

Yeah. No, well, I mean, I was engaged [laughs]. I was listening. I was listening, wondering where this is all going and, you know, yeah, everything you said made me think about the fact, like what I was saying before with the backlash period. We had a progressive uprising during the Trump years. We had all of these social movements, we had all of these reevaluations of systemic injustices, whether civil rights, women's rights, MeToo, environmental movements, gun violence. I mean, there were more protests during that period of time than any other moment in history and now we're in a backlash that is incredibly contrived and incredibly well slotted. It didn't spontaneously emerge. I think people capitalized on the trauma and the exhaustion of covid to make it faster. But these are incredibly well-financed, right-wing hardliners passing so many laws so quickly in so many states that it's difficult to keep track.

Sarah Kendzior (25:25):

And all the while, you know, you brought up Freud before in the 20th century and so my mind sort of started wandering a little to his nephew, Edward Bernays, who was the father of propaganda and the father of modern PR. He basically invented the concept and he is known for a lot of bad things; for marketing cigarettes and presenting them as torches of freedom; he's known for his work with the CIA and for basically pioneering the idea of psychological warfare. And I was thinking about this in the context of us talking about in the beginning of the show, that reality is harder and harder to discern. And I don't say that lightly. A lot of folks have been making that claim for a long time. They made it during the era of television.

Sarah Kendzior (26:14):

They made it during the early internet. And of course they made it when an actual reality TV mafioso candidate ran for president and then won and then lied ceaselessly. But I always felt like if you could dig deep enough, if you had the information out there somewhere and at least could access it, then you could pierce through that. You know, you could break through the psychological warfare, you could break through the propaganda and you could get to the kernels of truth buried into it, or the roots of the reasons for the lies that they tell. And now I feel like it is just harder and harder to do that. A lot of it is what you're saying. It's this desire to crush progressive movements; movements that give us autonomy, movements that allow us to be healthy and to thrive and therefore to work on other political endeavors, helping people who are worse off, getting justice for crimes committed long ago.

Sarah Kendzior (27:16):

But it's just this combination of the brutality of all of these laws and then the loss of the internet, the loss of the medium that existed where we could talk about things, whether they were public conversations or things like DM rooms where people who share all these interests, all these activists, all these people would get together. Imagine if all the places where people met in the 1910s and the 1920s to organize were surveilled and then just systematically destroyed. I mean, ultimately they were, but I feel like we're kind of in the virtual equivalent of that now, and no one really knows exactly what to do about it. We have new networks starting every week. We have all of these feuds that already existed being very skillfully exploited. And I've never felt... I've always got annoyed, as you know, when people had asked me, "What about hope? What do you feel hopeful for?" And I was like, you know, this isn't an issue of hope. This isn't an issue of hopelessness. What we need to do is organize and think and act. And I found, for the first time ever, just feeling lost, feeling like we're in this void where we can't even discern what the lies are, much less what the facts are. And I don't know... It's so many things and so frustrating. But go on with what you were saying

Andrea Chalupa (28:38):

As we're talking, the news is breaking from the *New York Times* that the Supreme Court is skeptical of Biden's student loan cancellation plan. How ridiculous is this? I mean, the student loan cancellation plan is for people that desperately need it. And here we are subsidizing mass industry. I mean, Wall Street got a massive bailout for tanking the global economy. We have corporate subsidies. We have subsidies for the 1%. We have these horrific tax breaks that are driving debt in America, our national debt, and they're paid for off the backs of the shrinking middle class and the working class. And you cannot even extend student loan cancellation debt when pursuing a higher education is what can really make a difference in upward mobility? Historically, we've always been told that. Whether it really does anymore is, you know, what the American dream's slipping away and so on.

Andrea Chalupa (29:44):

But my point is, you have this far right Supreme Court hacked by a trust fund kid, a nepo baby who inherited wealth from his asshole father, Fred, Fred in turn making his money off of developing places like Coney Island that became Russian hotspots. So the father, Fred, was the one that got the Russian money party started and Trump just continued that on, building essentially a Russian Brighton Beach in Florida, as we've talked about in our bonus episodes on Patreon for our *Gaslit Nation* community and so on. But what I'm saying is that you have this trust fund kid aided by other trust fund kids, Jared and Ivanka, that come to power in 2016 with the help of a mafia state, a mass murdering xenophobic mafia state that is as materialistic as them, as openly and proudly racist as them and so on. And they continue to then pack the highest court in the land, the Supreme Court, which is now looking like it's going to block student loan forgiveness for the people that desperately need it, while allowing the wheels of gross income and equality to continue to churn, churn us up into little pieces in terms of, you know, threatening our quality life here at home and allowing the powerful to stay increasingly powerful and so on, thanks to compound interest [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa (31:05):

So what I'm saying is that it's horrific what America is up against and we have to claw our way back from it. And what we do is we just demand better. We demand dignity, we demand value for our lives. We demand value for our children's futures, and we don't settle. We refuse to settle. And we treat voting and the get-out-the-vote work we do as chess moves, as strategic partnerships, competitive partnerships. But we don't submit to any politician willing to tacitly, openly betray us like so many of them do in that Democratic Party establishment. What we do is we confront them. We propose

alternative futures, better outcomes for ourselves and our communities, and we fight for our futures through primaries. Governor Kathy Hochul, you're being primaried. It's gonna be a joyful event when we finally get to primary you in your next election.

Andrea Chalupa (32:01):

I'm so excited for that. I'm gonna have a freaking tailgating party on the eve of that primary, alright? So every single person in a position of power in the Democratic Party establishment, I don't care how pro Ukraine you are, and I understand we're up against Matt Gaetz and his little sex trafficking frat party of Putinists propped up by Russian dark money, I understand the stakes for the world because it really is a global fight right now of fascism and democracy. But you don't get to take advantage of that extraordinarily vulnerable situation by empowering corruption and strengthening destructive, mass destructive income inequality. The people deserve greater rights. The people deserve a greater ladder, a stronger ladder, a fortified ladder to climb out of these horrific circumstances that they're increasingly being kept in. And that brings us to the heartbreaking story of the child labor laws.

Andrea Chalupa (32:55):

My God, it's like Charles Dickens in the United States right now, where a *New York Times* reporter, Hannah Dreier, was scratching the surface. She lifted up one stone and just saw gushing worms of mass systemized abuse that's been going on for a decade, where children are being killed, are being maimed, having their scalps ripped off, working long shifts, 12 hours in factories making food that we in turn feed our children, like Cheerios. So child slavery is feeding your privileged children, my privileged children, at home. How disgusting is that, that we're complicit in this, that we're being put in this position by this unchecked corruption and greed? And it's been happening for 10 years. And the problem has been growing worse. And just where they looked in this exhausting reporting and how the signs are everywhere in all 50 states that this is happening.

Andrea Chalupa (33:50):

And it's a sign that it's even deeper than what they were able to fully cover in their reporting. And it's been made worse even by the Biden administration that's been trying to speed up getting these minors processed outta these facility centers and placed with God knows who, where they then get trafficked into slave labor. So slavery is alive and well in America. And giant corporations are profiting from this. CEOs in America are taking their privileged children on luxury vacations paid for by child slavery. That's happening across the board in all 50 states. And children that should be in school, children who should be sleeping at night so their brains can help form and continue to develop, are instead working 12-hour shifts and sleeping in whatever school they have a chance to go to, if they even get that chance, because some of them were promised school when they were placed with sponsors, and instead they just go straight into slavery and they're stuck there. Many of them are afraid to talk because they were terrorized. So slavery is alive and well in America because we have this unchecked income inequality, unchecked corporate greed, supported by our packed courts, courts packed by trust fund children; the Trumps, the Kushners and so on.

Sarah Kendzior (35:09):

I didn't know you were gonna bring this topic up or I would've added more.

Andrea Chalupa:

Me neither [laughs].

Sarah Kendzior:

[laughs] Yeah. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. All of this, it's being framed as a resurgence of child labor and brutal conditions, particularly in places like meatpacking plants, particularly in agricultural and industrial areas of the Midwest. It made me think of the fact that the very first person whose sentence Trump commuted, the very first person who he let off the hook in this endless series of pardons of criminal elites, was Shlomo Rubashkin, a friend of the Kushner family who had a child labor and migrant abuse farm in Iowa for a long time. The company was called Agriprocessors. And this was the subject of an enormous state and local and federal investigation, a series of them in the 2000s.

Sarah Kendzior (36:07):

Then he was finally convicted in November, 2009. His team of lawyers kept trying to keep him out of prison despite the monstrosity of what he'd done, despite the fact that he had underage workers, he had child slaves, he had migrants working in absolutely horrific conditions. And there was a lot of reporting about this from that time and I encourage folks to go and read it. They tried to bring the case to the Supreme Court. That Supreme Court, you know, the pre-Trump Supreme Court in 2012, refused to hear the appeal. And then, of course, you get the very first commutation by Trump in December of 2017. But if you look at the lead up to this, if you look at how this came about, you will find a bipartisan effort to allow this man off the hook.

Sarah Kendzior (37:02):

Letters from Nancy Pelosi and from other prominent Democrats, letters from I think multiple former heads of the FBI. I know Bill Barr was in there from the DOJ, I think Louis Freeh was in there. I mean, I've gone over this on Twitter. It's like a who's who of people who have ruined America in the last decade and who are mindlessly venerated within their own party. And I've brought up, many times, Pelosi's role in this in particular because she wrote to Trump. She did it recently when he was in office. That was one of the earliest things she did during his administration was write to try to get Shlomo Rubashkin free, and they succeeded. Another prominent person involved in all of this is Alan Dershowitz.

Sarah Kendzior (37:51):

Alan Dershowitz is one of these conduits between the worst leadership of both parties. Anyway, he got let off the hook. This was one of the Kushner efforts. If you look at who Trump pardoned, I sometimes feel like you can understand everything about that administration if you look at the pardons and the sentences that were commuted and divide them into categories. This is a Kushner affiliate, so you have that. And you see a lot of those at the very end of his term too. Then you have the people who are Kremlin-linked and who helped rig elections. You have Manafort, Stone, Bannon. Then you have the war criminals, you know, the Erik Princes. You have Arpaio. I mean, it just goes on and on. And I mean, I would listen to it.

Sarah Kendzior (38:39):

I don't listen to podcasts despite running one. I sometimes read transcripts and whatnot, but, you know, I'm a written word kind of person. I would listen to a podcast solely devoted to breaking down Trump's pardons and why they happened, and what it tells us about America and what it tells us about who is backing him. Because it's just incredibly, incredibly revealing. But, you know, just coming back to the child labor issue, this has been a blight in America for a long time. And it seemed like around this time, around 2009/2010, there were some efforts made at trying to stop it. And then we see the people behind freeing one of the individuals abusing children, you know, abusing migrants, getting into positions of power, whether in the Democratic Party like Pelosi or Trump and Kushner and that whole enterprise. And then we see the return of child labor all over the country, under Biden, which I don't think is a coincidence. This is a group project. This is a—

Andrea Chalupa (39:46):

Well it was really under Obama. Obama, Trump, Biden.

Sarah Kendzior (39:51):

Mmmhmm <affirmative>. Yeah, the unholy trinity. And to quote Bernays again, he was famous for saying, "What can be done for a nation at war can be done for organizations and people in a nation at peace." And I think people don't look hard enough when it's Obama, when it's Biden. They're not doing this for child separation either. They're not doing this for a variety of issues. And there's so many times under Biden where I have this sense... It's not *deja vu*, it's just knowing we're literally dealing with the same bullshit as we were 10 years ago, only on top of it we had a coup, a plague and, you know, the complete infiltration of American institutions by transnational organized crime. But something like a refusal to forgive student loans, that returning to the forefront, all the progress made on that issue potentially being washed away?

Sarah Kendzior (40:41):

That feels very second-term Obama. I feel like we're just going back to that time and moving backward, only with the masks just stripped off. We know what we're dealing with at this point. We know what they're capable of, we know how far they'll go, and we know how unwilling agencies of accountability are to control or punish those committing these actions. And we know, as you've said, that their goal is to keep people in check. And student loan debt and the inability to get a job that pays well without a very expensive credential, without purchased merit, you know, is one way of doing that.

Andrea Chalupa (41:25):

Yeah. without question. And it's necessary to bring up Obama because he just used his celebrity and his star power to come out against expanding the Supreme Court, which is what would get us out of this mess. If we could undo the Supreme Court packing by, again, a longtime Kremlin asset whose children—the idiot sons, Don Jr. and Eric—have admitted that their family businesses are dependent on Russian money; whose grandfather, Fred, built up Russian Brighton Beach; whose father Trump built up the Russian Brighton Beach of Florida and so on. And these guys come to power with the Kremlin's help, with Russia's help as documented in the 400-page Mueller report and the Senate intel report and so on, and by many investigative journalists from Ukraine and around the world and by our allies pointing all this out and warning us, including the Australians and the Dutch and so on. And the British.

Andrea Chalupa (42:26):

Long list there though. Go back to all our episodes for deep dives on that, including the first three. But my point is, my God... Biden, the administration, they did say they were gonna take on this issue of child labor. Yes, let's hope they do that. Let's hope there's a lot of transparency on that. Let's hope that we can finally, once again, put an end to slavery in America. I would like us to put an end to slavery everywhere, including the sweatshops that we depend on. When the rich are this rich... How do I say this? I do know that there are people of wealth and influence who are concerned about income inequality because it destabilizes society. It creates a situation that's untenable. It creates a powder keg. Plus, children that grow up in immense wealth, unless you're raised a certain way with the right values and the right experiences, you could grow up with some very serious blind spots. And those blind spots can be very dangerous for you as you go through life. You could also perpetuate a lot of the abusive systems that continue to wreak havoc on democracy at home and worldwide, as Jared and Ivanka did, right? That's the route they went. So there have been nepo babies that have done wonderful things with the privilege that they were born into, and they should be commended for that. Good job. Everyone, whatever degree of privilege you have, everyone should be doing something with it to bring up others, to help

marginalized communities, help the vulnerable, give voice to the voiceless. That's why we were put on earth, ultimately, to help each other.

Andrea Chalupa (44:04):

That's the only soul level satisfaction that's worth anything, anything in life. Really. I don't understand any other ambition than that because nothing else satisfies. Even all the reports that are coming out trying to measure what is happiness, what makes people happy: it's the quality of our relationships that make people happy. All the monuments, all of the mansions, all of the wealth, it all goes away at the end. You can't take it with you. So what do you have left with? You have some sort of larger unity that matters, that connects you to all living things. That's really the true wisdom that everyone should be pursuing because that is what ranks in all the research on happiness. If you look at the happiest countries in the world, they have the largest indexes on quality of life, on low corruption rates. Who consistently ranks as the happiest countries in the world?

Andrea Chalupa (44:55):

The Scandinavian countries where they have famously strong, secure, well-fortified social safety nets for their people, where they can go get any higher degree for free. It's paid for by the state. I've witnessed this up close. I have friends in Denmark. I stayed with an extremely wealthy businessman in Copenhagen who proudly pays taxes. He's telling me about how happy he was to pay taxes because by paying taxes, he's developing the minds and the wellbeing of Denmark's proud national resource, which is its people. And I don't understand why our wealthy business men and women here at home on the conservative side, on the Democratic establishment side, can't understand that. It's so common sense to me. Why do you wanna live in an ailing, decrepit, corrupt, you know, public school-failing, poisoned water country? Why do you wanna live in a shithole country? Why? Does that bring you any sense of national pride?

Andrea Chalupa (45:56):

Why do you want that superiority of owning multiple homes around the world and multiple jets and yachts and things? That shit's all empty. That's like some Russian oligarch bullshit. That's the whole materialism that has turned Russia into a failed state where they had to go to war to distract the people and create some external enemy so the mafia state that's really the ones ruining everyone's lives can't be blamed. Putin went to war for a whole variety of reasons and one of them was to try to die in power and avoid a popular uprising, being overthrown. And he does that by creating this external enemy that protects his wealth. That's really what's at the heart of that. Why are the conservatives and the Democratic establishment leaders leading us down that path where they're always going to have to create some external force, some enemy, to try to distract us as the Republicans do with the Chinese?

Andrea Chalupa (46:44):

Right? So cynically. And as DeSantis does with the Commie left, with the left who's just asking for clean drinking water and voting rights and an end to being shot up in school and a movie theater and a mall, you know? We want an end to all this. And Americans need to be pissed off—be more pissed off than we are—and not fall victim to cults of personality and not fall victim to the threat of fascism. We are people that have devoted our lives to studying authoritarianism, dictatorships and how they work, and we're telling you that if you do not confront the Democratic establishment party and the far-right conservatives about how they are squeezing us and turning America into a blatant, proud oligarchy, and why we're getting subsidies for a corporate America, for the corporate giants and not the people, not the working class, and the middle class is disappearing.

Andrea Chalupa (47:33):

If you're not vocal about this, if you're not rushing to primaries, making sure that your elected officials who aren't serving you and fighting back against all this and addressing all this and being open and

honest and having honest community conversations about all this, then you need to. It's up to you. You're morally obligated to ensure that there's a really good primary, a really strong primary candidate who's trustworthy, morally strong, empathetic, knowledgeable on these issues. And it's time for people to rise up and run for office yourselves. Get over yourselves. Don't let your ego talk you out of it, that little vicious voice in your head. You have it in you to run for office. You have it in you to be part of the change we desperately need in the world. You run the first time you don't succeed, run again. Build a movement. Clean house where you live locally.

Andrea Chalupa (48:18):

Force these conversations because I'm telling you, we are headed towards, as Sarah opened by saying, the AI future is coming. How do we know that? Because it's the trend of history. It's the economics of it. There's a gold mine in AI. They're all rushing to be the first. Everyone's rushing right now to be the Mark Zuckerberg, the Elon Musk, the Bill Gates of AI and whatever the hell that means. And they're not going to be morally sound in pursuing it. I heard a story of a lawyer for Google who was working on negotiations with a British firm and the British, God bless you, the British, as far gone as I'm sure our British listeners think they are with Brexit, you're still a ways ahead of the US in some ways. So the British side was telling the Google side, "Look, if we're gonna develop AI together, make sure that there's a kill switch that we have some way to unplug the machine in case this AI becomes threatening to all humanity, life on earth."

Andrea Chalupa (49:15):

"And suddenly we're in the matrix and we're all being farmed, not by the oligarchs but by machines." And I don't know how the Google side handled that, but we need to know how the Google side and all these big wannabe Mark Zuckerbergs and Bill Gates and his AI gold rush are going to handle that. We don't know. We don't know how they're going to treat that. And with the coming AI revolution, what's going to happen to all the jobs that are going to disappear? We've seen how automatization, like basic robotics, has been displacing a lot of jobs. So what about a basic income? Can't we have the rich stop tax dodging and pay their taxes? Can we just have some reforms and regulations? There needs to be changes because if you're not pissed off now and agitating now and organizing now, the reality that we're facing is going to force us to do something about this.

[outro - music up and under, ['Don't Be An Asshole' by Andrew Jones and Spirit House](#)]

[outro - theme music, roll 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:

We encourage you to donate to help rescue and recovery efforts in Turkey and Syria following the devastating earthquakes in early February. To help people in Turkey visit the TPF Turkiye Earthquake Relief fund at tpfund.org

Andrea Chalupa:

To help Syrians in need, donate to the White Helmets at whitehelmets.org. We also encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine a razomforukraine.org. In addition, we encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. 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 theorangutangproject.org. And avoid products with palm oil.

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 at our Patreon. It keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior:

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

Andrea Chalupa:

Original music in *Gaslit Nation* is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demien Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle.

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 (54:54):

Gaslit Nation would like to thank our supporters at the Producer level on Patreon and Higher...