

Gaslit Nation Transcript
08 March 2023
Against National Divorce
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[intro - music up and under]

Sarah Kendzior (00:10):

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 (00:23):

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 (00:37):

And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world. We have an unusual *Gaslit Nation* episode this week because we are running an audiobook excerpt from my book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent*. I wrote *They Knew* in 2021 and it was published in September, 2022. We are running this excerpt now because we are appalled by the pundits and politicians proposing “national divorce” and we want you to understand the conspiracy of kleptocrats behind it. This is not a grassroots initiative. This is an organized attempt of plutocrats to shake you down by pushing civil war. It is horrifying for me as the author of this book to see the plots I wrote about two years ago coming to fruition, but that does not mean their victory is inevitable. We must fight back and the best way to fight back is with the truth. We do not want Americans to fall for this opportunistic and destructive rhetoric and therefore we are running a warning against it. If you're interested in reading the whole chapter, *They Knew* is available in most libraries and also at a discounted price this week on Amazon and other retailers. We hope you'll listen to this excerpt and take it to heart because our hearts are with the United States and the American people—all of the American people. So with no further ado, here is an excerpt from *They Knew* in a segment I am calling “Against National Divorce”.

[transition music]

[the following is an excerpt from Sarah's audiobook, *They Knew*]

Sarah Kendzior (02:35):

In the summer of 2021, millionaire celebrities and partisan pundits began talking about a national divorce. Americans could no longer live with each other and dividing into multiple countries was the best move, proclaimed liberal comedian Sarah Silverman and rightwing pundits, Ben Shapiro and Glen Beck.

Sarah Kendzior (02:58):

They parroted the points of Steve Bannon and, before him, hard right Republican operative Pat Buchanan, to their respective partisan audiences. Later that year, politicians including Ted Cruz and Marjorie Taylor Greene announced they were contemplating the idea. They were among many mouthpieces testing the waters by sputtering the sentiments of backstage brokers marketing treason in a more palatable package. It is easy when you do not care about your country, when you do not see people as fellow human beings, but as kindling on which to pour your rhetorical kerosene to have such conversations. You win no matter what because your color is not blue or red, but the green of money. The pay rolls in, the bloodshed rolls on and you play court jester in the color war while the rest of the country tries to survive, individually and together. The Civil War was an open conspiracy of slaveholders against the United States of America.

Sarah Kendzior (04:18):

Like most political conspiracies, its architects used weaponized conspiracy theories rooted in projection to terrify locals into supporting their cause. They spun tales of northerners out to steal their land and harm their women, invented tales of treachery about Abraham Lincoln that would befit confederate leaders like Robert E. Lee or Judah Benjamin, and portrayed Black enslaved Americans as innate brutes who, if freed, would carry out horrific acts similar to what they as slaveholders had been practicing. Today, secessionist rhetoric is cloaked in the same cloth—aggression masked as protection—but who is protecting whom from what and why is more ambiguous. The current push towards succession and national divorce is a conspiracy by kleptocrats exploiting both the bitter entitlement of the lost cause and the stereotype-fueled snobbery of liberal Americans in Democratic-majority states against regular people who live in states run by GOP legislatures. There have always been secessionist groups on the fringes of American political life, particularly in large states like Texas, which briefly existed as a sovereign nation, and in California where Silicon Valley technocrats have sought to secede.

Sarah Kendzior (05:57):

But the streamlining of sedition is a post-Trump phenomenon. The new secessionism is as contrived as the red and blue designations. Following the heated 2000 election, pundits and political operatives began using these colors as shorthand for entrenched Democratic and Republican identities that never reflected the reality on the ground. Red and blue states were manufactured to create monocultures out of a multifaceted nation, narrowing the parameters of political possibility in a country where most people are not even registered members of either party. In 2004, Barack Obama—then state senator in Illinois—condemned this false dichotomy at the Democratic National Convention. “The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states; red states for Republicans and blue states for Democrats,” he said, “but I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states and we don’t like federal agents poking around our libraries in the red states.”

Sarah Kendzior (07:14):

“We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.” When Obama made that speech I was living in Bloomington, Indiana. Bloomington, the proverbial small town that resident John Mellencamp immortalized in song, stood out as liberal compared to the rural region surrounding it, but not in a way that felt jarring. Why would or should any state be a monolith? This bizarre assumption is one easy for locals to debunk, but national propagandists were building a monopoly over the residue of gutted local media. Portrayals of the Midwest increasingly came not from the region itself, but from corporations in New York City, the proverbial metropolis where Wall Street and Fox News and Donald Trump and Rudy Giuliani sold fatuous fantasies of their own city as a liberal hellhole in contrast to “the real America” of the heartland. I had lived in New York City before moving to Indiana and what unites most hoosiers with most New Yorkers is that wealthy elites do not care about any of them.

Sarah Kendzior (08:39):

Elites are banking—literally—that the rest of the country is too incurious to know the truth about other states or too powerless for their corrections to be heard. In 2004, Obama's debunking of the red and blue state fallacy left me relieved. A future presidential contender had seen through a pernicious lie and preemptively sought to stomp it out. This relief was undone four years later by Obama's sneering campaign declaration that small town Midwesterners are bitter people who cling to their guns and religion. I knew I would be hearing this quote for decades to come and I was angered by his recklessness. In 2008, the great recession hit, local newspapers crumbled, Facebook rose, Obama won and his quote was immortalized as a meme; words stripped of all context but their callousness, like everyone's words, came to be digital daggers for the information war.

Sarah Kendzior (09:55):

I had moved to St. Louis by then, the breeding ground for everything from the Tea Party to the Ferguson protest movement, and I watched as wealthy political operatives traveled to the region to exploit its prejudice and pain. The great recession birthed an unequal recovery. Big coastal cities like New York and San Francisco thrived and became unaffordable, driving out native residents through gentrification. Meanwhile, small towns, lower class suburbs and rundown Midwestern cities like Detroit and St. Louis, which had enjoyed a brief comeback in the late 1990s and 2000s, nearly collapsed. The midwest's assets were bought up by American plutocrats as well as foreign oligarchs like Ihor Kolomoisky, a dual citizen of Ukraine and Israel who became the largest real estate holder in Cleveland in the recession's aftermath. Officials neither ignored nor encouraged the takeover. In Obama's first two years in office, both the Democrats and the Republicans bailed out Wall Street while doing little to remedy the hardship of Americans outside their donor base.

Sarah Kendzior (11:21):

In 2010, the Supreme Court upheld citizens united deeming corporations to be people and removing constraints on campaign financing. That ruling was a decisive moment in the movement to end America and it was followed three years later by the Supreme Court's partial repeal of the Voting Rights Act. Those two supreme court decisions stripped away what was left of American representative democracy, allowing the puppet masters to emerge from behind the curtain and flaunt their strings. Laws are both more formidable and more fragile than propaganda. Laws overrule the best intentions and codify the worst. Ordinary people can combat bigotry and stereotypes and reject the contrived animosity that prejudice breeds. But once legal rights are lost, they are very difficult to recover, particularly when a key mechanism to protect them—voting—is harmed. The judiciary acts as the cage bars of autocracies. How it wields its power sets the stage for the future overriding other avenues of liberation. In the United States, the new state voter suppression laws made possible by the partial repeal of the VRA codified the tyranny of the minority into the law of the land.

Sarah Kendzior (12:59):

Republican legislatures can lock down a red state identity by preventing people from voting while flooding the state with dark money propaganda as local news sources disappear. They can redraw its districts through gerrymandering so that their permanent rule is all but guaranteed. When confronted with citizen dissent, they can simply decide that certain people's votes do not count, as Missouri did after residents statewide, including most Republicans, voted in progressive ballot initiatives that included the protection of labor unions, an increased minimum wage, and the Clean Missouri Act, which would ban dark money in politics. The will of the majority was clear, but the Missouri GOP representatives ignored it and disregarded the measures as Missourians struggled to defend their fading democracy. Coastal pundits crowed that Missouri, once known as the bellwether state for its propensity to fluctuate

between parties and reliably back the winner of the presidential election, was a deep red state that got the terrible policies it deserved.

Sarah Kendzior (14:21):

They went on to say the same about Texas, Georgia, and other states whose legislatures ignored the stated will of the people, or created new laws to prevent or disregard their votes. The idea of a deep red state was a lie; part of a litany of lies. But repetition is necessary for the political elite to attain its goal. Hostile operatives want their prophecies of monolithic political cultures to prove self-fulfilling because that will make the partitioning easier. If you keep telling people that their states, states with fluctuating populations and complex histories and vacillating political preferences, have been immutable entities since time immemorial, perhaps they will come to believe it. Perhaps they will look to the distant past, in particular the Civil War, to justify the crises of the present, like the crisis of a government apathetic to their despair. Perhaps in desperation they will seek to revive what they have been told is their true political culture: the good old days that were only good for a select population.

Sarah Kendzior (15:44):

When that fails, perhaps they will see differences as irreconcilable and back secession plans peddled by elitist plotters who would never leave their gated citadels to live in the regions they seek to dominate and destroy. These tactics are not limited to conservatives. They work on anyone. Maybe liberals will view themselves as above countrymen they have now reduced to cliches, envisioning themselves as residents of a future blue paradise removed from the backwards red states, even though the blue states are just further fodder for an oligarch takeover. Wherever you live, you must remember you are no longer a human being in this scenario. You are a paw to push, an asset to mine, and an imposition should you grasp the plan. At every step of the way, you are seen as disposable. In the 1990s, journalist Robert Kaplan wrote a series of superficial, inflammatory and popular books about the post-Cold War states of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

Sarah Kendzior (17:04):

In Kaplan's view, conflicts between Serbs and Croats and Bosnians were an inevitable result of tensions held for nearly a millennium, intervening periods of peace and intermarriages be damned. The post-Soviet countries of Central Asia were, in his view, "similarly bound for regional warfare due to the blood lust of their distant ancestor, Genghis Khan." No such wars took place. Today, Kaplan's work is used by anthropologists to teach their students what not to do. His ethnic essentialism was not only lazy and inaccurate but dangerous. It ignored modern structural crises in favor of a vision of primordial destiny the same way dictators and warlords do to justify their brutality and greed. There is no easier way to get people to enact the unimaginable than to convince them this is the way it always was and therefore the way it will inevitably be. Kaplan's narrative tactics are the same ones being used by hostile operatives now to harden partisan labels onto geographic territory.

Sarah Kendzior (18:26):

Should the red state/blue state divide reveal itself as a fallacy, operatives will reach deeper into the darkest moments of the American past. For inspiration, they will rewrite losers as winners, sinners as saints, and treason as triumph. This is why the GOP is working to redefine accurate history as critical race theory, an academic term rightwing conspirator Christopher Rufo admitted they chose to repurpose and weaponize into whatever they needed to mean at a given time. "We have successfully frozen their brand, critical race theory, into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category," Rufo wrote in March, 2021. "The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and

immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans."

Sarah Kendzior (19:48):

They need the culture war to distract from the war on national security, a war that *all* Americans are losing because the government has decided to forfeit its sovereignty. In November, 2021, the Federal Election Commission ruled that it would become legal for foreigners to fund US referendum campaigns subversion that was until recently not only reviled but illegal. Another loophole has been created to function as a noose around the neck of American democracy. If you want to know who owns the United States of America, follow the money (it is in offshore accounts) and monitor who pays the people rewriting the laws and marketing these policies as normal. These donors give to both parties, often in record amounts. Billionaire Len Blavatnik, for example, a USSR-born partner of sanctioned Russian oligarchs, gave millions to the Republicans until House Democrats announced in 2019 that they were investigating Trump, at which point he gave the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee the largest donation in its history.

Sarah Kendzior (21:11):

Under pressure, the DCCC returned part of the funds. But as of 2021, he is again lavishing the Democrats with money, including \$50,000 for House Speaker Nancy Pelosi alone. In 2019, Blavatnik was a useful vehicle for foreign interests because his American citizenship meant that his donations were legal. Now, the FEC is eliminating the need for such go-betweens. This crisis is not a matter of Democrats versus Republicans or red versus blue. The crisis is a matter of people who seek to protect the United States versus elite operatives who want to destroy it. The latter are stripping down the country and selling it for parts and trying to convince ordinary Americans that it was their own idea.

Sarah Kendzior (22:15):

The crisis is also not a matter of north versus south. When people discuss a second American civil war, they often harken back to the battles fought around the Mason-Dixon line. Over the summer of 2021, as the Delta strain of Covid 19 spread from southwest Missouri into neighboring states and eventually into the southeast, partisans attempted to attribute the viruses spread to the Civil War's legacy, instead of the more obvious conclusion that it spread from a southern origin point to hot southern states where people were staying inside in air conditioned spaces. Now, in late 2021, as the Delta strain dominates the cold North and is scarce in the balmy South, coastal pundits and propagandists have suddenly put their maps and their generalizations away. The dividing line of America is not between north and south. It is not in fact regional at all, nor are there two Americas.

Sarah Kendzior (23:27):

There are a multitude of Americas, as one would expect in a country this large and diverse. But we are no longer unified by ideals. Instead, we are left with a common heartache of ideals betrayed. We share that pain and take it out on each other while disregarding each other's humanity, and being acclimatized by algorithms to do so. The new Civil War is fought on the internet where lies and memes spur exhausted people to hate each other; where troll farms can make AstroTurf rallies; where threats have been normalized and kindness is labeled virtue signaling. The new civil war is fought with truncated speech in character limited forums and in soundbites by politicians scraping at the dregs of the attention economy. The new Civil War was fought largely indoors in 2020 by people who dreamed up nightmare visions of the other states they could no longer visit, the people they could no longer meet, because regular life had been stolen from them.

Sarah Kendzior (24:44):

As a general, “We have an army of digital soldiers”, Michael Flynn told his supporters in November, 2016. This was run like an insurgency; irregular warfare at its finest. Three years later, Flynn filed an application to trademark the phrase “digital soldiers” so he could profit off the virtual war. This is how the new civil war is run; as entertainment and then as autocracy and then as an insurrection viewed with such apathy by the institutions it is trying to destroy that it can be trademarked by a foreign agent coup plotter and used for marketing purposes. This is general patent, absorbing the neo-Nazis into a profitability model rather than fighting them in the field. This is how a mafia state does battle against the people forced to live in its manufactured reality. The lost cause of the new Civil War is a reality TV president. The weapons of the new Civil War are viral videos of ordinary people being judged in the court of public opinion because the actual courts are not concerned with justice.

Sarah Kendzior (26:09):

The new Civil War is being fought, so you will forget that the old Cold War ended as a corporate merger. Kleptocrats and oligarchs, pedophiles and criminals, technocrats and white supremacists: that is who runs what is indeed a new world order, a phrase that merited the apprehension it provoked. Men of multiple passports, men of copious currencies, criminal elites who tell you their plots outright to test not only the limits of their own might, but whether civic obligation still exists. No one powerful intervenes, no matter how blunt and blatant they get. You see this threat unfold and you trust your instincts. You trust the pain instead of trusting the plan. Looking at it makes you feel insane, but seeing it makes you know you're not.

Sarah Kendzior (27:15):

“If the oligarchs partition the United States, what will happen to St. Louis?” This is the kind of question you ask yourself nowadays, not as an abstract intellectual exercise but to help plan the future. You envision a scenario in which your homeland is butchered into red and blue oligarch fiefdoms, and St. Louis—politically blue, demographically Black—is declared an enemy of whatever contrived conservative block takes over Missouri. You picture St. Louis asking to join Illinois, but being rebuffed due to its poverty and crime and longstanding reputation as a regional reject. Scorned by all, it resigns itself to becoming the first Midwest city-state since Cahokia. St. Louis, the Monaco of the Mississippi, the Vatican of Route 66, built on reliquaries of the American dream. What do you do with a city like this? A city that is so American that there is no place for it when America is destroyed?

Sarah Kendzior (28:32):

What do you do with a place that is, as T.S. Eliott said, “a reminder of what men choose to forget”? When I talk about the threat of partition in public, I often do it in a semi joking way because the reality of the threat scares me in a way that feels too personal, too pretentious to convey outright. I know too many people from the Balkans and from the USSR who have endured the horror of dissolution. It is not only the bloodshed, not only the sudden enmity of people you thought were neighbors and friends, but the loss of your place in the world. The theft of a rootedness so reliable you treated it like air until the day you woke up gasping for breath. The reality of secession and dissolution is that your countrymen, your friends and family members are suddenly living in other countries that you may not be able to visit.

Sarah Kendzior (29:41):

The reality is a military transformed into mercenaries trading weapons and operating with brutal impunity on what used to be fellow citizens. It is the loss of basic infrastructure and it is privatization by the most corrupt actors in your region, a process already underway in the United States by operatives who know that the privatization of public goods can be accelerated by the shock tactics of partition. It means that the most vulnerable people in the country—people who are not white or wealthy—will suffer even more under rightwing extremist regimes whom they did not elect and cannot control while

wealthy liberals in blue enclaves blame them for their fate. It means the blue enclaves will be invaded by the red territories because no oligarch is going to let resources go unexploited. The idea that a liberal paradise will be tolerated in the partitioned states of America is absurd.

Sarah Kendzior (30:55):

The right-wingers who treat small liberal arts colleges as major threats are not going to let actual nations rest in peace. They will raid you and then you will be one of us, only with more stigma and less recourse. There is no paradise in partition. All that will happen is that the things you hate most about America will multiply. This is true no matter who you are or what your political predilections may be. A stable economy, civic institutions, public and private education, foreign relations, reliable transportation, all of this will be up for grabs to the highest bidders. Necessities will become luxuries even more than they are already. You will feel this loss navigating daily life in a new nation of constantly contested borders, but the greatest loss will be your sense of self in a place that was never clear cut in the first place, a country born of ideals contradicting its own laws, principles that were never fully honored in practice.

Sarah Kendzior (32:11):

America was never the idealized melting pot it claimed to be, but it was never the bifurcated playing field it is portrayed as by pundits and politicians. It was an ineffable amalgamation. And to be American is to be shaped by ceaseless contrary influences, to not make sense and find a certain freedom in that. At times, this freedom exists only in your mind. It exists as possibilities and futures, and every confrontation with the opportunity hoarders and cannibalizing catalogers of imagination is an attempt to drive it out. There were American dreams deferred and then there were American ghosts. But you still have those dreams because no one can shake off a homeland. You still have those ghosts, those memories of the future. It is not a matter of your own life—you were done for a while ago—but of the next generation and what they deserve. When a country collapses under the weight of its own corruption, as the USSR and Yugoslavia did and as the United States seems set to do, it is common for people to say that the people of that country got what they deserved. What they usually mean is that bad actions have consequences, but we the people do not deserve what we have now or what may be coming. There is a great difference between what citizens bear due to the cruelty of the powerful and what they deserve as regular people who dream of more.

Announcer (34:05):

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[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...