

Gaslit Nation Transcripts

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The Save Democracy Challenge

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/save-democracy-80350698>

[intro - theme music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:00:11):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your co-host, Andrea Chalupa, and we have a very special episode today. Sarah is not here with us because she's in the trenches working on her next masterpiece. And if she were here, she'd like me to say that this is *Gaslit Nation*, a show about rising autocracy and corruption worldwide. And with us today are the winners of the 2022 US Midterms Get out the Vote *GasLit Nation* Challenge, where we have *Gaslit Nation* listeners who, like so many of you, rolled up their sleeves and did what we all had to do, which is get out the vote to ensure that the big Trump Big Lie movement didn't steal a bunch of races and usher in fascism. They came extremely close in the House, Kevin McCarthy's chaotic House, a very slim margin there. You've got the Putin Caucus, the Kremlin Caucus of Matt Gaetz and others who are trying to end aid for Ukraine and end democracy as we know it.

Andrea Chalupa (00:01:16):

But we obviously did not give a lot away, nevermind the deadbeats running the New York State Democratic Party. We held our own in the midterms and it was thanks to people like today's guests. We're going to start with Dr. Nicole Spear. Dr. Nicole Spear manages a brain imaging research facility at the University of Colorado and is a member of the city council in Boulder, Colorado. She is committed to building the Beloved Community through empowerment and collective liberation. Nicole, welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. We're so grateful for you and all the work that you do. Colorado has a history of being a purple state. It's now more and more blue thanks to amazing community organizers like you. Walk us through what the midterms were like for you. What were you busy doing and what are your dreams and aspirations for our country?

Dr. Nicole Spear (00:02:09):

Thank you and thanks so much for having me on today. So, for us here in Boulder, one of the big things that we were really working on was the type of systemic change that would lead to greater voter turnout in our local elections at these last midterm elections. So we were kind of focused a little bit more locally in order to try to create more of the changes here in our own community that are really needed right now because all of these forces that are operating nationally, they're also operating at local levels as well. And many times these local elections, as you and Sarah say so often on *Gaslit Nation*, are the places where we can create real change because we are the people who are directing the policy that most impacts people's lives. So one of the things that we were really working on here was changing when we hold our city council elections. Like many cities across the country, Boulder for the last hundred years or so has had our city council elections in odd years rather than in even years.

Dr. Nicole Spear (00:03:15):

And one of the things that that does is reduce the number of people who are voting on the leaders that most impact their day-to-day lives. So here in Boulder for example, we have an average of 17,000 less people voting on local issues in odd years than in even years. And so what that means is that there are 17,000 fewer people who are deciding on their local leaders. So one of the first things that I did in getting on city council was to advocate for putting a measure on our ballot to move our city council

elections from odd years to even years. And so that was a big force in our election this last November, was getting folks to turn out and to vote on that ballot measure and make sure that we can change our city council elections in time to where the voters are rather than trying to turn out voters.

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:04:06):

Because even in local elections, you know, we're struggling so hard to get even a hundred or 200 more people to vote, but by making this simple shift we can get tens of thousands of people potentially to vote in our elections. And I'm so happy to say that with a lot of community organizing and work to tell and inform voters what kind of difference this would make in their local elections, we won by almost a two to one margin, this ballot measure. So starting in 2026, Boulder will be electing its local leaders in even years alongside all of these other midterm elections that we focus on. And I hope that it gets more people engaged locally as well as nationally because I feel like we are so often telling people, "Go out and vote" in these even years and then they vote, but locally, their lives really aren't too affected day to day unless we get an authoritarian in the mix. So I'm really hoping that this will help us get more younger people, more renters involved so that our city council and our local leadership can better reflect the population that we have here in Boulder, because even though we have half of our city as renters, only one person on our nine person council is a renter. We are not having a lot of accurate representation on our council.

Andrea Chalupa (00:05:26):

Wow. So, that's terrific. Thank you so much for doing that. And the state and national parties should thank you too because the local elections, they drive out the vote for the up ballot candidates and that is going to help you in the House races that are going to be running in those midterm elections on those even years. Amazing! Good for you! That's so cool. And I love all the work that you're doing to ensure diversity, socioeconomic diversity. It's people like Nicole that are the dam against the rising flood of fascism in America. What advice do you have for people who wanna do what you're doing wherever they live?

Nicole Speer (00:06:11):

Yeah, I mean I would say follow your and Sarah's advice to run for something [laughs]. Get involved locally because when you are in these positions, you can be the voice that's helping to guide some of these systemic changes in your own community. Beyond that, I would say connect with the groups and the candidates locally that are inspiring to you, that have values that are similar to you, and really help them because the amount of support that you can put into a local candidate in terms of the time and energy that you're expending typically is gonna go a lot farther than if you are expending that same amount of energy in a larger national campaign because it really doesn't take that much in a local election to get people who are values-aligned with you into office. And so I would say get involved in your local elections. A lot of cities are still holding odd year elections, but start planting the seed of this idea of moving to even your elections. Start getting your groups and your communities to think locally and to get involved locally. And that's how we can start to make those changes, as you noted, that then build up to create a greater change in our state and in our federal government.

Andrea Chalupa (00:07:24):

Would you say that Colorado now is reliably blue?

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:07:27):

Yes, I would definitely say that. And I think that's due to a lot of local organizing that folks have been doing. We are getting more and more left-leaning, worker-oriented, family-oriented people elected into our state House especially, which is really exciting. And some of the things that are coming up in our state legislature this session are looking at things like rent control, looking at things like local control of zoning and for housing and whether that's something that we should have or not; the kinds of changes that people are starting to push for are very different. And a lot of this I think comes down to some of the changes that we made many years ago in terms of running our elections. So we have one of the best mail-in voting systems in the country and I think that really helps to get out the vote.

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:08:19):

We have polling centers all over, but we also have these vote drop boxes where you can just go and drop off your ballot when it's finished. I get a text message every time that I have voted when my ballot gets in and then again when it has been processed. So there are all these things that we've done to make sure that people know that their vote counts and that it's valued. And I think that makes a really big difference. Here in Boulder, we made some changes in our election finance years ago that have made a real difference in terms of who is getting elected over the last four years or so. We limit, for example, the contributions that any one person can make to a hundred dollars and it has to be a person who's contributing to your campaign. It cannot be some corporation or something like that. So it's a way of keeping outside money out of our campaigns. And there's certainly more work to do, but I think all of these changes that cities and counties and our entire state are making are really helping us to get representatives in our state government that better reflect the will of the people who live here.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:26):

And your background... For folks listening at home who have no connection they feel to politics, you sort of think of someone running for office, they have some sort of history of that maybe in their family, political activism, law degree, sort of the inside-the-box thinking about who should run for office. You're a doctor. You're a scientist. We've actually on the show called on people like you to run for office [laughs]. We need the scientists! We need the people that believe in facts to run for office, facts and empathy. Those are the two things we need for public servants today. So could you talk a little bit about the listeners out there that don't come from a political background, maybe they're like us, they knock on doors or make phone calls when it's election season, but they really feel like they're sitting on the fence when it comes to running for office themselves or recruiting someone in their close friend network to run for office who they think would be great, but they don't feel like they are the "type" to do it. And you don't strike me as the so-called "type". You just seem like someone that rolled up their sleeves and took the matter by hand and now look at you in a position of power where we need you. Could you talk to those at home? What would you say to convince them to run and what insights could you share with them about your experience running and what they would need to know in getting started? What helped you?

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:10:47):

Yeah, I think in terms of help, it's having a network of friends and supporters who can really help you keep believing in yourself because the system was not designed for people like me or you or so many of us who are out there. It's really meant for wealthy white male homeowners. That is who this system was built for. And, you know, I think a lot of times I hear people say, "Well I could never do that. You know, I'm not strong enough, I don't have the courage, I don't have the skills to go out there and do it." But just because you don't fit into this system does not mean that you don't belong there. And I have a very, very

good friend around here who says that very often, “It's because you don't belong. That's exactly why you're supposed to be there.”

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:11:29):

And I think that that is so true. And so all of these doubts and things, they are there and they will be with you even after you get there [laughs], that is not going to change because the system was not built for regular people to be in these positions of power. And so what I would say is just to make sure that you have strong community support around you wherever you find that community because the hardest part of doing this work is getting over the little voice inside your head that tells you, “I cannot do this. I don't belong here. I shouldn't be here.” And having people in your life who can help you push back on that, I think, is so critical. And I have the good fortune of being a part of the Emerge Colorado program. Emerge as an organization that has groups in many states that are giving Democratic women the skills that they need to run for office and to win.

Dr. Nicole Speer (00:12:24):

And so if you have a program like that, if you have something like Run for Something (if you're under 40), there are groups out there who can help you gain some of those more technical skills and knowledge that you will need to run. But I would say the biggest thing that you need is just people who will surround you with love and support and encouragement all along the way. And if you're even thinking about running for office, you probably should be [laughs] because it means that you have the knowledge to recognize that you're somebody who should belong, even if you don't right now. So I would say just surround yourself with love and support and like you said, roll up your sleeves and jump in there because nothing is going to change until we get more regular people in these positions of power where we are making decisions and setting policy that benefit regular people.

Andrea Chalupa (00:13:13):

Exactly. We have to flesh out the system with good people. The Republican party and—let's face it—some of the centrist stems have just a revolving door of lobbyists. Joe Manchin's a lobbyist for coal. That's what he is. A lot of Congress is. All these guys are lobbyists. And so that's why we need citizens to run for office who... Facts and empathy, facts and empathy! That should be everyone's campaign slogan. And no matter your age or gender, a really great hand holding book for everyone is Amanda Litman's book *Run For Something*. It's an excellent guide that demystifies the whole process of being a candidate and running for something. Amanda Litman's organization caters to young progressives, people under 40, men or women, however they identify, but even if you're older than 40 you could still read that book and you could also reach out to her organization saying, “Hey, I've aged out of what you guys do.”

Andrea Chalupa (00:14:09):

“Where could you send me so I can get the resources and the network I need to really practice this stuff and learn the ropes?” There is, as you mentioned, Emerge for women, but there are other groups out there. No matter how old you are, you just have to get in touch with them. And start with Run for Something, right? Whether you qualify for them or not, just to get a foot in the door for the information that you need to find your people, find your network. Okay, well thank you so much Nicole. So let's now turn to Hugh. So we have Hugh Stempfley here. Hugh Stampley, after his discharge from the army, Hugh earned a degree in international relations from the University of Minnesota leading to a 35-year career with social security. After retiring in 2009, he became more involved in politics. Living in Illinois, he made phone calls for Obama in 2012 (and met him!) and has canvassed for several candidates for the House. He trained as an election judge for the midterms, along with his grandson. Awww. They have a 50-year age difference and they kept our elections safe. That's so wonderful. Well, welcome to *Gaslit Nation*, Hugh. It's an honor to have you here.

Hugh Stempfley(00:15:21):

Thank you.

Andrea Chalupa:

That's so cool. So you were doing election protection work in the midterms?

Hugh Stempfley (00:15:25):

Correct. Election judge. The way I got involved with that, well, I've been canvassing and all that and making the calls. But at our Sunday school class church we had a session on Christian nationalism and the problems with it and what it was doing not only to the election process but to the whole religious process. So our pastor thought this would be a good chance to look at what exactly Christian nationalism is doing to the national picture. After that, one of the things is, as a liberal Christian, get involved in the election process because even though you're evangelical doesn't mean that you're conservative. So I was gonna do it. And then I mentioned to my son, my grandson, I mean. He said, "Well how much do they pay?" So that was his focus. He hadn't been involved in politics at all.

Hugh Stempfley (00:16:26):

So in Illinois election day is a state holiday, so he was able to get off college and be an election judge. And then he talked to his friends. Two more of them got signed up to be election judges and, you know, in southern Illinois, they're looking for Democratic election judges because this used to be a Democratic stronghold. Just like, you know, northern Minnesota where I came from was a Democratic stronghold, but with the demise of unions that basically turned those two areas red. We're a minority down here, but the problem with young kids is most of their news comes from TikTok. I've got four grandsons and I asked the youngest one the other day, he's 16, I said, "You know, where do you get your news?" He said, "TikTok." I get my news from PBS, NBC, CBS...the regular channels.

Hugh Stempfley (00:17:32):

But I enjoyed my experience. We had no problems. There was an equal amount of Democrats and Republicans as election judges. I did notice that it's very haphazard. You know, if you come in to vote, we find your name on the list. Even if your signature doesn't match it close, we look at when you signed it and how old you are now. And we say, "Okay, that's you." It was fun. I really enjoyed it. I met a lot of friends that I didn't realize lived in that district. Met a lot of new people. It was a good time.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:15):

And you were paid to do this?

Hugh Stempfley (00:18:17):

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:17):

Going back to your grandson's original question.

Hugh Stempfley (00:18:19):

Right? We were paid I think \$80 to be election judges.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:24):

Wow. And there's a training and all that?

Hugh Stempfley (00:18:26):

Right. And the training could have been better. I learned when you have to challenge people. And we didn't challenge anyone. They came in if their name was on the list, either the other people knew 'em or I knew 'em and we let 'em vote. Huge turnout. I don't know why, but it was a huge turnout.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:47):

Well, it was the first big election since the violent attempted overthrow of our democracy. So people had a lot to say in the polling booths.

Hugh Stempfley (00:18:57):

Right? Yeah. That was the day that'll live in infamy.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:59):

Always. Yeah. Speaking of that day and the Christian nationalism that your pastor wanted to speak about, that's really interesting because as we all know, the civil rights movement that took place in the churches in the South that became a hotbed, and you had martyrs, pastors that risked their lives, gave their lives for this war against authoritarianism in the South. So could you talk a little bit about that? That's really cool that your church seems to be so strongly on the side of human rights and democracy, that they're going to confront that issue.

Hugh Stempfley (00:19:35):

Right. We're a nation of immigrants and now the immigrants that are coming in, many of 'em are not Christians, but that doesn't mean that they don't have the same rights as regular white people. That's what we think of. That's what Christian nationalism pretty much focuses on; people who are white, people who have been here a long time. Like people came here before the revolution, people that are coming in now, a lot of 'em are Muslims, but they have and should have the same rights as Christians. And that's something that Christian nationalism is having a problem with is that they don't like differences. They don't like people who are not Christian having a voice in the nation. But, you know, like Christ says, you know, he welcomed everyone. He wasn't Christian. He was a Jew and he was a mideast Jew. So there's no reason that we shouldn't be welcoming people that were like Christ.

Andrea Chalupa (00:20:40):

Absolutely. And it's just power at the end of the day is what they're after. And keeping control.

Hugh Stempfley (00:20:47):

Power should be shared because too much power in one person...Even in Illinois you can see that the redistricting was slanted totally towards Democrats. In New York, for some reason, the redistricting seemed to be slanted towards Republicans, which is why there is a Republican majority in the House right now. I think churches have to be involved in politics because, you know, even though churches are losing members all the time, the ones that are there have a voice and they should have a voice. And we have to make sure that that voice is a voice of inclusion, not exclusion.

Andrea Chalupa (00:21:31):

You mentioned the unions. And so in southern Illinois and northern Minnesota, the union busting that has gone on by the corporations over the generations, what impact did that have? Why did that lead, with those unions being destroyed, why did that then translate into Republicans picking up all that ground?

Hugh Stempfley (00:21:54):

That's a good question. Because it seems that when the unions got destroyed, people got poorer. I don't know... Was it they remembered the old days when they could earn enough money to have a living?

Andrea Chalupa (00:22:09):

Buy a house. Send their kids to school.

Hugh Stempfley (00:22:10):

Yeah. You could buy a house, you could have kids, you didn't have to worry. You didn't have to have two jobs. Your union job protected you. It gave you enough to keep up with cost of living. When northern Minnesota had the iron ore mining, southern Illinois had coal mining. When those industries went down, that's when the unions started being busted. It wasn't a concerted effort, I don't think. Although, you know, it's these individual companies, if they had too many people drawing pensions, they would close that mine and reopen it under another name. So they didn't have to have the obligation, the former owner, even though the former owner was them. It's an unbelievable process of what they were going through.

Andrea Chalupa (00:23:01):

Wow. And it's almost like those areas became victims to the Republican gaslighting of grievance politics, pining for the good old days.

Hugh Stempfley (00:23:12):

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa (00:23:13):

And us versus them, the culture war, basically.

Hugh Stempfley (00:23:15):

I remember the first time I saw anything political was in '56 when we got our first television. We could only get one channel. And the conventions were on all the time. You didn't have your choice. So that's when I first saw it, but I was involved with politics before I became a federal employee and after I became a federal employee. I've been canvassing, I've been making phone calls, I've been donating money all through my life, but I'm glad I'm back.

Andrea Chalupa (00:23:48):

[laughs] And your grandson that gets his information, his news from TikTok, do you find him to be informed or are you pretty flabbergasted by what comes out of his mouth?

Hugh Stempfley (00:23:59):

It's unbelievable. They know almost nothing.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:03):

Well he must know some really cool dance moves from TikTok, I imagine [laughs]. So he's underinformed? What is he not aware of that you're aware of?

Hugh Stempfley (00:24:13):

He's really not even aware of the problems that Trump is having. He's not aware of how the war in Ukraine is going on. They're not aware of, you know, the banks. The Silicon Valley bank with the problems they're having. They have almost no political knowledge at all. The one in college has a little more because he's in college and he's learning more, but the other two that are still in high school, they know almost nothing. Maybe I was like that too when I was a kid. I really don't remember because that was 60 years ago.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:52):

And so you worked for Social Security.

Hugh Stempfley:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

And now you're retired.

Hugh Stempfley:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

And so could you tell us, are we going to get our social security when it's our turn? Is that going to be there for us?

Hugh Stempfley (00:25:02):

You know, I'll tell you... If they would... Right now there's an upper limit as to how much you pay social security tax on. If they did away with that, that would solve almost 80% of the problem. And it should be, because that is the one tax that people can't escape. Even corporations can't escape the social security tax, the social security/medicare tax. Income tax, it's easy to. And I hope at some point they see that that's what you have to do. You know, when old people come in to file for social security, most of them are happy because they are able to retire. But there's some that just say, you know, "I can't live on this. How am I going to make it?" But social security has gotten so many people out of poverty. It's a program that we cannot let die because people will not save for their retirement.

Andrea Chalupa (00:25:56):

Yeah. They're too busy paying for medical expenses. That's what wipes out your retirement.

Hugh Stempfley (00:26:01):

Yeah, I do worry. I do worry about even if, you know, even if people are putting aside some, social security is just like the bedrock of it. You build on that and that's where you go.

Andrea Chalupa (00:26:15):

Exactly. Final question for you Hugh, and obviously feel free to jump in as our discussions continue. What advice do you have for folks who haven't really done much in the midterm so far? Why should they get involved?

Hugh Stempfley (00:26:28):

First of all, it's fun. You get to know other people of like mind. When I went canvassing for Mr. Kelly—he didn't make it, by the way—I even got to go up to St. Louis, east St. Louis, and hear speakers up there who just fill you with joy because, you know, there's a hope. There's a hope in the world that there are people around you that believe what you believe in.

Andrea Chalupa (00:26:57):

It's wonderful. Thank you so much. Okay. And next up we have Jed. Based in San Francisco, Jed Holtzman has previously been a neuroscience researcher and assessed the effectiveness of global marine reserves. But he has spent the last decade working to reduce suffering and injustice through policy advocacy campaigns on air quality, environmental justice, clean energy and climate. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*, Jed Holtzman.

Jed Holtzman (00:27:28):

Thank you. It's a pleasure. And let me say that I don't know what the word is for the parasocial relationship of listening to someone rant for several years about things going to hell, but it's been a pleasure sharing that with you.

Andrea Chalupa (00:27:41):

Thank you so much. And you are our second brain expert on this episode. There's Dr. Nicole Speer and you. So I think Sarah and I are very honored [laughs] to have experts on the brain on this show because our minds are always about to explode.

Jed Holtzman (00:28:00):

A former expert.

Andrea Chalupa (00:28:01):

And what so what are you working on right now and what did you do in the midterms?

Jed Holtzman (00:28:06):

I right now am working on more environmental policy campaigns, essentially trying to comfort Ted Cruz's gas stove. That's a little bit of a joke, but it's been in the news lately, more or less, something like that. In the midterms, actually, I was just about to start a new job and so I was working part-time and had the benefit of a lot of time to devote to the midterms. So I decided to do some virtual carpetbagging, which is very easy to do these days. I wanna make a push for folks to think about text banking. So, I have knocked on doors, I have made phone calls, but in 2018, my congresswoman—you're gonna love this—in

2018, my congresswoman Nancy P. spent some money to take over the Pottery Barn at Castro and Market and turn it into what was called the red to blue nerve center or something.

Jed Holtzman (00:29:02):

And it was kind of focused on 2018 flipping the House. And you had a bunch of people in there, Republican nightmare, a bunch of people in San Francisco all texting across the country. And I think like every race that the Red to Blue Nerve Center had access to, we won. It's also very addictive to just send out a lot of texts and get replies. It's a very different kind of conversation and discourse than you have over the phone or at someone's door. Essentially, once 2022 rolled around, Nancy P. wasn't doing that this time, but thankfully there's more digital tools available and kind of clearing houses to find where all of the campaigns across the country are kind of posting their text banking. So I essentially just kind of became an almost full-time text banker for, I think it was 14 swing congressional candidates, two secretary of state candidates that were running against election-denying lunatics.

Jed Holtzman (00:29:59):

And then a few ballot measures that were related to democracy protection. Democracy protection and the diminution of Nazism and QAnon on lunacy are very important to me so that's kind of where I was trying to focus my efforts. And I think out of all of those campaigns, all of them won except for three. One of them won by 310 votes. And so I just wanna throw out there that every vote literally does count and that you texting 10 more people literally would make a difference. I also wanna say that while I had time to do way too much of this, even if you just have an hour or two to spend, it really makes a huge difference. So the only ones that lost were a couple 2018 flips in California and then the George Santos race, sadly. But hopefully that one will be remedied in the next election, if not earlier.

Jed Holtzman (00:30:52):

Texting literally just involves hitting the space bar or the enter key on your computer. You're sending out a lot of texts and then some people respond back to you and you start having conversations with them. There's little quick texts for you to fill in and/or you can have just legitimate independent conversations with voters. It's really fun. You reach a ton of people, just logistically more people than you could possibly reach over a telephone or walking around a neighborhood. And if and when someone is exceptionally mean to you, it doesn't feel like anything because it's a text message and it's actually kind of funny. And as someone who's sensitive and might get a little sad if someone is mean to me at the door or over the phone, I want to just tell you that texting is for you if you feel that way.

Andrea Chalupa (00:31:44):

Totally [laughs]. Totally. I'm an indie film producer, so me calling up complete strangers and being like, "Hey, let's talk about voting! I know you've gotten 50 of these phone calls and I'm your 51st and you're gonna talk to me about voting." That's very much what I have to do to get a film made. So I'm very much in that energy. But yes, texting sounds a lot easier on the psyche and all that stuff and just an hour an election cycle can make a huge difference, if all of us chip in. Where do you recommend going to sign up for texting?

Jed Holtzman (00:32:17):

Yeah, so here's the secret knowledge. As of now—of course these things change over time, but as of now—a lot of Dem campaigns use the website, mobilize.us. Mobilize.us. That's actually in-person canvassing, phone banking, text banking, that's just kind of a political campaign HQ. You're able to search by what kind of event you want, you're able to even search by things in your zip code for local actions and things like that. So as someone's sitting in my room in San Francisco, California, this is how I was able

to find campaigns across the country. And also, not that they need a shout out for me, but as a nerd I was kind of trying to use the FiveThirtyEight voodoo as some kind of benchmark by which to judge who might need the help the most. So if someone was looking pretty safe, I was not wanting to spend time there. I was kind of looking at folks that maybe had like a 25% chance to a 55% chance. So things that really could use... Where one extra volunteer could probably make, you know, a good bit of difference. So with just those two resources and some time I was able to plug into all of those campaigns.

Andrea Chalupa (00:33:35):

Thank you for doing that and thank you for trying to stop George Santos. And that reminds me of some news that just came out. We're recording this on March 18th. We are running it this coming Tuesday. I know I told you guys the first week of May, but I got that wrong. So we're running it this coming Tuesday. And the news that just broke this week was that the National Democratic Party is launching a shadow state Democratic party in New York State because Jay Jacobs, who's an Andrew Cuomo guy, who's an entrenched Democratic centrist, who is not a team player by any means, and he uses his powerful position as the head of the New York State Democratic Party to fight progressives; the same progressives that governor Kathy Hochul needed in the final hours to save her abysmal governor's race from proud white supremacist Lee Zeldin, who is a Big Lie Trumpist, who rallied up the frothy right wing across New York State.

Andrea Chalupa (00:34:38):

New York State is a place that used to have Hitler Youth camps back in the day. You know, so there's this whole legacy here that Trump can easily build off of to build his movement here, to bring Zeldin to governor and try to escape accountability some way. That's definitely what they would've had an eye on with these elections. But we managed to stop him thanks to the progressive grassroots army across the state, especially in New York, which unfortunately the Democratic State Party is at war against. And since we have so many easy-picking House seats in New York state, as everyone now knows, including George Santo's House seat which includes parts of Queens, the big old federal Democratic party obviously sees our state party here in New York as totally incompetent and useless and has built up its own machine to ensure that we don't lose any House seats.

Andrea Chalupa (00:35:33):

I think that's pathetic. I think that's putting in work in a blue state that should be easy pickings. I can't even tell you... It's like, that's taking resources out of places like Arizona and Nevada and it's just so sad that New York state has to be such a freeloader because Kathy Hochul can't show any gratitude to help her historically slim victory as Democratic governors go in this state by just appointing someone who's a team player, who's a coalition builder. It doesn't have to be a progressive, it just has to be somebody that plays nice with others and builds instead of destroys. So that's the latest news in New York state and I just had to throw that out there because, Jed, you know, in a very safe blue state—in California—[laughs] he was trying to save us from ourselves here in New York state. And I appreciate that, Jed, so much.

Andrea Chalupa (00:36:19):

And I'm sorry to the rest of the country. We're trying to do what we can to make New York state more of a team player and we're trying to get rid of Jay Jacobs. It's Governor Kathy Hochul who's standing in the way because of the big giant corporate interests and the big money interests. And it's disgusting, right? It's just this war against progressives that some in the Democratic Party establishment are openly waging, which is really sad. So with that said, back to Jed [laughs]. So you work in environmental issues. I'm gonna ask the same question that I asked Hugh about social security: Can we save the environment? Are we too late? What is your feeling on that?

Jed Holtzman (00:36:59):

Actually, it's changed even just in years. I used to be a bit more doom and gloom. We need to do everything that we can either way because, kind of like one volunteer contributing to a campaign gets X number of voters and those voters are important, if we reduce environmental devastation, we are literally reducing suffering and saving lives today. Like, say the world's gonna end in seven years: If we can reduce suffering and death in those seven years, is that worth doing? In my opinion, it is. So that's kind of what my view used to be. But actually, the penetration of renewable energy has gone way quicker, including in states like Texas and Kansas, you know, that don't have any political ideological pull towards it, it has gone way faster than anyone expected. The transition on any number of kind of environmental curves is going quicker than expected.

Jed Holtzman (00:37:56):

And so I think it provides a good amount of hope. Also, some of the science is coming in in our favor. Used to be thought that kind of, once you put the CO₂ up there, it's pretty much gonna affect warming potentially for hundreds to thousands of years, which is a downer. Now, it looks like there are various interventions that you can do that might shorten that timeframe as well as new interesting research into carbon dioxide removal. So not the thing where you're making polluting refineries or factories, power plants okay by putting a carbon capture machine on that and saying that you're gonna inject that into the ground, but actually ways to take carbon out of the air and mineralize it into stone. Really interesting things that, you know, obviously that is not turning back into CO₂ anytime soon. So there's a lot of work going on on this because people have figured out they can make money from it, right?

Jed Holtzman (00:38:54):

There's a whole new market for technologies, for carbon dioxide removal, for electric vehicles, for electric appliances, for even cleaner fossil fuel-polluting equipment. So I think in our society, as long as folks realize that they can make some money off of it, there will be action in that direction. And thankfully those kinds of organic processes seem to be happening. That's probably a little too long-winded for the podcast, but I think as a snappy answer to your question, yes, we can. Everything that you do makes a difference. And I wanna really try to reorient people around from feeling like this is "your fault" and that this is something that you need to kind of fix with a light bulb here or kind of a bike ride there or a changed meal here. All of those things are important to do for their own reasons, but really what we need to affect these changes is structural pressure on systemic systems essentially.

Jed Holtzman (00:40:00):

None of us decided we wanted to destroy the planet by flying on a plane, right? This is a system that we inherited. And so it really is just about people getting folks like Nicole elected, getting folks who represent your values elected, but also really leaning hard on the people who are in power at the local level, the regional level, the state level, your regulatory agencies, your legislatures, anywhere where you can make your voice heard. Because our system was established around the idea that the public is going to comment and if the public isn't there to comment and the only folks who are there to comment are corporations or industry, then in a way, the system is doing what it's designed to do. It's just the people who aren't doing what we're designed to do anymore because we are too busy working 40-plus hours a week. And so just trying to carve out a little time in life to be not only an employee and maybe, you know, a good partner or parent or something like that, but also a good resident or good citizen I think is kind of the most important thing that people can do to save our environment.

Andrea Chalupa (00:41:10):

And Jed Holtzman and Dr. Nicole Speer as the two brain scientists who are also, you know, working really closely with... Nicole's an elected official, Jed worked with elected officials, and you have all these initiatives for environmental protections. Maybe you guys could get together after this and maybe Nicole could consider some of the work you're doing for the Boulder City Council.

Jed Holtzman (00:41:33):

I'll be in Colorado in April. We can get together.

Andrea Chalupa (00:41:36):

Wow! It's a *Gaslit Nation* Change the World Connection [laughs]. That's what we're all about is world domination for good here at *Gaslit Nation*. Well thank you so much, Jed. That's all very inspiring and wonderful, as all these conversations have been. Which brings us to Isaac Flanagan, who I had the chance to meet when we were both doing the Christy Smith phone bank for a House race in California that was extremely close. The first time Christy Smith ran, she only lost by something like 300 votes. And unfortunately, Sean Patrick Maloney, who was Pelosi's guide to run the DCCC choked off a lot of those progressive races from much-needed resources and he pumped a lot of money into his own race which should have been an easy one in New York state, which he ended up losing, making history as one of the very few DCCC chairs to lose his own race. Good for you, Sean Patrick Maloney. And now you dare to have the audacity to try to make yourself, you know, run for labor secretary. How dare you? Anyway. [laughs]. All my tangents in this episode. You guys are bringing the joy, I'm bringing the need for improvement. So Isaac, you and I were chatting during that phone bank and you mentioned that you were in Ukraine at the time and that you've been doing a lot of important work for Ukraine as well as for democracy in America. So tell us your story.

Isaac Flanagan (00:43:03):

Yeah, thank you. First of all, you know, thanks to Nicole, Hugh and Jed for what you guys all did to defend democracy this cycle. And in particular thank you to Andrea and Sarah for the work you're doing with the podcast and the books and the films. Jed, I think, used the phrase parasocial, you know, I'll echo that and say, I just couldn't imagine living through this era without the informal virtual support group you guys have been running for all these years. And of course I look forward to the day that you get to declare victory and pivot to your UFO podcast about the midterms and Ukraine. So, I was in Ukraine during the midterms. There was a limit to what I could do in a hands-on way, although I do believe that these struggles are linked and that fighting Putin in Ukraine does indirectly make a difference in our elections at home.

Isaac Flanagan (00:43:51):

That said, specifically, I was up late in the night phone banking for people like Christy Smith, like John Fetterman, other crucial swing state candidates, including... I live in Colorado. I don't live in district 7 but I was proud to help Brittany Pettersen keep a House seat blue against a guy who described himself—this was the Republican candidate in Colorado 7—his catchphrase was that he was the male Lauren Boebert. So that was something he was proud of. And I'm proud that Brittany kept that seat. Unfortunately, my local representative of the Kremlin caucus here in Colorado 3, she kept her seat but we came within 600 votes, which is a lesson, you know, as other folks on this call have repeated: Every vote really does matter and the DCCC really doesn't know which seats to fight for and how to fight for them.

Isaac Flanagan (00:44:40):

I definitely agree with other folks on this call, the tools have gotten a lot better this cycle. I actually, you know, maybe kind of similar to Andrea, I like the phone banking. I like getting on the phone with people.

I don't care if they yell at me. I'm living for the ones that I can resonate with. But in past cycles it's just honestly been a pain in the ass to manually dial all those numbers. And now it's like you just click, it races through all the ones that are not there or disconnected or voicemail and it just one after another puts you on the phone with somebody, which makes a huge difference. So that was really great. And I think others on this call have said, it's fun. You make new friends; the people on the *Gaslit Nation* Zoom calls, the little chatter in between making the phone banking.

Isaac Flanagan (00:45:24):

It was all really fulfilling despite being very late at night for me. Nicole made some comments about the impact of volunteering on local campaigns that I just wanted to echo. I helped out with a city council campaign this year and it was the first time I've ever volunteered on something local. We didn't win, unfortunately. We came within just a couple hundred votes, but it was so clear, as Nicole said, that I think it is really important to volunteer on these. National campaigns and the state legislature campaigns and the swing vote stuff and going on mobilize.us and just figuring out, okay, what are the ones where I can help, help. But wow, you can make a big difference on a local campaign. I've never seen that before. And I think that there, at least for me, there can be a sort of like imposter syndrome with this stuff of like, what could I possibly have to offer on a political campaign?

Isaac Flanagan (00:46:12):

Yeah, there's a lot of work that needs to be done. There's not a lot of people doing it. I'm sure in whatever district or municipality you're in, if you literally just email the candidate and you're like, "Hey, I wanna help out," there's probably something really meaningful to do. So I would encourage people to do that. Sorry, Andrea, that was a long-winded preference to your question, which was actually about Ukraine. So in the *Gaslit Nation* Action Guide, you guys talk about how grassroots power is the strongest power that we have left in America. Tim Snyder and others talk about how you resist fascism by being in community with each other, that fascists want you to be alone, isolated and powerless. And I think of that a lot when I think of how our work in Ukraine unfolded and how we built this organization Zero Line.

Isaac Flanagan (00:46:54):

So I went over there last May less than 90 days into the invasion. I didn't have any kind of definite plan. I didn't know how long I was gonna be there or what I was gonna do, but I did have the contact information for a friend of a friend who had gone over to Poland on day two. I linked up with him and the people that he had met—Ukrainians and others that he'd met over those past three months working—and we just looked for immediate needs. At that time, April/May, tourniquets and other combat trauma gear, things that you would do to fix a bullet wound or a shrapnel wound, they were really hard to find at the front. And so we just got to work plugging holes and solving problems. By the end of May, in that phase where we were really focused on medical gear, we had delivered over a hundred vehicles that we would buy, just like older 10-15 year old 4x4 consumer trucks that were really needed as, you know, basically frontline ambulances to get people from the zero line, which is the furthest of the front lines.

Isaac Flanagan (00:47:56):

(That's why we named our organization that) and getting people from the furthest of the front lines to five kilometers back where the hospitals are. So we would get these trucks in Western Europe, we'd spray paint 'em green, get 'em to the border. We'd pack every cubic inch other than the driver's seat with medical supplies. And then the thing that made us a little bit different in those early days is we had built this network of local Ukrainian partners; people who lived in the Donbas, in the south, in the places where their fighting was from, people who were from those places and knew their way around. And we built this network where, unlike what a lot of the big budget brand name aid organizations who will not

comment further on, but most of them, if they were doing anything at all, were just sort of dropping supplies off at the Polish Ukrainian border.

Isaac Flanagan (00:48:44):

Things would sort of pile up in Lviv where they're not needed. And we were really proud of the ability that we had built to get these trucks filled with medical aid all the way to the places where the bullets were flying and the bombs were falling and where things were actually needed. So that's kind of what we started on and that's what we're working on in April and May. And now as things have evolved, we've really prided ourselves on staying close to the most current needs and eventually, through the efforts of other organizations that eventually caught up, you know, tourniquets and combat trauma gear are largely a solved problem. Of course, people are unfortunately still getting shot, they're still getting bombed, but those supplies are there and they're findable. So we evolved from that to electronics, drones, you know, which are basically flying cameras.

Isaac Flanagan (00:49:35):

In our world, we're not working with lethal drones. So drones, encrypted communications and different tools to really help make the armed forces of Ukraine and the soldiers there safer and more effective. Our premise basically is that whatever it is that you care about from a humanitarian perspective, whether that's animals, refugee resettlement, education, children, we think the most humanitarian thing that you can do is to keep territory in Ukrainian hands and to win territory back. So we try to be closest to the point of leverage and in that area. We focus on providing tools and technical assistance to make the armed forces of Ukraine safer and more effective because when we win the war, then we can also solve all those other problems.

Andrea Chalupa (00:50:20):

And do you have anything in your background that prepared you to go into a war zone and set up a humanitarian first response organization? Because it doesn't look like it.

Isaac Flanagan (00:50:31):

[laughs]. No. No, nothing. I have been an entrepreneur my entire career in places from manufacturing to logistics to technology and I would say experience with different kinds of regulated markets. The first thing that I did when I moved to Aspen three years ago is I got here and I was absolutely flabbergasted that there was no way to get a PCR Covid test in under eight days in a place that has the financial and intellectual capital that we have. Five months into the pandemic, I couldn't believe that that hadn't been solved. And I kept kind of looking around to find the grownups and the people that were gonna solve that, and it ultimately wasn't solved. So my business partner and I, on basically six weeks notice, opened a full-blown FDA-approved and permitted and regulated high complexity diagnostics facility. So I think this collection of kind of unrelated experiences positioned me really well to get to Ukraine and sort of like, "Okay, well what are the needs? Okay." And just kind of work backwards from, "Well it seems like there's a shortage of about 50,000 tourniquets. Well, where do you buy them? How can we get the best price? You know, email the boards of directors of the companies that make these products, make our case to get discounts and then build a supply chain to get it over there."

Andrea Chalupa (00:51:50):

When you were in Ukraine, were you ever scared? Did you come under missile fire?

Isaac Flanagan (00:51:54):

You know, I think that one of the great things about being human that's great most of the time is we adapt to things and we get used to them. Sometimes that's a negative, right? When there are people who are trying to steal our elections and steal our democracy, you know, hopefully we don't get too used to that. The first time you hear the air raid siren, it's a little bit like, you know, that's a little scary. And then they're going off all the time because Putin's terror campaign against the Ukrainian people means that these sirens are going on all the time, and it eventually just sort of becomes background noise. I spend most of my time in Kyiv, which in the summer felt very safe and normal. As you guys all know, in the fall, the campaign of the suicide drones made things seem edgier.

Isaac Flanagan (00:52:41):

But we periodically will make trips out to the frontline to go along with our deliveries. So, definitely there were some *Twilight Zone* moments. In July, we went out to the Bakhmut, Sloviansk, Izyum triangle area, and I'll still never forget we stopped off in Sloviansk to make a delivery of drones and I heard something that I'd never heard before, which was just a continuous air raid siren that doesn't stop. And every street was empty and there were no people on the street. So it was a real reminder of, you know, just how harrowing... Set aside the reality of these munitions falling in your community. Just imagine hearing that sound for hours at a time without a let up. So, you know, fortunately I've never been all that close to anything truly dangerous.

Andrea Chalupa (00:53:28):

So, us in America, this war is just dragging on and I worry that we're becoming desensitized to it even though it's absolutely horrific. And there's a lot at stake for the whole world if Ukraine should fall because Putin is a modern day Hitler. These guys are all cut from the same cloth. There's nothing creative about him, there's nothing innovative. It's just autocracy versus democracy, once again, the world is facing. So, you know, it's 2023. We have DeSantis clearly running for president. He hasn't announced it yet, and Trump we know is running because he needs to keep that whole movement going to try to stay outta jail himself. What advice do you have for people as we enter yet another big election, 2024, right around the corner, as Ukraine becomes this big talking point and Americans are made to feel as though we're being squeezed, as though we're being ripped off, as Kevin McCarthy and others wanna call it (Large Marge in Georgia) "a blank check for Ukraine" and and so on, and that "Ukraine is the new welfare queen" and all that stuff. So what do you wanna say to the American voter, the American public, and especially how do you wanna equip people on the conversations they should be having with their family members around the Thanksgiving table and so on about what the stakes are for us as Americans in Ukraine and why Ukraine should matter?

Isaac Flanagan (00:54:46):

Yeah, I mean, I think there is a tendency in our current political discourse to use a lot of big words and make things complicated. And I think there's a really disappointing and depressing tendency among journalists... It seems like the bigger your platform is, the less likely you are to just say what things are, which is self-interested lies. And you see all these, you know, *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and people with millions of Twitter followers twist themselves in knots to come up with some kind of false equivalence between the people who are saying, "There is an active genocide in progress in Europe and the people who are saying, "Yeah, but Putin has a point too." And there is no equivalence between those two arguments. To watch DeSantis become even more of an invertebrate in real time in front of us...

Isaac Flanagan (00:55:44):

The Lincoln Project posted a little highlight reel just the other day of his comments in 2015-16 and '17 when he was actually kind of ahead of the mainstream and saying, "We need to arm Ukraine. We need to help them resist incursions into their country." And now I don't know how he keeps a straight face calling it a "territorial dispute." I mean, it's just a lie and it's a self-interested lie that's not based on any kind of principle. He thinks that the only way he's gonna get the Trump voter is to cuddle up to Putin. And so that's what he is doing. But it's just a lie. There's no three-dimensional chess foreign theory to it. And in terms of advice, I guess I would say two things; one that's a little bit less immediate but important.

Isaac Flanagan (00:56:32):

The less immediate thing is if you have any time, whatever time you have, whatever your form of consuming information, whether that's reading books, audio books, podcasts, try just to spend right now a little bit more time on history because if you go through, whether it's watching *Mr. Jones* or reading *The Last Call at the Hotel Imperial* or all the frequent troubles of our days, you know, any of these things that you guys have talked about on the show with regard to World War II history, you see that it's just the exact same patterns; the same people with the same power base and the same supporters and the same funders that in the '30s were saying, "Let's be isolationist. We don't need to get involved with what's going on in Europe. Or actually, you know, is Hitler even that bad of a guy?"

Isaac Flanagan (00:57:23):

You know, people that were both-sidesing Hitler while the cattle cars were already running. It wasn't like people who were, "Oh, maybe this won't turn into a big deal and they were just wrong." It was already a big deal. That stuff was happening then and here we are 90 years later and it's the same thing happening again. And if you spend a little time consuming some content about history, then you'll recognize them. But I think that's hard. And what I have a lot of empathy for is, like, I wasn't taught any of this stuff in school. I like to think that I went to pretty good schools, but it's the reading over the last two years that allows me to see those patterns. So I would say, I know we're all busy trying to survive in this world, but if you can find some time to even just spend two hours watching *Mr. Jones*, I think that really helps because it clarifies the stakes and it puts you in a better position that, when you are at lunch and someone says, "Yeah, DeSantis says, 'Ukraine's a welfare baby.'" you can say, "Yeah, actually these assholes have been saying the same shit since 1933. There's nothing new. They were wrong then, they're wrong now." So that's that. Obviously, to address the point on the face of it, Ukraine is not a welfare baby. Go there. Anyone who wants to—

Andrea Chalupa (00:58:35):

No, you know who is a welfare baby? Silicon Valley Bank and its executives [laugh]. That's who the welfare welfare baby is.

Isaac Flanagan (00:58:42):

[laughs] I mean, it's completely insane. But if you wanna say for a moment that human life doesn't matter, that human suffering doesn't matter, if you just want to look at the black and white of it, we are spending an infinitesimal fraction of our \$900 billion defense budget. We are deploying equipment that we don't currently use in wars anymore. The HIMARS system—which we have over 400 of and we have given Ukraine less than 30—has been enormously consequential. It's not a weapons system that we would even use. It's antiquated gear. So we're handing off our antiquated gear, we're pulling in new orders to replace those things. So we're benefiting the defense contractors that donate so much money on the hill. We're using a tiny fraction of our budget. We have not put a single American soldier in harm's way. And we are dealing Putin the greatest black eye that he's had in 20 years.

Isaac Flanagan (00:59:36):

So let's pretend for a moment that you don't care about Ukrainians. Let's say you don't even like Ukrainians: Russia represents the single greatest threat to our peace and prosperity, our ability to live normal lives that exist right now. And we're containing that with pennies on the dollar. So why not do that? So anyone listening, if you hear someone in your personal life spouting these Putin talking points that are laundered through our social media and our journalism, just say, "Look, if you care about human rights, then you already know the answer. And if you don't, it's the highest ROI way to damage Russia that you could possibly think of."

[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.

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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.

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Andrea Chalupa (54:54):

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