

Gaslit Nation Transcript

31 May 2023

“Saving Democracy”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/saving-democracy-83781025>

[opening music features [‘Paper Thin’ by Confusions](#)]

Andrea Chalupa:

I am Andrea Chalupa, a journalist 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. And this is *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the United States and rising autocracy around the world. The song you just heard at the top of the show was 'Paper Thin' by Confusions

“Paper Thin” is off “Muck of Morale,” the second album release by experimental pop artist Ben Turner. Ben releases music under the name Confusions. The album and an accompanying experimental lecture on vulnerability through sound were recently performed at the Pizzuti Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, as part of the Columbus Printed Arts Center's inaugural art book fair, where Confusions was a featured artist.

Interested in a spectrum of lofi and hifi sounds and approaching music as a space, Confusions values the process of creating songs and soundscapes through experimentation, and what that teaches them about their life and relationships. Confusions have been described as “genre-bending” with lyrics that could “provide the subplot for a short film.”

Ben provided this statement about the song:

“My partner and I are listeners of the podcast.”—thank you very much—“This song features audio samples from the 1940s film *Gaslight* and of” —friend of the pod—“Jared Yates Sexton (sampled with permission) from *The Muckrake Political Podcast*. I'm seeking intersections between art and community.”—thank you so much for doing that. That is everything—“I make art to cope with my emotions and as a choice to grow from experiences. The beginning of the song leads with compassion. It's a reminder to go easy on yourself when you make mistakes. Much of the time we were growing up, my sister and I were taught the opposite.”—aww—“I'm trying to promote this way of talking to oneself compassionately through my art.”—I love you. I love you so much—“But I also use my songs as a space to name the traumatic things I see and experience. That's the second half of the song. Sometimes I think this song is like a plea to those with fragile egos, to confront their insecurities so we can all have more enriched and equitable lives.” Yes. All very well said.

We will post a link to 'Paper Thin' on our Twitter page and in the show notes for this episode on our Patreon page. You can find more of Confusions' music on Bandcamp at confusions.bandcamp.com. Thank you so much for sharing your work with us Ben! And if you want to submit your work, your art, to Gaslit Nation, look for the link on how to do that on our Linktree or in the show notes for this week's

episode. Thank you to all the artists out there creating a space for us to breathe.

Andrea Chalupa (00:03:23):

And with us today is David Pepper, a lawyer, writer, political activist, former elected official, and adjunct professor. He also served as the chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party between 2015 and 2021. He's the author of several novels and nonfiction books, including his latest, *Saving Democracy: A User's Manual for Every American*. Welcome back to *Gaslit Nation*, David.

David Pepper (00:03:51):

Thank you, I'm so glad to be here and technically on my launch day of all times. So it's really an honor to be here. There's no one I'd rather be with. You guys have been preaching a lot of what I'm saying for a long time.

Andrea Chalupa (00:04:02):

Well, it's an honor and we're in the bunker together in this fight. I remember in late August of last year, you and I first met doing a virtual fundraiser for the States Project, which was instrumental in flipping the state house in Pennsylvania. And that was with the cast of *Succession* and you were one of the featured speakers. I was the host, trying to wrangle the cats and keep that show moving. And your talk was so gripping and chilling and the States Project, which is one of the groups that we point folks to on the, "What should I be doing with everything being so scary and very serious right now?", we always say fight locally and the States Project, which is a great group to do fundraising and put in some time, they hold you up as sort of like their big... I don't wanna say thought leader, but you're the book they always say, "Everybody get David's book!" And you're out with your latest. I do want to ask you, so some of the big news stories out now, Ron DeSantis, who is the Viktor Orbán of Florida, he's finally coming out. He's going to run for president. And in a very fitting way, he's going to be announcing this on Twitter with Elon Musk. And they represent just the worst of America right now that is taking over everything, consolidating power in media, bullying local school boards, bullying librarians, banning books, scapegoating LGBTQ people, drag queens. What are your thoughts on this announcement and DeSantis' whole anti-democratic movement?

David Pepper (00:05:36):

Well, you know, it's funny, in my first book, this *Laboratories* book, and I repeat some of what I say in the second book, usually the driving force of the right-wing nonsense in these states are the state houses. They sort of overwhelm the governors who often have a little bit more of a moderate instinct. I mean, we've seen this in Ohio. We saw it in Arizona under Doug Ducey. Florida is the exception. Ron DeSantis basically in one person sort of encapsulates what I would say usually is what a state house is doing. And the reason you don't normally know it's doing it is because no one knows about state houses or cares about them. But Ron DeSantis is actually bringing much more profile to what all these states are doing because he's a governor running for president. In one way, I mean, it's awful for Florida, I feel for them, just like I feel for Ohio and all these other states. In one way though, it's actually kind of helpful because you're like... You know why I keep going on about state houses? Because they are doing all the things that DeSantis is doing and most people don't know about it. So he sort of is almost the personification of

the attack on democracy; the Orbán style leadership that we're seeing all over. In Ohio, it's again, the charges generally led by state house leaders who are anonymous, just like that's true in Tennessee and other states. DeSantis happens to represent it himself. Now, I will say this: Just as the former party chair in me—and we'll be on in a year or two and maybe we can see if I was right—he's a horrific candidate. I feel bad that Florida is going through the hell they're going through to prop up somebody who I think is not going to go very far. So it's almost worse in a way that he's using them as his little laboratory and in the end, he does not have the makings of a strong candidate. You know, they're all running basically assuming that Trump will be indicted again. But even if that happens, I don't really see DeSantis going anywhere. And what's ironic is, like most of the right-wing current project, almost everything he's doing is unpopular. I go through this in this new book. Book banning, CRT, almost everything they're doing, the crazy gun stuff, it's all unpopular. And I think they're doing it to stoke their own base, but in this case, all of that stuff which makes him a toxic candidate for the general has actually not even got him anywhere in a primary. I mean, he's further behind Trump than he was six months ago before the stuff with Disney and everything else really got going. So it hasn't worked. He's a bad candidate. But for our purposes of explaining to people that the attack on democracy is so much bigger than Donald Trump and it starts in states, I mean, he honestly is sort of this helpful rogue that he shows people what it looks like. And the bad news is, in Ohio it's happening, in Tennessee it's happening, in other states it's happening, but it's a little more undercover because we don't have a presidential candidate who's quarterbacking it all. But I don't think he's gonna go far. I don't think he's very skilled at all. He seems like a really poor candidate. And I also think that for six months they've been wasting time, providing cover for Trump when he was indicted in New York, just not very good warmup to what is apparently going to be announced, of all things with Elon Musk on Twitter, which again, that's a very narrowcast right-wing world that, in the end, only going for that world is not very good long term for them.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:01):

Yeah. DeSantis and Elon Musk together announcing his campaign on Twitter is like the mouth of hell opening up. It's just so representative of everything we're up against.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:10):

So you were a Democratic Party chair for a very long time. Do you have any insight of what's going on in Florida? Why did millions of people vote for this guy? He was extreme before his most recent election and there's been just sort of frustration that the Democratic Party has ceded ground. They lost in the messaging battle with a lot of the Latino communities with the socialist message that the far right has been bashing the Democrats on, calling them communists. So what is your insight there? Are we losing Florida? Biden is saying that he's going to pick up Florida—

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

—because of all the craziness of DeSantis. So how can we save Florida?

David Pepper (00:09:46):

I mean, my perception from a distance is, although we are watching DeSantis with our eyes on all the extremism, in the same way I could tell you how terrible I think Mike DeWine has been as governor of Ohio for a while. In this state, he actually appealed to more moderate people. He seemed kind of normal. And my guess is that's actually what he has appeared to be for most of his tenure as governor of Florida. Now, maybe he's pivoting more of late but my guess is that that's what Charlie Crist was running against, that beyond the organizing of the party and all that, DeSantis actually was doing okay in the polls there, or better than okay. Thanks to a broader Democratic push in Washington, the economy is doing pretty well in most places. So I think that that was a state that the sort of midterm against the White House, a governor who has not alienated most Floridians as much as those of us watching more closely are worried about him. The biggest threat of Ron DeSantis generally—and you see this in polls—is that insiders who see all his anti-Disney stuff and everything else, we see that, but he still is polling better than Trump too because—and this is our mistake—when we make everything about Donald Trump, we give cover to other people like DeSantis. He doesn't seem as crazy as Trump. His type of extremism is slightly more subtle than this insane personality of Trump. And my guess is in both Florida and the country, there's some work to do to try and show people he may not be as crazy as Donald Trump in some ways. He's not having trials for defamation or sexual assault or worse. But when it comes to the basic measurements of a democracy, he's actually just as bad and in some cases could be worse. My sense is that that never broke through in Florida and if he were to win the primary, I think there'd be work to do in the general to make sure that was very clear to people. I'll just say about the Florida Democratic Party, and I've gotten to know some of their chairs over the years, and this is one of the biggest problems in Democratic politics: Chairs turn over every couple years, and there's not a lot of consistency or continuity in the infrastructure. You know, there's a bad election, the chair resigns, there's a new chair, they make a lot of promises. It's so much harder than anyone thinks it is to build this stuff up. You spend half your time dealing with the inner party politics versus the precinct organizing that frankly is the most important thing these parties could be doing. If you're not new to the swing state, the resources aren't what they should be. So it's very difficult. And I think Florida, when I look back, you know, when I was chair, I think there were at least three Florida chairs in my five and a half years as chair. And we have a new one now, and I think she actually could be very good. I don't know her personally, but she ran a very hard race for governor. Obviously we were all thrilled by what happened in the mayor's race at Jacksonville a few weeks ago. She seems to really be on it. I would say the gold standard of chairs right now is Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota's been good for a long time. And what we need is as many people of that caliber who run it like a well-run nonprofit whose mission is to win elections and do great public service. All the old good old boy party stuff is not how you win. And my hope is she's of that mold that organizing is the heart of it. And one thing in common with Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, those chairs have been there a while so there's some continuity, there's some trust. When they say we're going to do something, they do it. And it's not it's not what some states have had, which is constant turnover, which never really lets you even get underway. So that's some of it.

Andrea Chalupa (00:13:22):

The road to the House—to winning the House in 2024—goes through New York State. The Democrats

are committing a lot of money to this and they kind of have to do that to work around our state party chair, Jay Jacobs, who has been asleep at the wheel. There's a big grassroots movement bringing together Democratic centrists, progressives, people from across the whole spectrum, people that normally don't see eye to eye on very many issues. They're all united in trying to get an effective coalition-building, organizing being the heart of the movement, precinct-building chair. And it's very, very, very, very tough because like you said, it's this old boy politics. He was an Andrew Cuomo appointee and he knows where, I guess, the deep pockets are; he's got the corporate friends or whatever. So he's really entrenched and it's very hard to get him out. And we're going to pay the price of it again, like we did in these midterms where we lost the House. We could have won the House. We kept the Senate. We had this big old blue wave thanks to the low loss of reproductive healthcare rights. And voters, especially young voters, were coming out in droves. And we could have kept the House if New York State had its act together. And it's heartbreaking because you see all these other states working so hard; in Nevada and Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan. How can we in New York State pull our weight and what advice do you have for Jay Jacobs? Don't you think... My advice is step down, let some fresh thinking come in. You've been there a bit too long and you have a track record that's not great, to say the very least. What advice do you have for us here in New York State?

David Pepper (00:14:55):

Yeah, so I was on a call a few months ago. We probably had mutual friends on that call that walked through the turnout numbers in New York and it really was distressing. And then I heard sort of anecdotally from people who were kind of part of the party and it was frankly more distressing. And I actually do think whenever you see a party, and this often happens in blue States because they don't feel the need... They think they're going to win so the parts of competition that make you more efficient and effective aren't there. And I think that's a risk in blue states. Whenever you see a party that is sort of... The chair or the party is simply the arm of one office holder, I'm telling you, you're going to have problems. And this is what I said on the call: The more you're like, again, when I was chair of Ohio or Wisconsin, I thought of it as not the old school. I didn't work for one person, one politician. There are too many things to do to only be serving one politician. You'll let too many other people down if that's your mindset. There literally are conflicts of interest if that's your mindset. Think of it as a nonprofit. What's your mission statement? Again, win elections, do everything you can to win those elections at all levels, and then go encourage great public service. And I think pushing and advocating for that model in the year 2023 could be more important. The fact that you are on the backdrop of a really poor election result gives you some volume about that that you don't have if you're coasting every year and the state looks blue. My advice, though, would be to, I think, to me, it all starts, and I put this in the book, I have a whole section on this. There's a lot of things parties can do and have to do that most people don't care about. And if they don't or do them well, it may make a difference. But the greatest low-hanging fruit in democratic politics is precinct organizing. Do you have someone who owns the precinct they live in and says long before the campaign starts, long before people are knocking doors from a campaign, which is gonna be the last three months, "I own this precinct. When someone new moves in, I know it. There are eight streets in my precinct or ten, I've got a street captain for every one of them. Do I have 10 apartment buildings? I got an apartment building captain who lives in that building for every one of those apartments." And it depends on the state or the county, but precincts and wards are somewhat manageable. But if you go around any state, my guess is the answer is, does someone own that precinct

in their mind and I guess in their heart? The answer will be maybe 10% of the time they do. If we move that number to 50%, we would win elections everywhere. It's that much of an untapped resource. So my advice to anyone in New York beyond getting into debates about who's the chair, figure out the precinct you're in and take a look. Does someone own it or don't they? If no one owns it, run for the spot and then say, "I'm going to own it and when I win it, here's what I'm going to do." And if someone's in that spot and you kind of like them and they own it, say, "I'm going to help you own it." If they don't own it and you're not going to knock them out of that spot (and this may be the hardest part), approach them and say, "You know what? I respect that you're the chair of this precinct, but you don't really own it. I want to help you own it." So one way or another, take ownership of the precinct you are in. Of course, advocate at the highest levels. If you look at where we're struggling, we're struggling with disenfranchised voters, getting them re-engaged. That's not gonna happen in the last three months of a presidential, that's gonna happen from good precinct organizing. So strong precinct organizing, where someone who lives in every district, at least one person, owns that precinct is one of the greatest solutions out there, especially in a state like New York, where people feel like the party hasn't done that well for a long time. So there's a massive growth opportunity. You could do that if he's Chair, you can do that if there's a new chair down the road. But... owning the local precinct is the key to it all.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:59):

And couldn't some superstar organizer who's a coalition builder rise up and run against him? Don't the bylaws of these organizations allow open elections? Couldn't there be a candidate to challenge Jay Jacobs saying, "Vote for me"?

David Pepper:

It depends on the rules, but certainly, depending on the committees. But a lot of those elections come from the group. And this is the problem. A lot of times people literally are in those precinct or ward positions, whatever you call them, to support a certain person, okay? And so they may not do a lot of organizing, but because they're loyal to someone who's in charge, they stay there. And that becomes a problem if they're not organizing too. So what I would say is, I would almost separate out the effort over the leadership, which is an effort that if people feel fired up about they should lead, but say in the meantime, well, whatever happens happens and we'll sort it out. Who's organizing these precincts? And say to the person, "I don't care who you support. This precinct is not organized. No one is knocking on any doors. And if we wait for three weeks before the election, we've lost the election. It's too late. I'll go knock on doors for you." Or you oust them because he ran against them. But either way, the problem is that too many precinct folks are literally going to meetings because of a vote they're casting for who's in charge or who they're endorsing and they're not organizing anything. That's the problem. And the reason I'm saying this is each state's got different politics, but everyone could start organizing tomorrow the places where they live whether they're a formal precinct executive or not. They can they can be part of that

Andrea Chalupa (00:20:40):

And this is important for everyone to understand listening. When you're angry and you don't know where to start, start at the precinct level. You don't need to run for office yourself. That would be great if you could, like, you know, check out books like *Saving Democracy* by David Pepper. But, you know, just

channel your anger in owning a precinct wherever you live and getting the votes you need for the issues you care about. And that is how we're going to protect our democracy.

David Pepper:
Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa:
Precinct by precinct, where we live locally.

David Pepper (00:21:10):
I mean, apartment building floor. There's nothing worse than knocking on doors—and I was doing this last November. We had a great victory for Congress in Cincinnati. First time we've had a Democrat in years—knocking on doors with three weeks to go, I guess it's now on the phone, and you go to a house, a house, and then you skip the apartment building because their voting turnout is so low. They don't show up as frequent voters. And we're skipping all the people that we should be talking to. And with two weeks to go, that's going to keep happening. The precinct organizer is the one who, a year before that, can find the apartment resident who can make sure that all those people are registered and voting. So if you live in that apartment building that's being skipped over, you could be a massive champion of democracy by simply saying to the apartment, “We don't want to be skipped anymore. How do we not get skipped? We're voting. We're registered.” If someone new moves in, we knock on their door and say, “We vote in this apartment building. Are you registered?” so there's ownership. It can be the precinct, the street. I mean, ideally, a precinct organizer is driving all this.

Andrea Chalupa:
Mmm.

David Pepper:
But it's everybody. And the whole point of this book I've written is—and I know you guys are totally on the same wavelength—

Andrea Chalupa:
Yeah, this is therapy right now.

David Pepper (00:22:25):
If you watch the news—and they've been nice to put me on the last couple of days—I worry that everyone watching the news that doesn't listen to you or read my books thinks, “Well, that's great. Democracy is declining and I can't do a thing because it's about some DOJ investigation somewhere or a swing state somewhere where I don't live.” And so then they think there's nothing else to be done. Once you realize that the front line of the right wing's attack on democracy is not there; it's Florida, it's Ohio, it's Tennessee. It's the red parts of blue New York. If they do well there, they do what they did last November. Once you realize the front line of the attack on democracy is actually all over, the empowering part about that versus the disempowering part of the current federal framework is it means, my God, you could do so much right where you live; own your apartment building, get everyone

voting, be an election official. Steve Bannon is recruiting election deniers to be at all the volunteer elections officials at all levels. We can't afford to have them be the only ones there, so we've got to step up as well. I don't care if you're in the reddest area, the bluest area, you are relevant in the battle of democracy in a way that, again, I feel like the narrative is that it's all about a few swing states and a bunch of DOJ investigations that I know Sarah don't think is ever going to go anywhere. It's the most disempowering narrative for the average person who is seeing the problem, maybe finally, and some for a long time, but still is not being given any guidance that there's so much they could do about it. And the point in my book is to say, whether it's precinct organizing or running yourself or helping fill a state house seat that has been uncontested for too long, which only makes extremism worse, all of these things are problems that all of us can and actually have to be solving or it's gonna keep getting worse.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:15):

That's exactly right. We're living in such a dangerous crossroads that we have no choice but to get to know our neighbors. [laughs]

David Pepper:

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:23):

So back to Saving Democracy. What are the big steps? You just said like, what can you do wherever you are that's listening, but we're up against a death cult of bullies. Right now, you have Target. Target's pulling LGBTQ products, Pride products from the shelves as we're about to enter June—Pride month—because of the Libs of TikTok cult going in there and screaming about woke culture. And what we have is this vicious scapegoating. It's scapegoating.

David Pepper:

Yep.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's authoritarian. It's genocidal saying that trans people don't have a right to exist. And this is such a severe bullying epidemic driven by this cult of the right. Elon Musk has unleashed, you know, the hounds of hell on Twitter.

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's become like TruthSocial or whatever, a site Trump tried to launch. Elon Musk succeeded there by taking over Twitter. How do we stand up to bullies? You're asking people to get in the field, as you should, because we all need to get in the field.

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

The school boards are being overtaken by floods of bullies.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

So what are the steps? What do you write in your book, *Saving Democracy*, on how people can stand up to bullies?

David Pepper (00:25:44):

I mean, I know it's easier to say, because some areas, I understand the intimidation. In some red parts, it's very difficult. Know that if framed well, the thing that should give you confidence, and we have to stand up to bullies. I mean, if Donald Trump has taught any of us anything, it's that when bullies aren't stood up to, they don't just feel sort of, "Oh, phew, I'm relieved." They feel invited to do more. We incentivize worse behavior when they don't feel accountability. And again, you guys talk about this more than I do. There is a lack of accountability at all levels right now because we never push back. But no, when I write in my book, "Show up at that school board meeting or run for the school board or show up at that state house", on almost everything they're doing—and this is why they're always switching issues because they know this too—they're in the deep minority. When you show up at a school board and you say to that school board, or the library board, "Hey, my kids and my family, they have freedom to read what they want to. And just 'cause some angry parent over on Main Street doesn't like a book, they have no right to tell my kids or me what my kids can read." And, you know, when you say that, about 65% of Americans agree with you. Almost every single audience that hears that will agree with you. And so when you go to that school board and say that, and by the way, this is why, if you look around the country, whenever, let's call it reading liberty on our side, reading freedom people who say "we should be able to read what we want to read", when they show up in big numbers and the school board see, well, oh, wow, many more people don't want to stay banned books than do, those school boards usually go with those freedom to read people as opposed to the book banners. So what I'd say is, they're counting on no one showing up when they bully and then they leave an impression that most of this community wants to ban a bunch of books when in most places, you know, the library, there's a National Association of Libraries that's done polling on this and I cite it: Most people, of all places they don't want right-wing extremism, is in their schools. And that's why you've seen repeatedly, including in Ohio last November, the culture warriors running for school boards actually don't do very well, even when they have all this money, because people don't want that. So I'd say, be secure whatever you do, but know that for the most part, when you stand there and you frame it in any way that gets back to your own family's decision about what to read, you actually are standing and speaking for the majority of people, almost inevitably in the place you live as well. And they're the ones who are screaming on behalf of a minority. And if you show up in a way at the state house or the school board in any numbers, you will, I think more often than not on many of these issues, win the day because of it. So in the book I go through... The Ohio school board spent months on anti-trans, anti-LGBTQ legislation. It became a total circus. And let's call them pro freedom to read parents and families showed up at every meeting, made a

lot of noise about it. And there were three seats open last November. Remember, this is a year where Mike DeWine won by 26 and Tim Ryan lost by six. All three of the culture warrior Ohio school board candidates lost in districts that were, you know, medium. They weren't gerrymandered for Republicans, but they lost. Two of the three who ran against them were former public school teachers and all three basically said, "Can't we just get back to educating kids like we used to talk about?" And they all won, meaning the toxic stuff, if you stand up to it, normally is actually unpopular and when you stand up to it, you're gonna expose that.

David Pepper (00:29:34):

But the local school board members, if they don't see you, and they only see the angry book banners, they may get bullied. And so you're providing cover for them to get to the right place. But if they see you or you make a lot of phone calls, they'll see that. And again, when parents and families and kids have organized around the key decision moments, I see article after article where they're winning the battle.

Andrea Chalupa (00:30:00)

So what I'm worried about is a brain drain in the civic sphere of our country where a lot of the good people we need running for office are going to say, "I don't wanna put my family through that." What advice do you have for those folks? And are you seeing a lot of talent leaving public service because of this toxic culture?

David Pepper (00:30:22)

It's a massive concern and these states that are stuck with this toxicity, I'm worried sick about losing civic-minded elections officials of both parties. And we know there were some heroic Republicans in certain states in November of '20 or after who actually did vote to certify an election. And I worry—and a lot of these are each party makes decisions about who is in these spots—I worry that we are losing civic-minded, more fairly minded public servants of both parties. One, Democrats don't want to feel intimidated or they are being intimidated, so they walk away. Moderate Republicans who did the right thing for years, win or lose—they acknowledged who won—are being chased out by Bannon recruits. And yeah, that's a real concern and that can happen at schools and libraries. I mean, imagine being teachers, librarians, school administrators right now. It is hell. And it's one of the reasons why the more people who show up and say... Because part of the speech I would give if I were at a library is, "We trust the librarians." Who doesn't trust a school librarian? And again, when you say those words, 70% of people at that school district will say, "Well, I trust them too." So I think to your point, we need to shore these folks up too, because I do think there's a worry, especially in these states that are really going through it. You know, Ohio, Missouri, Tennessee, we know the states. That's a real risk. And it's a risk that I agree should be taken seriously.

David Pepper (00:31:56):

But I also think, like, we've got to shore folks up and if you have the wherewithal, don't go anywhere because that's what they want.

Andrea Chalupa:

Stay in the fight.

David Pepper (00:32:06):

Yeah, my book is saying, in Pennsylvania, a lot of their election officials are determined by a local election. And those are people making decisions about how votes are tabulated or is this a real vote? A lot of those are going uncontested. I mean, think about that. So my book is saying—there's a chapter on this—figure out what the election spots in your area are. If you have good people there, wonderful. But if you don't, think about stepping up yourself, vote early and then spend your election making sure it's a smooth election.

Andrea Chalupa (00:32:36):

Absolutely. I mean, we're in for, I think, as Gen Z comes up and becomes a more and more powerful voting block and then running for office, what Republicans are really afraid of is that they're going to become extinct. They're going to become overwhelmed with this changing America, this browning of America. They know the writing is on the wall and instead of becoming more tolerant and open-minded and inclusive, they decided to go full on authoritarian. And they are proudly, openly authoritarian. And you have universities across Europe that are doing research studies on us. You have UN reports warning about the sharp authoritarian turn America's taking. It threatens to make us an unreliable ally—

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

—in this global war against fascism. And just with this war DeSantis is waging against big corporations... In America, you know, you have this free market religion. That's what they always prided themselves on in waging the Cold War and so on, when America stands for the biggest, strongest economy in the world. And here you have DeSantis who's, like, making his brand of trying to bully corporations. And that's what Putin did in coming to power.

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

A big businessman dared to run against him for president. Liquidated, thrown in prison. And what he's doing with his picking a fight with Bob Iger and now Target has to pull Pride products from the shelves, he's really this anti-business candidate. And so in the world of business, does that mean that corporations, businesses need to be named and shamed and have a much stronger social responsibility, social contract with the public to pull their donations to Republican parties?

David Pepper (00:34:22):

Yeah, two things. One, you summed it up and I try to explain this in the very beginning of this new book: This is all about people who know that almost every position they take is in the deep minority. They decided—and the smart ones figured this out a while ago—they decided, frankly, for correct reasons, that if they were to run—this is at least their correct judgment—if they were to run elections on the issues they care about on a fair playing field, they would lose over and over and over, whether it's

abortion bans no exceptions, crazy gun laws, trickle in economics that enrich a few and everyone else is not doing well. They know, Mitch McConnell knows, that's why he told Lindsey Graham, don't bring up a national abortion ban after *Dobbs*. They know full well that they're in the minority. And so while Democrats are confident that we represent the mainstream of this country, overconfident in the stability of our democracy, we run around saying, "Hey, let's go win elections. That's our thing," not seeing that democracy is actually under enough threat, that we've got to be more than just winning elections. We've got to protect democracy. The Republican far-right game is that their battle is not elections themselves, it's democracy itself. How do you undermine democracy? It's just what Orbán's done. How do you undermine and suppress democracy enough so that a minority viewpoint stays intact over time that would never survive in a healthy democracy? That's what gerrymandering is about, that's what disinformation is about, that's what all these crazy tactics... A month ago, there was a caravan coming from Mexico. It's to get people off the topics that if they voted on those topics, they would lose. So it's all about a fear and an understanding—they know it—that they represent a minority view that is a loser in American politics today, and they can't have a system that allows for repeated referenda essentially on those issues.

David Pepper (00:36:20):

So on the business side, I literally have an entire chapter dedicated to no more investing in autocracy, America corporations. Invest in democracy. And I go through this. Disney is what will happen to you as a company if you invest in extremists. The whole thing in Disney began because Disney gave money to Florida extremists and those extremists passed the don't say gay bill. And then good for them, Disney employees and I assume some customers said to Disney, "Why are you giving money to these extremists?" And they protested outside of Disney. And at first the CEO of Disney said, "Well, we're not going to say anything. We don't get into that." And then pretty soon, those employees and that protest turned into enough that the Disney CEO said ultimately (and he ultimately now has been replaced) something like, "We don't agree with that law." And then the very people who he supported that passed the law turned on him and it's gone on ever since. The message to corporate America: This is all your future. Now, the Koch brothers don't care. Mike Lindell doesn't care. Certain companies that are privately owned, have a narrow customer base or it's not a broader consumer base, maybe they don't care. But every public-facing company should watch what happened to Disney and decide, "We are getting out of the autocracy business. We're getting out of the extremism business. Giving money to statehouse politicians in a world where they're becoming laboratories of autocracy is a losing proposition." And to your question: What do we do? We have to help make that clear. We need more people to stand up and say what they said at Disney. "It is unacceptable that you gave money to people who are attacking your own employees and your own customers through horrific laws. And we see that you did that and we're going to speak out." And by the way, I'm glad Disney's suing DeSantis. I think it's a hell of a good lawsuit. I'm glad that they're saying something now, but I worry that most of these companies won't say much until we all start to say. And I literally provide in this book, in this chapter, I provide links to the websites that do a good job of tracking how companies give their money out because whether it's a small business or a big business, no more lifting autocracy as part of your political giving. And what do I say to them to do instead? Do I say, "Give all your money to one party?" No, that's up to them. But just don't give it to many autocrats, please, or we'll be watching. Do you know what you should do with your money more than any political giving? Invest in democracy. And I go through

examples.

David Pepper (00:40:00):

Disney, through apps, through their park, could be registering every single person who walks through the Disney park right now. What's the key part of the attack on democracy? Purging voters. Disney, Kroger, you name it, they could be doing so much. And some of them are; I point to good examples. They should be using the footprints of their corporation not to necessarily make bets on politics or trade for private benefit, they should be using their footprint to actually engage their customers, lift up democracy, and in many of these companies, their customers and their employees are the very people being targeted by voter suppression. So, I go through examples. I say, "Get out of the autocracy business." And the best thing you could do for democracy if you're a company who actually cares about this... My dad used to work at Procter & Gamble, okay? I said to him, "Dad, what if you put a QR code on every thing of Charmin and said, 'You care about your family? Well, let's register to vote.' and they get their phone out and they register with the package of Charmin?" Or whatever it is. You know, right now we have doctors all over this country who have on their medical badge. They're called Vote ER, if you've heard of them. They have a QR code on their medical badge and they say to people who are coming out of surgery, "Hey, make sure you're registered. You need to know how? Scan the QR code." The NFL's doing some good stuff around this actually, if you watched a lot of their PSAs last fall. Corporate America, and by the way, even more so nonprofits, could be doing so much of this nonpartisan democracy-building work, and I have a whole chapter saying, "It's time for them to do it? And it's time for every customer and employee to start asking them to do it."

Andrea Chalupa (00:40:42):

Absolutely. And we also need to advocate—all of us—for just automatic voter registration.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

You turn the minimum age to vote, you turn... What is it, 18? You're automatically registered. That's it.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

If you have a social security number, as soon as you turn the right age, you're voting. That's it.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

That would save these nonprofits, that would save the Democratic Party so much money—

David Pepper:
True.

Andrea Chalupa:
—if we just had these auto voting registrations based on your social security number and that's it.

David Pepper:
Right, and this gets us back to the New York conversation.

Andrea Chalupa:
Mmhmm <affirmative>

David Pepper (00:41:15):
That's not going to happen in red states because they want to minimize the voting of certain folks. But when I was chair of Ohio—the Democratic Party here—they loved to bring up any blue state that had bad voting laws and stick it in my face when I was advocating for better voting laws in Ohio. So I agree it should be everywhere. It's the 21st century. It's common sense. I saw, by the way, the other day that Minnesota, now that they have a trifecta of Democrats in charge, did this. Michigan's doing this. Any blue state that we control needs to be moving into that world immediately: Automatic voter registration and a window of voting that's more than just a couple days, if only a day, not only because it's good for your voters, but it actually ends up being good for democracy and it counters one of the strongest arguments they use against people like me in a red state: “Well, why should we do it if New York State doesn't do it? You're just saying this because we're Republicans here.” So in part of your fixing New York agenda, and I'm talking to folks in other states about this as well, every blue state should look like Washington State and Oregon, and they should look like what Minnesota and Michigan did now that they have the chance to win based on last year's election results. To put it simply, we need to be the opposite of my first book. They all need to be laboratories of democracy. And once they are, we in red states can say to people, “Look how convenient it is when they have a drop box in every library or something. Look how convenient it is when they can vote for a month and drop it off.” We actually create much better arguments about why to do it here versus when New York is actually having a terrible law that they use to hurt our case here. So it's really important that every blue state does exactly what you just said. That's where I'd start at least.

Andrea Chalupa (00:43:03):
So questions from our listeners in the chat—and feel free to drop your questions there—so John writes, “In eight days, the economic weapon is about to be unleashed on the world, rendering conversation pointless. Millions of people lose their sole income, an income that they have paid into for decades and no one is talking about the single problem. I am one of those people. There seems to be nothing we can do/agree” —and of course he's talking about the terrorists in the Congress trying to force the U.S. to basically default and refusing to make concessions with President Biden.”

David Pepper:
Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa (00:43:47):

So, what are your thoughts on that issue? And this defaults conversation can keep coming around again, as it has in the past.

David Pepper:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

So how do we confront this?

David Pepper (00:43:47):

That's a great question. And I obviously spend a lot of my time trying to keep people only focused on these, but there's no doubt that this is like a massive iceberg in front of us, that as you said McCarthy is putting in front of us. It could easily be out of the way. I think messaging as strongly as possible, and many are doing this to make sure people understand this is about paying Trump's debts. It's not about spending now. I don't think they've done a great job messaging on that overall and that's why I think the polls are kind of pushing by and I think he needs to reach a deal. I would in good faith try, you know, if you can come up with a deal that has something around spending caps, it isn't gutting key programs and you can do that, great. But then if you can't, here's my glass half empty... And I'm not quite as half empty as you guys sometimes are on the podcast, but I'm pretty empty on this one. Trump is telling them not to have a deal. So the closer they get to a deal, the more the Trump Republicans—

Andrea Chalupa:

Because it helps his friends in Russia.

David Pepper:

Right. He's running ads about the economy being a disaster. So he wants that to happen. And so the closer a deal would come, let's say a few people want one, the more Trump's going to say, "No deal", and they'll pull away. So you really are stuck with people who I think it's very questionable whether or not they want a deal or whether or not there's a majority that want a deal. And the closer you get to that, I think you call it out. Again, if you think that there is a deal to be made, try and make one. If there's not, I think you call it out. And then again, I don't wanna play super lawyer here, but I'm a big believer that if there is a Constitutional clause that allows you to pay the bills so you don't have the catastrophic consequences that the questioner asked about and you can point to the Constitution, which says our debt shall not be questioned, go pay the damn bills! And let them sue you to stop you. And if the Supreme Court rules to stop you, then it's on them. So what I wouldn't do is if there's no deal, I wouldn't be the one to stop paying the bills. I would literally say, Biden, Yellen, "Well, maybe it's legally up in the air, but we're going to pay the damn bills. They haven't agreed to anything reasonable. They keep walking away from the table. Trump's convincing them not to do it. So we're going to do the measures that we need to do to keep the economy going. And if they want to stop us, that's on them. We're going to move forward." So I think in all these conversations, and this is why I was very frustrated back when we didn't do enough voting rights protection when we had the Senate and the House, we have to stop

acting like the other side is full of normal people playing normal politics. And I think sometimes surprise them by being aggressive. And at some point you just say to them, "You're being impossible. We're gonna pay all the bills and if you wanna stop us from doing that and tank the economy, that's on you." Sometimes surprise them by how aggressive you are, as opposed to always feel like you're surprised by them.

Andrea Chalupa (00:46:39):

A trillion percent. It's that saying that Democrats always bring a baguette to a gunfight.

David Pepper:

Right.

Andrea Chalupa:

So we have more questions. Glenn... So I don't know why... This is our first time doing Riverside for a live show and for some reason I cannot scroll up in the chat, but there's some really great questions. So feel free to copy paste your questions again. I'm gonna grab Hubbersnacks really quickly: "Does Biden want the budget cuts? He's not stupid, I think he knew this would happen." What are your thoughts on that?

David Pepper:

You know, I think that's a fair question. I don't know. I obviously don't. Going into a '24 election, if he could say that he, you know, by the way, we all know the deficits lower under the Democratic presidents, so if one talking point he would have is, "No, we reduced spending in ways that didn't hurt folks and the deficit is lower," sure, I don't think he'd mind going into a '24 election with being able to say that. You saw the thing the other day on *60 Minutes* about the massive bilking by military contractors. If Biden can come out of this saying, "I cut out much money we're wasting on some things here at Big Pharm and certain subsidies and reduced giveaways at the top and made some other cuts," yeah, I think that's a talking point that in a swing state he probably doesn't mind doing. But my God, I hope he doesn't all of a sudden start doing anything around social security or other things that the Republicans are pushing for. I hope he doesn't agree to lock in permanent tax cuts that were already such a scam a couple of years ago. My guess is he wouldn't want to do those things and he wouldn't want to be forced to. Maybe that's where the hardest part of the deal happens. I do think that Democrats in Congress would be pretty skeptical if he really were to do that but my guess is he wouldn't want to. Again, I don't want to claim to have any special knowledge. Having been in office, you know, I was a county commissioner. That's a small level. I found a whole lot of waste. It just is part of government, so I guarantee you that you could find some in some of these big bureaucracies and if he could claim that, I'm sure he wouldn't mind saying it. But that's a whole different thing from some of the things that McCarthy would want him to do.

Andrea Chalupa (00:48:44):

So Glenn dropped this question in the chat: "Precinct management,"—which you recommended, like all of us, it's all hands on deck right now in this emergency. Grab a precinct, own that precinct, get to know your neighbors—"Does that apply also for so-called red states? What should you do if you're in a very

red county?”

David Pepper (00:49:03):

Totally applies. You probably have an empty precinct right where you are. And there are Democrats who live in that precinct. I did this once as Ohio chair. At one point, a national campaign told us, “We don't really want to organize in red parts of Ohio because we worry that the people won't vote for our candidate.” Well, I was chair of a party with a whole lot of local candidates and another statewide candidate. I said, “Well, I'm not going to do that. These are important races. I can't not organize there.” So we did a whole experiment around sporadic Democratic voters in red areas. And we thought, Let's actually hit them harder than we ever have and see what happens. And guess what? You could see an increase in turnout. So I actually think, where is the extremism running rampant? In red parts of our country. In red states, in red parts of those states. Where is turnout suppressed for Democrats? In red areas where people are almost embarrassed to say they're a Democrat. Well, if you have someone call three times and knock on your door a couple of times to say, “Hey, I'm the Democratic chair from this precinct. It looks like you're a Democrat. I know you aren't voting that much, but we're pretty fired up about this local candidate that we convinced to run.” You could actually increase turnout. And if I'm Sherrod Brown, that's exactly what I need to win in a statewide race. The difference between Barack Obama and Clinton and Biden since, was obviously Obama got very good numbers in our urban core, but by the way, so did Biden and Hillary Clinton. Obama got to 40% in red Ohio and Clinton and Biden were maybe low 30s high 20s. That's the difference. By being in that red precinct, if you're lifting your turnout by five or 10%—and a bunch of people are doing that—especially in close races, you're making a big difference and you could win the race. And this is a big part of my book. And even if it's in a losing effort, by running in these places and doing that work, you're bringing accountability to worlds that right now don't have it.

David Pepper (00:51:00):

So my ideal vision, even if you're losing, and by the way, what does losing look like? 50% of the Tennessee Republicans who voted out the two Justin candidates did not even have an opponent last November. That is losing. And if they don't face an opponent, they will always behave the way they're behaving. They literally are rewarded for being extremists. They're rewarded for kicking those two state representatives out. What's the ideal situation? That you are organizing that precinct that they represent. So if you're in a red part of this country, I mean, you actually have a great value to add. You're organizing these precincts and you're running a state house candidate, and you're knocking on enough doors so 50% of them next time not only have an opponent, but they have neighbors saying, “You know, I never knew you were such an extremist. You voted for an abortion ban, no exceptions. None of us agree with that,” that's accountability. Even if those people win, hopefully they start to hear from the more central or left part of the world because we're organizing. Right now, across this country, we have a crisis of uncontested races and no organizing so they only hear from the right wing world and that's why they get worse and worse and worse. So, yes, I think the untapped potential is enormous in the red parts of this country.

Andrea Chalupa (00:52:19):

So we have a question from Ross. Ross, feel free to jump into the chat and clarify some of this question

because I wanna make sure I get this right. Ross writes, "Why haven't EMS been used to promote public safety/police reform, especially in Pennsylvania with Freedom House as the origin?"

David Pepper:
EMS?

Andrea Chalupa:
What is EMS, Ross?

David Pepper:
Maybe I should know that but...

Andrea Chalupa:
Emergency medical services.

David Pepper:
That's what I assumed.

Andrea Chalupa:
Okay.

David Pepper:
Why aren't they being used?

Andrea Chalupa:
Mmhmm <affirmative>, for public safety, as a form of police reform. So putting less strain...

David Pepper (00:52:52):
Yeah, no, I mean, I actually, yeah, that's a good... That's actually something that when I was... I ran for city council in Cincinnati a long time ago, in 2001, on the heels of a number of years of fatal police shootings that ultimately led to riots, as some of you may remember, in Cincinnati. And so the first mission that this new council I was part of was to actually come up with what we called a collaborative agreement, which was a series of reforms. The first thing we did was we trained far more police to be much more trained on mentally ill suspects. The results were so stunningly better when that unit was called that we said, "Well, we should just train every one of the police officers." But to your point, in many of those cases, that person doesn't actually need to be a police officer, just someone who is trained to deal with folks who are having some kind of issue that doesn't necessarily need police response. Our new mayor talked about that when he ran. So I think that is the type of reform that, now again, the minute this mayor proposed that he was accused of defunding the police. He said, "I'm not defunding the police, I'm just saying that sometimes we're better off sending someone else who's actually a mental health expert or an emergency service expert." But we found the results, when we even did the training on that kind of response, the results were so much better. A lot of our fatal police shootings had been that type of situation.

Andrea Chalupa (00:54:15):

Great, thank you so much. Does anyone have any further questions for David Pepper and his new book, *Saving Democracy*? If not, I'm gonna ask my final question, and that is: David, do you think we are in a civil war or that we're headed there? Is this a new kind of civil war where you have these mass shooters, these manifestos and so on? Where do you think we are when it comes to the civil war threat in America?

David Pepper (00:54:46):

So I wouldn't write these books as frantically as I write them. I think you and I and Sarah and a lot of others—

Andrea Chalupa:

I wouldn't be grinding out this podcast [laughs].

David Pepper (00:54:54):

Right, exactly. I think we all feel like Paul Revere, like, it's really bad, okay? It's not bad because of DC, it's bad because of all the things in these states. So I don't ever want to understate the problem. That's why I literally wrote a book called *Laboratories of Autocracy: A Wake Up Call*. At the same time, it's bad. And we are seeing five-alarm fire indicators; the white supremacist violence, they always try to dismiss it but there's always that Nazi symbol as part of it. So there's no dismissing it. Censorship; I grew up loving Indiana Jones. The book burning scene was like, you grew up knowing that's not right. That never ends well. We're seeing rule of law totally attacked in states like Ohio. We look insane when you look at the facts. The way I said it yesterday on Chris Hayes was, "If you looked at the facts on the ground in states like Ohio in another country, we would all say, 'my God, that country's lost its rule of law. It's lost its democracy.' We don't like to think about that happening here, but that is the facts on the ground." On the flip side, I actually wrote this book quickly, too, because I actually think they're overreaching. There's a reason why every single election denier running in a swing state last November lost for Secretary of State. because it feels a little too much to people. And it did in Arizona, and it did in those other states. It clearly did in Pennsylvania. These were all counter to the very consistent pattern that we should have lost those races when we were in the White House, and we won them. We also won state houses that we normally lose in a midterm when we have the White House. So yes, we should all be alarmed. That is the right emotion, but—they have been trying to hide for years how extreme they are. They can't hide it anymore. Every day we see Marjorie Taylor Greene. Every day we see DeSantis in a primary against Trump in a downward spiral of extremism. So they've been trying to hide their sort of minority rule sort of fangs for a long time. It's not hidden. And that's one reason I think those sector state candidates went down in flames last year. It's where Kari Lake went down in flames. And the other thing is, and this is, you mentioned the very beginning of our podcast, the States Project, podcasts like yours... More than when I wrote my first book, there's not only awareness about the problem that when I wrote my first book there was not, but there's also some infrastructure growing at the grassroots and organic level that's actually working.

David Pepper (00:57:25):

I have a whole chapter on Run Everywhere. And if you want to support Run Everywhere, create a giving circle in the States Project. If you have 40 friends, do it tomorrow. There are things that worked to create results in November of '22 that we need to scale up quickly. Now, this is the sobering part—and you talk about it all the time: The scale of the attack on democracy is immense. The scale of our response has been far too small and we've been focused too often in the wrong place. But since we're the majority, if we scale up our defense of democracy, we can win. And the good news now versus two years ago is there's enough infrastructure of what works, you know, Run for Something recruits people to run everywhere. States Project supports those people. I started something called Blue Ohio to support even in tough districts. There are all these things out there. And the key, and this is why I read this book, we've got to connect more and more people who are concerned to be part of this pro-democracy infrastructure that is building, but that we need to grow and build more quickly. You dovetail their extremism and their Trump problem—and in the end, he's a problem for them—with our growing infrastructure and awareness, and combined with one other thing, by the way, I know I'm going a little bit, the results of their little autocratic states are disastrous for everyday people. It's public schools failing in rural parts of our country. It's infrastructure collapsing. So the results aren't there for them. That's why they have to always bring up other things. So you combine all that together, and I actually think in the next two years, there is an enormous opportunity to kind of make a comeback here that we saw some hints of in the '22 election, not because of Fetterman necessarily or Warnock—although those were great wins—but because of state house and secretary of state wins, the Wisconsin Supreme Court race is another example. People figured out, “My God, we gotta win that thing.” Once we tell people who care about democracy what the real broad battlefield looks like, they have been responding of late, and we just gotta keep going and going and going. And I think the next two years could be a huge opportunity to actually build on this momentum, to actually score some real wins for democracy in the next couple of years.

Andrea Chalupa (00:59:24):

Thank you so much, David Pepper. It's always just so, so, so inspiring being able to talk to you. You always are welcome here. We are a home for you and your books. Come back again. Obviously heading into 2024, let's regroup. Let's get the band back together—

David Pepper:

Absolutely.

Andrea Chalupa:

—and face America's demons together. And we're gonna win, and we're gonna win big, and we're gonna end the civil war, and our kids are gonna have an amazing future. We're gonna save civilization as we know it. Thank you to everyone who showed up and asked your questions. If you didn't get your question answered, we will be back with more events in the future. David will come back again. And thank you all and just fight and check out his book, *Saving Democracy*. And let's all find our precinct and own it and help others own theirs. Thank you.

David Pepper:

Thanks everybody.

[closing song is our May 2023 song feature: ['Paper Thin' by Confusions](#)]

[outro music - roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa:

Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by standing 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 theorangutanproject.or and avoid products with palm oil.

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