

Gaslit Nation Transcript

7 June 2023

“The Marie Yovanovitch Interview”

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[\[opening clip\]](#)

Manu Raj:

Mr. Santos, doesn't the public deserve to know who paid for your bail? Why won't you tell constituents who paid \$500,000 to keep you out of prison?

George Santos:

[inaudible] I'm glad you're walking again.

Manu Raj:

Well, can you tell us about the \$500,000?

George Santos:

I'm not commenting on it, Manu.

Manu Raj:

Why is it so important to protect their identities?

George Santos:

Because it is.

[theme music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa:

I'm Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Russia'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.

Our opening clip was disgraced Republican Rep. George Santos, keeping us all in suspense over who paid his \$500,000 bond to keep him out of jail. As I said in a recent episode, Santos is just the tip of the iceberg of Steve Bannon's corruption racket. We will, of course, have more on this story in this week's bonus episode, out later this week. Ask yourself, who would bail you out for half a million dollars? I mean... I don't... Maybe... I'm hoping my husband? [laughs] I don't know how much he'd really get out

of that.

Gaslit Nation is out with a new book, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. Every month, we're giving away a copy to thank our community on Patreon. Be sure to sign up to be considered for that by supporting the show at the Truth-teller level or higher at patreon.com/gaslit. And you'll hear our very own Judge Lackey, the narrator of *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*, in today's end credits. Thanks to everyone who supports the show.

Andrea Chalupa [00:02:24]

And another quick announcement: Russian mafia expert Olga Lautman will be doing another live taping with us on Tuesday June 27th at 12p Eastern. Olga was a researcher for Vanity Fair contributor Craig Unger's must-read book, *House of Trump, House of Putin: The Untold Story of Donald Trump and the Russian Mafia*, as well as several books by Malcolm Nance. She recently founded an NGO in Europe that investigates and exposes Russian spy activities in the democratic world, including how Russia buys off Western officials and other useful idiots. Olga Lautman will join us to talk about whether Trump will be indicted again. It's reported that Trump's lawyers are meeting with the DOJ this week and there may be a plea deal. We'll discuss that and more, including how the spies have regrouped. Now that Russia is losing its war in Ukraine, what are they up to now? And what should we expect from the Kremlin in the 2024 US presidential election? So to get access to that live taping with Olga Lautman and join us here at Gaslit Nation, see how the sausage gets made, make sure you're subscribed to the show on Patreon by signing up on patreon.com/gaslit.

Andrea Chalupa [00:03:42]

And now, we have a quick news roundup before we head into our conversation with this week's very special guest. At the top of the show, I want to highlight an extremely important and horrific story out of Ukraine. Russia very likely (obviously) blew up a dam in southern Ukraine in the Kherson region, according to US officials and reporting from NBC News. There's also speculation by Ukraine watchers that Russia waited until the water contained by the dam, which was the size of Utah's great salt lake... Russia waited until this water was at historic levels to ensure maximum impact. We just had spring rains so they've had their eye on this dam as a weapon. And Zelensky flagged this threat a while back and now here it is. They're using it. It's a war crime. It's genocidal. Thousands had to be evacuated. Homes were of course flooded, as was a zoo. Yes, a zoo. There are images of people's pets, dogs, clinging to whatever they can. Children trying to rescue their pets out of the water. The cruelty is the point. This act of genocide was done to kill as many civilians as possible, destroy critical infrastructure, especially given that the water systems needed for agriculture in the region have been disastrously impacted. And so has the route for water to Russian-occupied Crimea. Remember, Russia will always shoot off its nose to spite its face, and that's what it's done here.

Andrea Chalupa [00:05:24]

And, of course, Russia wants to deter and demoralize Ukraine as Ukraine ramps up its long-anticipated counteroffensive to liberate Russian-occupied areas. Many have become like Maxmax-like zones of Soviet torture and war crimes. If you are an environmental organization or activist, speak out over what Russia has done in this scorched earth cruelty, killing countless animals and destroying their habitat; not

to mention, the landmines planted by Russia now spreading in the flood, washing up on shores and exploding. With Russia, the cruelty is the point. The dam also provided cooling water for Europe's largest nuclear power plant, which is nearby. So that might now be at risk. We will continue to track this story.

Andrea Chalupa [00:06:18]

From USA Today: "It turns out that declining life expectancy in America is a much bigger problem and much older problem than previously thought and it's not just the Reagan revolution that's to blame. The crisis goes back to the 1950s, with the US ranking now in 40th place of populous countries, behind Albania and Lebanon. Why is US life expectancy declining? Not because of personal health choices, but systemic issues mostly in so-called red states in the South and Midwest." These states are gerrymandered hostage states, like Viktor Orbán's Hungary, which is why Tucker Carlson and the far right love Orbán. The Biden administration and all Democrats from all levels of society who are running for public office, considering it, in public office, everyone must now lead a new civil rights era push to restore voting rights in those states. It could literally save lives. Raising life expectancy in America must be the number one campaign issue heading into 2024.

Andrea Chalupa [00:07:24]

We talk about this all the time on the show because one of the ingredients, as you'll see in our book, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*, one of the ingredients to fascism taking root is economic instability. So when you have all these people falling through the cracks of society and they need to put their anger somewhere, where do you think they're going to put it? They're going to buy into these genocidal violent culture wars and they're going to be puddy in the hands of fascists, as we saw in 2016. And the issue is only going to get worse as AI takes off and steals even more jobs, eating into white-collar jobs in urban centers and so on. These are all themes we've talked about since the start of *Gaslit Nation* and we'll keep going and following this and seeing all the vulnerabilities that allow fascism to take hold, but I want to go back into the culture wars because Nikki Hailey was out with some hate speech genocidal language buying into all this. From *The Advocate*: "Nikki Hailey blames trans visibility for teen girls' suicide ideation." Right, Nikki. There's ZERO research, ZERO data to back any of that up. There's simply no reporting. She's pulled this out of the air to be hateful and cruel and to win points with an increasingly authoritarian, fascist base. She's trying to get the Trump vote, but this is also who she is. She's someone who said that the Florida "Don't Say Gay" law doesn't go far enough and she has a long history of being against marriage equality and so on.

Andrea Chalupa [00:08:50]:

Let's not forget that she's also the Kushners' candidate as they try to rebrand themselves and distance themselves from one felon father to another felon father, Kushner. So that's Nikki Hailey. She's as bad as they come. The presidential race now includes Mike Pence. He's formally announced. He's the guy who's going up against the guy whose supporters tried to hang him:

[clip up and under of Trump supporters chanting "hang Mike Pence!"]

Let's see if that awkwardly comes up in any debates, as it should. Speaking of Nazis, there's a stupid *New York Times* piece once again trying to fan hysteria over Nazis as a far-right element in Ukraine. They did

this on the eve of Putin launching his total genocidal invasion in 2022. Now, they're back with another piece. To be clear, there is a far-right element of Nazis in every country. Would I rather have Ukraine's far-right problems than America's? Yes! 100 times yes. One of the foremost experts on the far right in Ukraine, Anton Shekhovtsov, Chair of the Center for Democratic Integrity, writes on Facebook that he gave the author of that *New York Times* piece "names of experts who had studied the Ukrainian far right for years to consult with. None was quoted in the piece."

Andrea Chalupa [00:10:15]:

Ukraine seems to be launching its counteroffensive to liberate land stolen in Russia's invasion, according to US officials. And Russia's invasion of Russia continues. Ukraine-backed Russian volunteer fighters have taken over a Russian town in the border region of Belgorod, including taking prisoners of war, showing the Russian people that their strongman Putin can no longer keep them safe; the war is coming home. Ukrainians apparently hacked into Russian TV with a deep fake video of Putin announcing a mass mobilization to instill panic in the Russian people. This is a chilling weaponization of deep fakes that could be turned on any of us. Dear lord. We've already been in the deep fake era. It's only going to accelerate. We're here. But, you know, where we have deep fakes we're going to have communities like ours that come together to fact check them, to call them out. So remember, we're facing this future together. It's uncertain, it's dark, but we'll be there. We're gonna fight it. And we're going to create this grassroots army of fact checkers and we're gonna rise up together as needed.

Andrea Chalupa [00:11:22]:

Speaking of deep fakes, Tara Reade, who claimed to have been sexually assaulted by then-presidential candidate Biden, her claims debunked by an extensive investigation by *PBS NewsHour* that interviewed well over 70 people, has exiled herself to Russia, straight into the arms of accused Russian spy Maria Butina. Reade is seeking Russian citizenship and claims her life is at risk. From what?! [laughs] From whom? I mean, does she have creditors? This clearly seems like another operation to try to tarnish Biden heading into the 2024 election. So, expect Tara Reade to become a darling—even more so—of Russian state TV, and look out for a *Gaslit Nation* Tara Reade super special, just for fun, soon.

Andrea Chalupa [00:12:07]:

And finally, fittingly enough, this brings us to Robert Hanssen, the FBI agent who spied for the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation from 1979 to 2001. Hanssen was just found dead at the age of 79 in his prison cell in Colorado, where he was sentenced to life in prison for what the DOJ called "possibly the worst intelligence disaster in US history." Hanssen sold classified documents, including nuclear secrets, to the Kremlin. Hmmmm. If that's the worst intelligence disaster in US history, then why is Trump still free and allowed to run for president? Merrick Garland... Come on. [whispers] Do something.

Andrea Chalupa [00:12:50]:

Video has emerged of special prosecutor Jack Smith walking down the street in Washington, DC with a security detail, driving many on Twitter wild. I refuse to buy into the Jack Smith mystique unless he secures a conviction and prison sentence, finally, for Donald "Robert Hanssen" Trump, and investigates Trump and Kushner's pardons, overturning the seriously corrupt ones of Bannon, Paul Manafort, too many to list, especially given that Trump's own lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, was reportedly selling pardons for

\$2 million each, splitting that totally illegal fee with Trump. The DOJ needs to clean house, like they did with Robert Hannsen. Then I will swoon over Jack Smith, and only then. Justice must be served. Get Trump in prison. He should not be running for office. Investigate the Bannon, Manafort and other pardons and investigate Kushner. He was in charge of the whole pardon operation, clearly, so please investigate that. Thank you

Andrea Chalupa [00:13:52]:

And now, speaking of justice, we're going to now head into our interview with someone who became one of the many important faces of justice and standing up to the Trump regime's corruption. This brings us to our very special guest. Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch served as the US Ambassador to Ukraine, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, in addition to other senior government positions during her 33-year diplomatic career. She retired from the State Department in 2020 and is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a non-resident fellow at Georgetown University. She is the author of the new must-read memoir of her incredibly inspiring story of courage, *Lessons from the Edge*, out now in paperback with a new afterword. She has just returned from a trip from Ukraine, so we have a lot to talk about today. Welcome to the show, Ambassador Yovanovitch.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Thank you, it's a pleasure to be on.

Andrea Chalupa:

So you became ambassador to Ukraine in 2016 under President Obama in his final year in office. What was your time like in Ukraine in those short few months before Trump came to power? What were you focused on?

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, I mean, so I was focused on the same things that my predecessor, Geoff Pyatt, had been focused on and that I would be focused on afterwards, which was helping Ukraine in its own goals and our goal of improving its good governance, its fight against corruption and of course increasing its security. Sometimes I think we forget that there was still an active war in the east of Ukraine throughout those years since 2014 and of course continuing until the total war that started in February '22 when it became a war not only against folks in eastern Ukraine but also against Ukrainians everywhere in the country.

Andrea Chalupa:

What struck you most about Ukraine and Ukrainians in your work?

Marie Yovanovitch:

You know, it's hard to really put it into words. The Ukrainians are just so inspiring. So, I've been there twice. I was there as the number two from 2001 to 2004, and then I came back as ambassador from 2016 to 2019. And, you know, this is relatively... I mean, it's an ancient culture and civilization, language and people, but it's a new country, right? Independence happened in 1991 when the Soviet Union fell apart and every part of Ukraine, including Crimea, including the East, voted for independence for Ukraine. But it was hard because there was that old Soviet overlay with leaders who have been brought

up in the Soviet era and, you know, frankly, citizens who have been brought up in the Soviet era as well. So by the time I got there in 2001, there was the beginning of what we call civil society, which is something we take for granted here, but it's basically citizens active and informed, doing things to help their community, help the government, so that might be leading a Girl Scout troop, it might be planting flowers around the local library to beautify it. It might mean rallying people to vote. It might mean rallying people to put in a stop sign near the local school because there had been a couple of accidents there and it was dangerous. We don't wait for our political leaders to tell us what to do. In fact, we tell them what we want them to do. In the best cases, we hold them accountable for their actions and we continue to vote for them if they are responsible, good leaders. If they're not, we vote them out.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:17:26]:

All of that was not the case in the Soviet Union, so people had to build that. And they were just starting to build that when I arrived in 2001, ten years after independence. There were some brave investigative journalists who were calling out President Kuchma's corruption and other issues. There were civil society activists that were beginning to be active both on the local scene as well as on the national scene. And then fast forward two revolutions; one in 2004, the Orange Revolution, another revolution, the Revolution of Dignity in 2014—and the Revolution of Dignity means, “I want to be treated with dignity. I want to live according to the rule of law. I don't want some cop to just pull me over on the street and demand a bribe because he can. I want that cop to act according to the rule of law and treat me the way he would treat anybody else,” and so that was not happening in Ukraine in 2014 and people demanded a change. So in 2014, a new government came into power—the Poroshenko government—and they had a mandate for reform. The international community got behind that, and so it was partners, reformers in the government (and not everybody was a reformer), reformers in civil society and the international community. And a lot of change happened during the time because that's what the Ukrainian people wanted. It was just inspiring to see. You know, there's always only a relatively short window or a small window for reform because it's so hard. And that's true in any country in the world, including of course our own. But it was inspiring to me to see what the Ukrainian people were able to do working together.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:19:12]:

And then of course you have the total war that started in February 2022. The brutality of the Russian invasion where they were not only striking against Ukrainian military, but against Ukrainian civilians who were tortured, who were killed, who were raped, some of them kidnapped, including children, and taken to Russia. That brutality, I think, was just shocking, and Ukrainians have come together as a country, as a people, and are standing behind President Zelensky. And really, it's a completely mobilized society where everybody is doing what they can not because Zelensky is, like, pointing to people and saying, “You do this, you do that,” but because they see the need and they're not waiting for somebody else to fill that need. They are joining up in the military. They are driving ambulances. They are bringing supplies to the front lines. They are working in soup kitchens. It's inspiring to see how people are mobilizing, how united they are and how absolutely convinced they are that they will be victorious. As you mentioned at the top, I was just in Ukraine. I just got back yesterday. I was there for several days and I was, you know, again, newly amazed and inspired by the courageousness of the Ukrainian people, their commitment, and their confidence that they are going to win. I was in Kyiv, the capital, and this comes, you know, under the withering attacks against the capital, which have been going on for several weeks now and in

fact today there have been strikes during the day as well, following strikes during overnight. So the Russians are really pulling out all the stops, I think, to try to defeat the Ukrainians. But even today, I got emails and texts from friends saying, you know, “they're trying to scare us. They're trying to make us back down. And we're not going to.” It's inspiring.

Andrea Chalupa:

Incredibly so. And did you feel safe being there? Did you hear the sirens warning people to go to the bomb shelters?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:21:19]:

Yeah, so there are, you know, since it's 2023, there are applications, everybody has them on their phone. So you can hear it. Obviously, I was in a hotel, I could hear it in my hotel from the street, but I also heard the sirens on my phone. And at that point, you have a decision to make whether you go into a bomb shelter or you stay out of the bomb shelter and there's... I mean, the Ukrainians have quite a lot of experience now in terms of the timing and “how serious” the strikes are going to be. So people can make informed decisions. But I'll tell you, you know, I'm not exactly a veteran of wars and it's frightening. I mean, I think it's frightening for everybody, but they're not going to knuckle under a period paragraph.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, absolutely. And what decision did you make? Did you go down into the bomb shelter when you were there? Did you feel like, oh, I don't have the energy. It's the middle of the night?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:22:09]:

Well, I'll tell you, I mean, it's not a question of energy, even though I think a lot of people are pretty tired because this has been going on for weeks and for some people over a year, depending on where they're located. So people are pretty tired, but that siren goes off and I think for most people, I mean, some people said that they continue to sleep through it. They're just so inured to it. But I think most people wake up with a start and then make a decision, and that was certainly the case with me. The decision I made: so I was there from last Wednesday to Friday night. I mean, not a whole lot of time on the ground, but those particular attacks did not seem as serious and did not seem to be going to the center of Kyiv, which is where I was located. However, I left on a Friday night and the subsequent attacks were much more serious. And then, of course, today with the strikes that happened in broad daylight and according to some of the people I've talked to, I mean, there are a couple of reasons for that. I mean, first of all, it's terrifying, right? But secondly, I think the Russians are trying to get the Ukrainians to use as much of the anti-defense capabilities that they've got. And then thirdly, I think they were hoping that maybe the Ukrainians weren't able to reload and be prepared for the daytime strikes today, because that's the first time that's happened. We'll see whether they continue that tactic or not.

Andrea Chalupa [00:23:34]:

Right. I mean, there's all this anticipation that Ukraine's going to launch a counteroffensive, get back some of the stolen land. The Russians are, of course, as you said, are pulling out all the stops to scare and intimidate and try to just keep going in their genocide. So I want to go to your memoir, *Lessons from the Edge*, back to the surreal experience that you lived through that you write about so beautifully in

your book. And it's such a story of resilience and faith. In those early years of 2017-2018 before the smear campaign, how did this, the one targeting you, of course, how did Trump as president and Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, how did they color your experience as ambassador? When they first took over, what was that like? Was there a sort of jolt from your business as usual when they came to power?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:24:19]:

No, quite the reverse actually. We weren't quite sure what to expect given some of former President Trump's statements as a candidate about Crimea being Russian because they speak Russian there, as though we here in the United States who speak English are somehow English and British. So he had made a number of statements like that and also against NATO and against wanting to scale back U.S. assistance, not just to Ukraine, but everywhere. So we weren't sure what his policies were gonna be like, but in February of 2017, less than a month into his presidency, there was an interagency meeting and papers presented on what the policy towards Ukraine should be. And it was adopted by the interagency, led of course by Trump's National Security Council, and that policy was very similar, if not identical, to the previous policy. And so we at the embassy, we at the State Department, I think, were very comfortable with that policy because it was about strengthening Ukraine, you know, helping them continue with their reforms, fight against corruption, and obviously security issues. And in some ways, Trump actually strengthened the policy because with a lot of, I think probably, you know, this was above my pay grade, but a lot of arm twisting from a couple of cabinet members, Trump did later on in 2017 agree to transfer javelins to Ukraine, something that President Obama had not wanted to do because he viewed it as escalatory. And they were delivered in the spring of 2018. So I thought that was a real plus because it sends a strong signal. not only to the Ukrainians that we were supporting them, but also to the Russians.

Andrea Chalupa [00:26:10]:

Right, and I think there was reporting on the fact that Rex Tillerson had to basically say to Trump, "Obama was against this" so then Trump was automatically for it.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

What were the early signs of trouble that Giuliani and his associates in Ukraine were targeting you?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:26:28]:

So, you know, this is the really strange thing. It's not like I got a message: "oh, by the way—", you know, from the White House or from the State Department—"this is happening." There was just a feeling. Somebody would tell me, "The White House Personnel Office is asking whether you're doing a good job." That's really unusual because White House personnel doesn't usually worry itself about career ambassadors who have already been confirmed and are out at post and things like that. So I thought, well, maybe this is just the normal course of events that, as all presidents have the absolute right to nominate their own ambassadors and also to get rid of their ambassadors, and maybe they're now getting around to Ukraine and they want to replace me with his own nominee. I would always go back to

Washington and say—you know, my part of Washington, professional Washington, you know, at the State Department and at the NSC—and ask them, you know, “Am I going to be replaced?” “No, no, everything's fine.” So I would keep on doing the same job because that was what U.S. policy was. But towards the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, The Ukrainians actually were coming to me. Cabinet members were telling me that Giuliani was working with two emigres and that they were messaging the Ukrainian government that I was going to be pulled out, somebody else was going to be put in. And famously a Minister of Interior Avakov said, “you need to watch your back.” So that was really the first indication and that was sort of December, January in that time period.

Andrea Chalupa [00:28:08]:

How surreal was it, the fact that here America for years has been telling the Ukrainians to clean up their act, they need to fight the big fight to take on corruption, they can't nibble on the edges, and then lo and behold, a US president and his inner circle is engaging in blatant acts of corruption? What sort of confused looks did you get from Ukrainian officials when all of this was going on?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:28:34]:

Yeah, I mean, of course they didn't know what to think and neither did I. And I would say, “No, no, that's not the case. I just checked with Washington last night.” And in fact, I was getting very strong signals from Washington that they thought I was doing a good job. In this time period, actually in March of 2019, in the normal course of things I would have been rotated out in the summer of 2019, and I was asked to extend my time in Ukraine by another full year, so leaving in the summer of 2020. So I was getting, on the one hand, from the Ukrainians, I was hearing, “You're in huge trouble and you're going to be pulled out” but from my own government, from the professional side of the government, I was hearing, “No, you're doing a great job, and in fact, we want to extend you.” And so just to be clear, again, President Trump, like all presidents, has the right to remove ambassadors and put somebody else in place. What was strange is the way this was happening. This wasn't Rex Tillerson sort of told personnel and personnel told me. Actually by this time it was Secretary Pompeo. This was sort of behind the scenes with people who had no government jobs. I mean, we all know that Rudy Giuliani was the former President Trump's personal attorney, but he did not have a job in the US government, and neither did his associates. And yet somehow they seem to have outsized influence. And then, you know, moving forward, in March, they arranged for the prosecutor general at the time, Lutsenko, who was quite corrupt and had come to office making a number of promises, including pulling out the bad apples out of his agency, making reforms, and fighting corruption. He made no progress on any of those things and as we prodded him I knew that he didn't like that. I didn't realize how much he didn't like it until he gave this blockbuster interview to *The Hill*, an online—

Andrea Chalupa:

Right, that was John Suliman at *The Hill*.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, that's right. All of his lies were just printed with no verification at all. And then over the next couple of days, it was all picked up on TV, on Fox News, on various blogs and Twitter and everything else. The president himself even tweeted out some of this. And when I looked at all of it in Toto that Saturday, I

was like, this is a campaign. This is a campaign to remove me. And so I asked the State Department to issue a statement supporting me because it just didn't seem that I could survive otherwise. And I said it would be good if it was coming from Secretary Pompeo himself, because I think that's what it's going to take, because these are all political people in Washington, and they need to be told that I'm doing a good job and that I have support. But that support, unfortunately, never came. And so, about a month later, I was finally pulled back to Washington almost overnight, told that I would have to leave, and then I left, ultimately, permanently. I left Ukraine on the day, ironically, that Zelensky was inaugurated.

Andrea Chalupa [00:31:50]:

Wow. Lev Parnas, who was working with Giuliani in Ukraine, became a cooperating witness, providing audio of his conversation with then-President Trump, ordering you to be fired.

[\[audio clip of Trump ordering Yovanovitch to be fired\]](#).

Andrea Chalupa [00:32:48]:

How did you find out that you were being removed from your post and what was that moment like for you?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:32:54]:

Well, it was devastating. I was called in April by the head of personnel and told that... The first call, the head of personnel just told me that there were problems and she was just giving me a heads up. And I asked for more detail, understandably, and she said she would try to nose around and find out more. Then she called me. At this point, it was very, very late—past midnight, Ukrainian time—and she said, “You need to get on the next plane home. You need to get on a plane today.” I was like, “Well, it’s one o'clock in the morning in Ukraine.” And I said, “Why? I mean, what is this about?” And she said she didn't know, but it was for my own security. And so I asked, “Am I in physical danger?” And she said, “No, I don't think so.” I did come home shortly thereafter and that Monday. Several days later, I had a meeting with Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan, who told me that I would be leaving Ukraine permanently. I mean, this was, you know, I mean, it was devastating. On the one hand, he's telling me I've done nothing wrong and that I was doing a good job. And on the other hand, he's telling me that I'm going to be pulled out. And it was... It was devastating. And it was even more devastating because when I asked questions, big picture, “How are we going to explain this to the embassy personnel, to the Ukrainians, to the broader public?”—because the campaign against me, the smear campaign against me, was very public knowledge, certainly in Ukraine. And in the US and in other countries, frankly, where people were paying attention, people knew about this. And it's unusual—right?—that your own government would be going after you when all Trump had to do was to give the order, right? So it was clear that there was something else going on here.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:34:36]:

And yet there were no answers as to what we were going to say. In the end, the press release regarding my departure from Ukraine, frankly, became a laughing stock because they said that this was, you know, in the ordinary course of things, I was leaving because a new president was being sworn into office. In the ordinary course of things, what you want is continuity at the head of a U.S. embassy so that there is a

smooth transfer of relationships and everything else.

Andrea Chalupa:

Right. So for a corrupt prosecutor general like Lutsenko, who was supposed to be investigating corruption but was corrupt himself, he wanted to get rid of you because you were trying to do your job to get Ukraine to get a handle on corrupt officials like him. So he wanted you gone. Giuliani and Trump and their operation wanted you to essentially be a symbol, because you're appointed to your post under Obama, they wanted to make you sort of a gotcha moment in their case that the Democrats were working with elements of Ukraine to try to get President Trump to basically flip the script on the Russia investigation of Trump. Right? You were sort of part of that larger conspiracy theory web that Giuliani and Trump were trying to spin to try to go after the investigators that were going after them or to really make them make Trump seem like the victim basically.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:36:11]:

Yeah, that could be the case. I mean, I think we still don't know the full story, but I think the most important issue was that there was a plan that Giuliani had where he wanted the Ukrainian government to prosecute Joe Biden—former vice president at that time Joe Biden—and his son, and for activities in Ukraine. They wanted to dig up dirt that they could use in what they rightly anticipated would be a campaign for the US presidency against Joe Biden. And so they were looking for dirt wherever they could. And they thought—Giuliani had said this—that I would stand in the way. And so I think they wanted to make sure that there was nobody at the US embassy that would somehow stand in the way of their schemes.

Andrea Chalupa:

And it seemed like a lot of women kept standing in the way of their schemes. During the Trump years, there's so many women like Sally Yates and others putting themselves in the line of fire by just doing their jobs.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, well I think there are... There have been and continue to be a lot of courageous women. I mean, I don't want to take anything away from my male colleagues. I think there are a lot of male colleagues who stood up as well. And I think it takes a village for us all to do the right thing when there are abuses of power.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely. So in Ukraine in recent years, there's been a car bombing of a prominent journalist from Belarus. There was a witness, I believe, tied to a Yanukovich corruption case that was killed outside of a hotel in downtown Kyiv. There's been a lot of, you could say, political assassinations. During this time, did you feel that you were in danger?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:37:52]:

I have to say, no, I didn't for two reasons. I mean, first of all, I had a security detail and I had a lot of confidence in them. But secondly—somewhat naively, I later discovered—I felt I had kind of the

immunity bestowed on me by the US government, that surely nobody wanted to harm the US ambassador because that would bring a lot of additional trouble, right? Whether you were part of the government and against me, or even a criminal or somebody outside of the government, there would be a huge investigation and a huge uproar and that wasn't worth the trouble. Then fast forward to 2019 and I find out that not only did I not have that kind of magic laying on of hands, but even those in the highest offices and those around them were ready to go after their own ambassador. I mean, it's shocking.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:38:55]:

it's not only the Ukrainians that were watching all of this and sort of aghast, but other countries were watching it as well and seeing that, "Hey, if I don't like the agenda, the policy of the US government and I feel that the US ambassador is too active, too effective, whatever the case might be, I wanna replace that person and get somebody that's more to my liking," what they were watching in Ukraine was corrupt elements in Ukraine and corrupt elements in the United States basically manipulating the president. And I think other countries took note. And I think that's a very dangerous thing for our national security.

Andrea Chalupa:

Absolutely, because it allows corruption to flourish. The idea spreads. The operation spreads—

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, exactly.

Andrea Chalupa:

—and undermines men and women like you who are on the front lines of trying to, like you said, strengthen international diplomacy and a lot of anti-corruption measures. You're working with some of the bravest Ukrainians on the front lines, the reformers, the investigative journalists.

Marie L Yovanovitch:

And if I could say, it doesn't just undermine me, the ambassador, it undermines our US policy. I mean, that is not good for the United States of America and should never be tolerated. What we discovered was this was a trade for something that would,, accrue to the benefit of former President Trump, his personal and his political agenda, you know, trading our national security for that. I mean, that is shocking and wrong, frankly.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah. During the first impeachment hearing, you emerged, I have to say, as this incredibly inspiring figure: this woman coolly, calmly standing up to the president of the United States through your congressional testimony. And meanwhile, Trump is just wielding his Twitter account as this disinformation weapon against you, blaming you for everything, just really trying to make you this mastermind of disaster and really putting a target on your head. And all of us look to you. I know it must have not been easy going through this with this big target on your head and just the shock of the operation and, like you said, the high stakes that you just listed. Where did your resilience come from? What kept you strong? What faith were you clinging to when you were going through that whole horrific

process of your congressional testimony and having to confront this?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:41:16]:

Well, it was... Yeah, it was a pretty terrible time, all in all. 2019, both personally and professionally, was the worst year of my life. I had faith. I had a very supportive family. I knew my friends were behind me. And I felt... Well, there was a long... Not a long process, but a process in terms of me deciding whether or not I would testify because I'll just remind the audience that during the so-called perfect phone call—

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs]

Marie L Yovanovitch:

—as President Trump called it, between himself and President Zelensky in July of 2019, where he was asking Zelensky to do him the favor though and the favor turned out to be, you know, “I'll release the second shipment of javelins if you look into getting dirt on the Bidens,” there was also another part of that phone call where he basically bad-mouthed me and said that I was bad news and that “I will be going through some things.” I mean, that's a direct quote. And when that phone call was released in September, this was just as the Congress's investigative committees were getting going and they were reaching out to me and to others to testify. And I read that transcript and a colleague in the room told me my face went white because I did not know what that meant. I'd already been basically fired from my job. I was still a government employee and I was wondering what he was talking about. And if I did testify, what the consequences would be. It was a very unnerving time, I have to say.

Marie Yovanovitch [00:42:57]:

In the end, it just felt to me that testifying was the right thing to do, that Congress was—is—according to the Constitution, a co-equal branch of government. And according to the Constitution, one of the foremost responsibilities of Congress is oversight of the executive branch. This happens all the time that members of the executive branch testify before Congress. And it felt to me that I needed to be above all loyal to the Constitution. And so that's really what decided me. The other thing was, you know, at the end of the day, when the cameras go away, the public attention goes away, everything else, you have to live with yourself. And would I be able to look myself in the face if I hadn't testified? But nevertheless, there was huge pressure because of, “She's going to go through some things,” and the fact that the Trump administration, both the White House and the State Department, notified me and other witnesses that we were not to cooperate with the investigation.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow, and you just went ahead and did it for the sake of living with yourself and the country.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, and because I felt it was constitutional.

Andrea Chalupa:

And thank God for your family and friends helping you through that. What sort of messages did you

receive from American men and women during that time?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:44:18]:

Well, you know, it was really more after I testified publicly that I started receiving literally thousands of messages and letters. And people thanked me for my service, which was a wonderful thing. And often people told their own stories in various different ways. And many people said that they weren't aware of the State Department or the Foreign Service and what we do. And they said, "We want to hear more. You should write a book." And so that was the first time that I started to consider maybe writing a book because that was never one of the things I had planned for myself. And so then when I retired from the Foreign Service a couple of months later in January of 2020, I started to write.

Andrea Chalupa [00:45:04]:

So you were one of a very long list of people that Trump, his family, and their associates targeted. They went after law enforcement and the FBI, Bruce Orr, Andrew McCabe, it's a very long list. And, of course, in that first impeachment trial, another name they kept batting around, Devin Nunes, trying to make infamous or so on, was my sister, Alexandra Chalupa, the DNC consultant who was targeted for going to the press, flagging Paul Manafort, Trump's longtime friend his campaign manager who worked as a Kremlin operative for some time in Ukraine. You were asked about that and you just gave the perfect answer. You were like, "Yeah, okay." [laughs] And you just kept going.

[\[audio clip of Marie Yovanovitch's testimony to Congress when asked about Alexandra Chalupa\]](#)

Andrea Chalupa:

What were your thoughts on Paul Manafort and his work in Ukraine? Did you know about him before he became Trump's campaign manager?

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, I mean, first of all, just his work in the United States and elsewhere is, I think, relatively well known. And I knew that he had been working for Yanukovich, the former president of Ukraine, a very, very corrupt man, for many years. So I was aware of all that, and so it was concerning given Manafort's ties to Yanukovich and Russian oligarchs who were paying the bills for Yanukovich. It was concerning when I saw him named as former President Trump's campaign manager.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, I mean it kind of is just a big sort of red flag wailing siren moment. A sort of, "Okay, well, what's this guy doing here?" Trump's obviously out and about. He's running for president. And as part of his stump, it seems to be blaming Biden for Putin launching a war of annihilation in Ukraine. What would you say to that?

Marie Yovanovitch [0048:32]:

I think Putin had a plan, had a plan all along. He wants to restore the Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union, but I think it's the Russian Empire that he wants to restore. And he wants to take up his place in history as the heir to Peter the Great. And so I think it was always part of the plan to expand not only his

influence but his control over Ukrainian lands. And I think he would have done it no matter who was president. It would obviously have been a lot easier for him if President Trump had won the election because I think a lot of things would have worked to Putin's advantage, starting with what some of former president Trump's senior advisors say was Trump's desire to pull the US out of NATO. That would have been catastrophic, I think, for our collective security and I think it would have been hard to pull together the kind of, you know, given that and also given former President Trump's really terrible ways of demeaning and dealing with our allies, it would have been really hard to pull together the kind of alliance that the Biden administration has been able to support Ukraine.

Andrea Chalupa [00:49:52]:

Without question. How do you think Putin sees Trump? What do you think was going through Putin's minds... His mind, the minds of the Kremlin. What do you think they were all thinking during Trump's four years in office and how did they see Trump?

Marie Yovanovitch:

Yeah, well, I mean, I think it's hard. I don't think we have a lot of visibility into what people in the Kremlin think and so forth and certainly what President Putin thinks. But my guess is, you know, that old Soviet term "useful idiot"? I'm thinking that's what they were thinking, that they could use him and in some ways, I think former President Trump was so, you know, sort of obsequious and flattering and leaning towards the Russians that in some ways even Putin, I think, probably felt that it was too much because there was a backlash in the United States. And right now I'm thinking about the infamous press conference in Helsinki when the two had a bilateral meeting there. And then afterwards there was a press conference where Trump, in front of the whole world, took President Putin's word over our own intelligence agency with regard to interference in the US presidential elections. I mean, it was a shocking moment, a new low.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah, I canceled a trip I was supposed to take to Ukraine then. I just felt like they were targeting my sister a lot back then. The same operation, John Suliman of *The Hill*, Giuliani, Giuliani's associates, I think even Lutsenko, they went after my sister the same way they went after you. And she asked me to cancel my trip that I had planned at that moment to Ukraine because she felt like the heat, the attention was too much on her. It was just this sense of global lawlessness, as you said earlier. What Trump was doing was sending a really dangerous message to the rest of the world, the corrupt elements around the world. And just the look on Putin's face in Helsinki, it just felt like this heightened sense of danger that he had his useful idiot and they were going to get away with it if the American people didn't stop them in 2020. Do you think the chaos and instability in Trump's attacks on NATO and American allies, all those things combined, contributed to emboldening Putin, giving him the green light to finally launch his full-scale invasion and really go for it to build his legacy?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:52:05]:

Yeah, I think so. I mean, I think Putin sort of made three incorrect assessments. The first was that he had the most powerful military in Europe. The second was that Ukrainian people are not a true people, there is no Ukrainian country or language or distinct culture, and that they would not fight; that in fact they

would welcome an invading Russian army. I mean, you really have to wonder about that. And then the third thing was, I think that he thought the West, the United States, but Europe as well, were weak and dissolute, that we had no values, that we were hypocritical. And I think he looked at individual countries. And at that time, Macron was going into difficult elections, same thing in Italy. Angela Merkel, most powerful politician in Europe, had just left the scene. It wasn't clear where Germany was going to go. The UK... [laughs] I mean, enough said. And the US was saying they wanted to put Russia in a box, as you'll recall. And we had the disastrous evacuation of Afghanistan, which I think was registered around the world, including in Moscow. And I think he thought, "This is my moment. This is my strategic moment where I can move into Ukraine and nobody's going to stop me." And I think he looked back at his experiences in Georgia in 2008 when he essentially grabbed two hunks of Georgian territory, and we did nothing, not even levying a single sanction. And it was back to business as usual within months. In 2014, where he made the initial attack on Ukraine, illegally seizing Crimea and continuing the war in the east of Ukraine, we did levy sanctions. We did punish Russia in other ways, but it was insufficiently strong. And Putin was able to weather it. And I think he just waited until he thought the moment was right again to keep on going. And that turned out to be eight years later, in 2022.

Andrea Chalupa:

It's such a nightmare to look back on all that. Would you call it a policy of appeasement? There are the Minsk agreements allowing Russia to have certain rights over decisions of parts of Ukraine. And there's jokes that with Russian volunteer battalions going into Belgorod now and trying to take over parts of Belgorod that they would do another Minsk agreement allowing Ukraine to have concessions over parts of Russia. [laughs] That's the joke.

Marie Yovanovitch:

[laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

But would you call what Angela Merkel and Germany and France were sort of pushing all these years along, with Americans, almost under President Obama mostly, would you call those years sort of appeasement years, given what little was done to try to force Russia to rethink its calculations?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:55:01]:

Yeah, well, I think it's clear, especially with the benefit of hindsight, that we were not strong. We collectively in the West were not strong enough and we needed to send a stronger signal to Russia that this is not okay in this century to behave this way with a neighbor country or any other country. And I think it's critically important that this time around in 2022, Russia understands that it is not okay. I mean, that means that Ukraine has to be victorious, and it means that Russia needs to be defeated. And when I say Russia needs to be defeated, I don't mean that the Ukrainians are sitting in the Kremlin. What I mean is that Russia's leaders, the Russian people, understand that what they did was wrong, and there is accountability for that, and accountability in such a way that they don't try in four years, in ten years, when our backs are turned and we're distracted with other things, to do it all over again. Because that's what we can expect if the Russians get any kind of victory out of their lawless brutality in Ukraine.

Andrea Chalupa:

Yes, yes, yes. It's just so satisfying to hear you say that because it's just been so many years of frustration leading up to this full-scale invasion. What do you think of the Biden administration's response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Marie Yovanovitch [00:56:18]:

So I actually think that the Biden administration has done a pretty good job because if you look back to a year and a half ago, say, if I told you that we were talking about training Ukrainians on F-16s and we had sent HIMARs to Ukraine, you would have told me I was crazy. Nobody I think would have expected that a year and a half ago. I don't think anybody would have expected that even at the beginning of March, 2022 after Russia had invaded. So I think on the one hand, the Biden administration has been strong and rightfully so, and it's been deliberate because it needs to be deliberate because the stakes are very high here. We don't want to make a mistake. On the other hand, I think that we need to send more equipment more quickly so that Ukraine can win, as I said before. And I think we need to make it clear that that is what our policy is. I think we need a plan so that there isn't the incrementalism of making decisions every other week regarding which military systems to send to Ukraine. The announcements can come every other week, that's fine, but I think there needs to be an overall plan—and maybe there is, it just isn't articulated publicly—but I think it needs to be articulated publicly. And I think more broadly it needs to be articulated publicly because I think the American people need to understand what the stakes are. We support Ukraine because it's the right thing to do. This is a democracy that is being invaded by autocracy. Putin is ripping up all of the rules of international behavior, starting with violating the sovereignty of another country, its human rights, and its borders. This is something that the Soviet Union agreed to in terms of international principles in the UN Charter back after World War II, and Russia agreed to when it became the successor state. And again, if Russia is successful in Ukraine, Russia will keep on going. And the reason we know this is we look at Russia's past behavior under Putin, we look at what Putin has written, and we look at what he has said. He has made clear that he will keep on going West. And that will mean, perhaps counterintuitively, an even bigger war for all of us. And so it is in our national security interests to help Ukraine win in Ukraine. I mean, period, paragraph. And when you think about it, I mean, it's a lot of money, and we have a lot of important priorities here in the United States. But when you think about it, for something like 5% of our annual defense budget, the Russian military is being destroyed with no US boots on the ground. That is a huge deal for us. And if you think about what the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian military is fighting for, they're fighting for the West. They're fighting for Western values. And if they are victorious, those values can continue. If they're not, I think we're going to have a lot of challenges to the international order and that is going to be a huge challenge for our security, for our prosperity, and for our democracy.

Andrea Chalupa:

Without question. The final thing I wanted to ask you about, back to *Lessons from the Edge*, if you look at the world now, the global struggle between democracy and fascism, what advice do you have for young people today, this next generation coming up, when you look to the future? What advice do you have to them for following in your footsteps, for going into foreign service, for being sent to some dangerous hot spots to link arms with investigative journalists and anti-corruption reformers in some struggling democracies? What advice do you have for that future generation coming up?

Marie Yovanovitch [01:00:12:

Well, you know, obviously I do encourage people to join the Foreign Service, to join the State Department, to raise a flag for our national security. I think that's hugely important and is a very satisfying career because every day you can make a difference. But I think, you know, if that's not your thing, or if moving every couple of years to a different country is not the lifestyle that you aspire to, then there's so many things you can do in the United States. I think the important thing is to get involved. Be an active, engaged, and informed citizen of the United States. Try to build bridges in your community, in your state, maybe more broadly even in the country. But get involved. And you don't have to run for office. You don't have to join the military. You don't have to join the Foreign Service. Get involved in what you're most passionate about and help build your community and help build those bridges so that our country is stronger and more unified so that we can master the challenges that are coming and that are, in fact, already here in the United States.

Andrea Chalupa:

Thank you so much, Ambassador Yovanovitch. Thank you for all that you've done for our country. Thank you for being such a wonderful, inspiring symbol of resilience, and I highly urge everyone to read *Lessons from the Edge*. It was a wonderful companion during these times, and thank you so much for writing it.

Marie Yovanovitch:

Thank you.

[theme music, roll credits]