

Gaslit Nation Transcript

06 September 2023

“All Eyes on Virginia”

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Andrea Chalupa (00:01:00):

Dear future historians,

There was once this thing called Burning Man. Here's a description of the philosophy of the festival from its founder, Lee Harvey.

[start audio clip]

Lee Harvery (00:01:10):

We're a populist movement and within it you will find nearly every demographic you can imagine. We were always a family. Gift giving is very connective. If I give something to you and you accept it, there's a moral bond between us. We're all in the same lifeboat together.

[end audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa (00:01:24):

And here's the philosophy of one of the attendees who can afford to go and has been more than once: Grover Norquist, architect of the Republican Party's budget-killing, deficit-expanding tax cuts for the rich at the expense of the most vulnerable and the working class.

[start audio clip]

Interviewer (00:01:42):

Grover Norquist, you know, at some point, socialists have to learn.

Grover Norquist:

They run out of other people's money.

Interviewer:

Are we there now? And if we are, how do we fight it?

Grover Norquist (00:01:51):

We're en route. Step one is never raise taxes, never raise taxes, never raise taxes—

Interview:

lol yeah

Grover Norquist:

—because they spend it and more. So that's step one. And step two is fight to keep the spending down.

[end audio clip, theme music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:02:09):

Hello everyone. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine. It's never been more important to watch this film, to share this film with people. You know why? Because the United Nations, which has Russia as a permanent member of the Security Council, is pushing back on the well-documented fact that Russia's ongoing genocide in Ukraine is a genocide. Keep in mind that extraordinary historians like Timothy Snyder who are experts in genocide and how they work have said over and over again, "This is a genocide." "Hi, I'm an expert in genocide. This is a genocide." The Russians themselves on Kremlin State TV are telling us proudly—gloating about it—that they are committing genocide, that they're determined to kill every last Ukrainian because they are simply Ukrainian. And so of course the UN, because many of our institutions are captured, they're infiltrated—

Andrea Chalupa (00:03:13):

Blood money is delicious—they're scratching their heads and saying, "We're not really sure." It's like a really bad Mike Judge movie at the UN. It's like a Mike Judge horror film. That's the UN. So please share the news of *Mr. Jones*. Get the film out there. It came out during the pandemic, which was tough, and it's really been this sort of grassroots movement supporting it. So thank you so much to everyone who gets the word out there about Mr. Jones and watches the film and shares information. Thank you. Thank you. I love you. I appreciate you. I see you. Quick reminder, we're doing a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* on Tuesday, September 12th at 12:00 PM Eastern with Terrell Starr live from Ukraine. Terrell Starr, of course, of the must-listen-to *Black Diplomats* podcast. He just did a great six part series on Iran and that's going to be 12:00 PM Eastern on September 12th.

Andrea Chalupa (00:04:05):

And you can get tickets to that by supporting the show at the Truth-teller level or higher on Patreon at patreon.com/gaslit. That's patreon.com/gaslit and you can leave questions in the chat. So come join the conversation for the Tuesday live taping with Terrell Starr of *Black Diplomats*. And then we have an event, a night out: Russian mafia expert Olga Lautman and Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the historian and author of the bestselling book *Strongmen*, they're going to be joining me in conversation on September 18th, a Monday evening, at 7:00 PM at P&T Knitwear in Manhattan, in Lower Manhattan. So I am going to be doing a live taping of *Gaslit Nation* with them. This event is free. I'll be doing a special meetup with our Patreon community. I will have a mask on for that meetup with the community. I will have N95 masks with me, so if you don't have one, you can get one for free from me. And we can hang out.

Andrea Chalupa (00:05:07):

I'll give you some signed posters, say hello. We'll take some selfies with our super cool masks and normalize wearing masks again because Covid is still here. So we look forward to that, so come September 18th, Monday, 7:00 PM Eastern to P&T Knitwear in Lower Manhattan. Join me, Russian mafia

expert Olga Lautman and historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, author of the bestselling book, *Strongmen*, for a special live taping of *Gaslit Nation*. Thank you to everyone who supports the show. And check out the book from *Gaslit Nation*, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!* So this week is Labor Day Week. Thank you to all the workers out there. Thank you to everybody who is pushing back, who is unionizing. To all the exploiters out there who think they can get away with this, you have podcasts like *Gaslit Nation* that are going to call you out. Please listen to my interview with the wonderful filmmakers behind the must-watch documentary, *Americonned*.

Andrea Chalupa (00:06:02):

It tells the story of the people power in the Amazon warehouses pushing back and organizing, and all the strategies and all the risks and all the dark dark arts operations by the business elites in trying to infiltrate and destroy that grassroots movement. It's a chilling documentary. It's an important one to watch: *Americonned*. And I'll link to my interview in the show notes for this week's episode. We're going to feature those guys, those filmmakers back again on the show and cover more union efforts moving forward because in a time of historic levels of income inequality, which is a breeding ground for fascism as we talk about in the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think!* It's one of the three main ingredients of how dictators come to power. Economic instability. Economic depression: that's one. Then you have political instability, that's another. And then disinformation, propaganda and so on.

Andrea Chalupa (00:06:55):

So we are a cauldron of those three ingredients right now. We're just boiling away. And *Gaslit Nation* is here pushing back against all of it. So, as you heard in the opening clip, there was an ode to Burning Man. My heart goes out to anybody who is living their most authentic lives, who is a good person who picks up litter in the park, who volunteers their time, who adopts rescue dogs, who donates to Sierra Club and all the right causes and votes and volunteers to watch polling places. And if you ever went to Burning Man and it meant something to you, my heart goes out to you because Burning Man is dead. It needs to be packed up and buried and put away, and that's it, for obvious reasons. Obviously you saw the news. Climate change, the asteroid of climate change is hitting us and it will for the rest of our lives, even if we get on track to all the numbers that we need to hit to fight back against fossil fuels and carbon and so on.

Andrea Chalupa (00:07:48):

We're living with this asteroid in our lives now. Parents now have to check the air quality before they send their kids out there because of the forest fires, hundreds of miles away and so on. The new normal is here. The new normal is something that... "No, your skin, your lungs, your body cannot acclimate to this. I don't care." It's hell. And we all have to stay organized, stay vigilant, fight back, and there's a lot of great groups who are doing that. You can find some on the *Gaslit Nation* Action Guide. But my larger point is this: I want to just really, really stick the nail in the coffin for Burning Man for everyone's sake because there's such a mythology there that is getting exposed. With the climate crisis torrential rains that flooded out the playa, turning Burning Man into a perfect metaphor of what it truly is, exposing it, and creating this swamp, this quicksand, where Grover Norquist, as you heard... He's one of the architects of this libertarian anti-tax, tax-dodging, "I'm apartheid Elon Musk trust fund kid that pulled myself up by the bootstraps of my parents' diamond mines" face of what led us here to this crisis point in destabilizing the economy because these tax cuts only help the wealthy. There is no trickle down. It's gaslighting at its finest. And Burning Man itself is a big lie. Maybe it did not start that way, but it's certainly been co-opted to become that. Yeah, the whole trickle down theory of Burning Man, meaning you go there, you experience some hedonistic revelation that connects you to our shared oneness by spending all this money just to reach this place and sustain yourself out in this hostile environment. It's a

boatload of money to go to Burning Man. That's why I've never gone. I will never go. And I don't need it. I absolutely do not need something outside myself for Nirvana.

Andrea Chalupa (00:09:36):

All I've got, all I need is inside me. I'm fine. Thank you very much. My power comes from within, as does yours. We don't need it. No Burning Man for us, it's a lie. It's a big fat lie. What it ultimately does... I'll just sort of take it back a couple steps here. When I was at Condé Nast Portfolio, which is a big old fancy business magazine—and I was only there because I needed a job, I needed to sort of cut my teeth in media somehow because my Ukrainian immigrant parents were like, “Get a job and don't talk to us until you have one.” [laughs] And I thought earning \$15 an hour temping in the basement of some skyscraper, hidden away in some office somewhere clerking while I worked on my screenplay, I thought that was a job, but it wasn't according to my parents.

Andrea Chalupa (00:10:15):

So I got a big fancy job getting paid nearly nothing working for Condé Nast Portfolio. My parents were super proud. I was super demoralized at first, but I did meet some extraordinary people through that experience (but that's another story). While I was there, I reported an article on Wall Street executives who go to Burning Man. And these executives were trying to tell me, or they were trying to convince me that the Burning Man experience is so real, it's so authentic. “I come back a better executive, better for myself, better for my company.” One guy who was going that year had a meeting with Rupert Murdoch as soon as he got back. So what happened shortly after all of these Nirvana-seeking executives got back from Burning Man? What happened shortly after that? They tanked the global economy, putting countless people out of jobs, exposing the burning man of Wall Street, Bernie Madoff, and all the money that he set on fire with his big old Ponzi scheme and so on.

Andrea Chalupa (00:11:08):

It was all a big fat fraud. And then how did these Wall Street banks get saved? Socialism. The government came in with our tax dollars and saved them all through good old fashioned socialism; the kind that Grover Norquist, Burning Man attendee, is set on making exclusive just to his friends in the business elite, the very top, and not to the rest of us, which is creating all sorts of destabilization and an uptick in all sorts of social ills and really hurting our country for generations. It's shredding away at our social safety net, which makes us less competitive in the global world, in the marketplace. And in the global marketplace, you have the Scandinavian countries outpacing us on all sorts of metrics, including happiness and including very limited corruption. And meanwhile, America's falling apart because of the Grover Norquists in the world who think they deserve a pat on the back for going to Burning Man, when the whole theory of that place—the trickle down, “If you go there, you just become a better person.”—all a lie. There's as much truth to it as the other trickle down theory, which is absolutely none. So please, it's over now. This was the final year of Burning Man. I have declared it here on this show. I want to also point out for your sake, when I was going down Grover Norquist's Twitter timeline, I came across something called the Atlas Society. They're having a gala—where else?—in Miami, Florida. Miami, Florida is a place where a lot of people in the business elite left, right, and center will move down to Florida to pay less money in taxes. You know, people that can't stand Trump who will do this just so they can pay less in taxes, which is a reminder again, that fascism, right?

Andrea Chalupa (00:12:44):

The DeSantises, the Trumps, the people that have the Nazis in their base, they come to power despite their overtly racist rhetoric—their genocidal rhetoric—because of men, women, left, center doesn't matter who want to pay less taxes. It's the business elite that plays a significant hand in bringing dictators to power. This happened under Hitler, this happened with Mussolini, this happened with

Pinoche. This is a very classic story and it's happening now with all the people moving from the North, like Illinois, New York and so on, because they see Florida as a tax haven. And they might complain about DeSantis with polite company over dinner in Palm Beach, but they love the tax breaks. And so therefore, DeSantis can continue whitewashing American history, endangering the lives of LGBTQ youth, trying to erase trans people and trans children, and trying to completely whitewash American history, which is authoritarian history for non-white people.

Andrea Chalupa (00:13:42):

And not only that, going a step further and saying that promoting this idea of slavery being a good thing, that's like saying the systemic rape of children in Ukraine by Russia is a good thing. It's simply not. DeSantis is as vile as they come. That is why you have these Nazis out in the street in Florida, as we just saw the other day with these viral videos outside of Disneyland of Nazis, once again in their Nazi garb and their face tattoos, screaming about white power. Some are promoting Trump and DeSantis and so on. They're saying ridiculous stuff. There's one video clip where they're saying, "We like Biden because he promotes the Nazis in Ukraine." They're trolling you when they say that. Ukraine right now is fighting for everything the Nazis hate, which is a culturally diverse democracy. Ukraine, while it is fighting for its life with the military, with mothers raising their children, both boys and girls, to go out and give their lives right now for their country, for their freedom, for future generations to remember this as the greatest generation, that country is also moving forward with legalizing civil unions for gay marriage.

Andrea Chalupa (00:14:44):

That's a movement that's been growing. They've been fighting corruption and those forces and pushing back. And you have a trans woman who is one of the spokespeople of Ukraine because Ukraine has something that the Russians hate, that DeSantis hates, that Trump hates: Ukraine has a woke army. So when you hear these idiot Nazis in Florida trying to claim stuff in their viral videos ("We like Biden because he gives to the Nazis in Ukraine.") that's Russian disinformation. That's GOP disinformation, that's Tucker Carlson disinformation. They're trolling you. They don't actually mean that. They hate Ukraine because Ukraine has a woke military, and that is why Ukraine is winning this war— one of the many reasons. And so that brings us to Florida, the bane of our existence. It wasn't 2000 when we lost in Gore v. Bush and then Bush unleashes the dogs of war, the Pandora's box with Afghanistan, Iraq, and that destabilized the world with those illegal invasions and the rise of ISIS. And the horrible foreign policy years of the Obama administration, where they tried to make a deal with the devil—Russia—in the name of fighting isis.

Andrea Chalupa (00:15:56):

Meanwhile, Russia just openly stabbed the Obama administration in the chest for the eyes to see. Then Trump comes to power due to a lot of mistakes during that time and so on. So we're back with all eyes on Florida. There was recently a modern day lynching, a shooting by a racist in Jacksonville. The corporate media debated, "Is it a Nazi?" It was a Nazi shooting emboldened by the genocidal rhetoric of DeSantis and Trump and their supporters that are out in the open. And I know people are scared because there's all these reports of the Nazis running for office and organizing themselves. I'm here to reassure you, the Nazis have always been there. You had William F. Buckley with his Nazi rhetoric of, "The South must prevail." We all know what he was talking about, very clearly, why the south must prevail; that white supremacy must prevail.

Andrea Chalupa (00:16:43):

Then you had a dear friend of Paul Manafort and Roger Stone, Lee Atwater, in that unholy trinity of the dark arts of political ops of Republican political mayhem, saying how, "You can't say the N-word anymore so you gotta say 'welfare queen,'" and all that other stuff they used, all the other racist dog whistles they

used to get Reagan elected. And Reagan of course unleashed the “greed is good,” the trickle down theory lie and decades of economic instability and widespread poverty and widespread prison industrial complex growth that we're all living with today. I want to tell you: One wonderful investigative journalist who's coming on the show soon, Jesse Eisinger, who is leading the extraordinary investigative reporting against Clarence Thomas and his keeper, Harlan Crow, about what a cesspool of corruption the Supreme Court is. We all knew that. If you were Elizabeth Warren supporters, as I was, she had a plan for how to clean that up.

Andrea Chalupa (00:17:38):

So it was all very obvious. But Jesse Eisinger and his team at *ProPublica* have done a lot of extraordinary reporting on that. And Jesse's going to come on the show. I spoke with him recently at an event and he made the point to me and I made the point back to him—because we both agree because it's obvious—we are living with the horrible fallout, the headache, the nightmare of those Reagan years, the Reagan revolution, brought to us by proud Nazis like Lee Atwater, like “the south must prevail,” like the white supremacists. That's why you have Harlan Crow, a guy who collects Nazi memorabilia because we all know where his sympathies lie, owning Justice Clarence Thomas, who has no problem being a dark face for white supremacy. He has no problem cashing in, selling out his soul, selling out his country and democracy to be the Black friend of the Nazis.

Andrea Chalupa (00:18:24):

So yeah, that's all of it. So I hope to God that helps you make sense of what's going on now and as well as future historians who are going to have to make sense of all this should we survive. And we will survive. And that brings us to, how will we survive? Well, it's the same strategy that we've always talked about since the start of the show. We all need to fight like hell where we live in our states, in our communities, and that's how we strengthen each other. That's extremely important. The Virginia elections are coming up at the state level. I was just in Virginia. I saw some scary attack ads that are the kinds used in Florida where the Democrats are painted like socialists and it shows a montage of “violent crime of non-white people breaking into your home, white woman in suburban America!”, the independent voters that Biden and Trump both need to win the electoral college.

Andrea Chalupa (00:19:16):

Those are the types of ads that are running right now in Virginia. It's the Florida game plan. It worked in Florida to bring DeSantis in power. It worked in Florida to chip away at any chance the Democrats had, granted the Democrats also ceded Florida. They gave up on it. They pre surrendered and Republicans were able to fill that void by scaring everyone over crime, driving out the racist vote and so on. The same attack ads are running now in Virginia leading up into a very important election because how the Democrats do in Virginia will determine how well the state does in 2024. Currently, with the latest electoral map, Virginia was called early on election night and it was a solid Democratic pickup. It might not be this way around because the Nazis are very well organized and the way we fight back against them is in the state. Because if we do not, and Trump ekes through—you saw the latest polls as I did between Trump and Biden matching up in a general, it's very scary—if Trump ekes through, he's going to make all of his investigations, all of his court cases go away for his 91+ felony charges.

Andrea Chalupa (00:20:20):

And more than that, he's going to pardon the over 1000 people that have been convicted and sent to prison for trying to help him violently overthrow our democracy. So that 1000+ people—those Nazis—are going to be released from prison and they're going to continue to be his foot soldiers, his brown shirts. And they're going to intimidate judges, juries, election officials, women, non-white people, activists, journalists, LGBTQ+ people and their families. They're going to try to terrorize all of us into

submission. They see themselves as martyrs, and once you release them from prison, they're going to rebuild and they're going to use the same organization they built to systematically infiltrate our Capitol and try to hunt down Pence and Pelosi to hang them, and go after AOC and others, that same level, the column worming its way up through the crowd towards the capitol, we're going to see that level of organization across the land. It's going to be the same terror squad that Hitler used to turn Germany into a dictatorship within six months. It's going to happen a lot faster this time and you're going to see a lot of rich white people flee abroad rather than stay and fight and deal with this. And so the rest of us will be left behind to confront this. Basically the whole country will be the Jim Crow South, most of it. So let me just give you a clip of some of the guys I'm talking about.

[begin audio clip]

Speaker 7 (00:21:43):

This sentencing comes more than two and a half years after the attack on the US Capitol, and just hours ago, Joseph Biggs learned his fate: as you said, 17 years behind bars but not nearly the amount of time that Department of Justice prosecutors wanted. They want him behind bars for 33 years, almost double. Ultimately, the judge disagreed with that. According to witnesses in the courtroom, Biggs wept as he asked the federal judge to show mercy on his sentence, indicating he wanted to be able to take his daughter to school one day. Ultimately, the judge decided on those 17 years behind bars in court. Biggs said what happened is something he'll have to live with for the rest of his life.

[end audio clip]

Andrea Chalupa (00:22:24):

Yeah, no kidding. We're all going to have to live with what you did for the rest of our lives. So, now, before we get to a special shout out from a wonderful appearance here by a friend on this show, I want to say to our listeners, Twitter has become an authoritarian state. We saw this. This was all headed there. We've seen reporting that people that talk about Ukraine and other hot button issues that Apartheid Barbie Elon Musk does not like, they're getting flooded with Russian disinformation. That's obvious. Elon Musk is very much on the side of the Russians that systemically rape men, women and children on Ukraine and their genocide. That's who Elon Musk is fighting for by turning his plaything, Twitter, his ego midlife crisis toy, into a Russian disinformation vipers den. And on top of that, [there's reporting out in *The Guardian*](#), which I'll share in the show notes, that his buddies, the Saudis, the murderous millennial MBS—who killed Jamal Khashoggi, the journalist—the Saudis have been getting intel from Elon Musk's Twitter that they then allegedly used to hunt down activists, kill and imprison people and so on.

Andrea Chalupa (00:23:29):

So yeah, and Twitter also, I've noticed some so-called resistance accounts on Twitter being very quiet on issues like Ukraine and trans human rights, trans rights, because those are issues that Elon Musk openly hates. And so I see people, normally good people—self-censoring now on Twitter because they don't want to fall victim to the algorithm that's going to suppress you if you dare to really talk about Ukraine and trans rights and so on. So those accounts that do that tend to get buried and they're not visible. They're just sort of shadowbanned. And so what I've seen since all of us sort of made this choice to stay on Twitter is that people are starting to self-censor. And it's heartbreaking. It's infuriating. That's why I'm making the decision to go into exile. I'll still be posting on Twitter, but I'm going to decentralize. I'm going to try Bluesky, LinkedIn, and I know they all suck.

Andrea Chalupa (00:24:25):

I know they all have some warlord owning them, like [Mark Zuckerberg has given data that led to a conviction of a mother who helped her daughter get an abortion](#). Mark Zuckerberg's evil. The Chinese regime committing a genocide against the Uighurs that own TikTok, they're evil. I understand that we're dealing in a time of a Big Brother, of authoritarian control over our social media. And as a result of that, I'm making the decision to decentralize right now. That's where I'm going. I'm going to start a lot of different accounts for myself, for *Gaslit Nation*. I will link to them in the show notes of this episode. Please follow us there. It's very important. I'm going to still be on Twitter, but it's very hard for me to watch good people succumb to self-censorship. I remember talking to a journalist from Belarus who was dreading returning home to Belarus because she's like, "I know the self-censorship is going to take hold," and that I'm afraid it's what is happening to too many good people and why they are reluctant to talk about Ukraine now and Twitter and talk about trans rights and other issues that Apartheid Barbie hates.

Andrea Chalupa (00:25:23):

Yep, that's the reality. Twitter is an authoritarian state and I know many of us are in a toxic relationship with it and it's hard to walk away, but eventually you have to break away. And so I'm taking a step in that direction by decentralizing. And again, I'll link to my other accounts in this show notes for this week's episode. Now, a special guest and a wonderful, wonderful friend of the show, the actor J. Smith-Cameron, who you might know as Gerri from *Succession*, what you might not know—and this is extremely important information—is J. Smith-Cameron, extraordinary talent, nominated for a bunch of Golden Globes, all that fun stuff, what you might not know is that she turned the set of HBO's *Succession* into an organizing powerhouse, into a fundraising powerhouse, raising over \$100,000 to help flip the State House in Pennsylvania from Republican control to Democratic control. That helps protect Pennsylvania leading into the all-important 2024 election.

Andrea Chalupa (00:26:20):

J. Smith-Cameron is someone who is the real deal. She'll roll up her sleeves, she'll send emails in the middle of the night and text messages, she brainstorms, she hits up all of the people, the talented artists around her; the actors, the filmmakers and so on. She's an organizer. She's an activist, through and through. She's in the weeds on this work, doing this all-important work. And what it symbolizes to me is this urgent reminder that this is an all hands on deck time in our country. No one is too cool for school while the world burns, all of us have to be doing something, whatever we can do. Every little bit helps. And I thank you to everyone out there rolling up their sleeves, trying even when they're tired, even when they don't feel like it, even when they're dealing with their own nonsense and mess in their own lives and they're carrying themselves through this, we need you.

Andrea Chalupa (00:27:08):

I need you. You are not alone in this. I'm by your side. We are doing this work together. Thank you so much to everyone out there. Now, here's a quick message from J. Smith-Cameron to our listeners. Followed by that is a really important interview looking at Virginia and what is at stake in those state elections with Daniel Squadron and Melissa Walker of the States Project. This is their third time back on the show, which reminds everyone again how important this state level/community level work is in protecting our country and strengthening our democracy and really building a future that's livable, building a future so our kids don't have to deal with these asshole Nazis anymore. Thank you.

[military snares, 'America, the Beautiful' up and under]

J. Smith-Cameron (00:27:59):

Hello, *Gaslit Nation* listeners. It's J. Smith-Cameron. Thank you to everyone who listens to and supports the show, and works to rebuild our democracy. We have a long road ahead, but together we can create a livable future for ourselves, our children, and the planet. And one way to do that is by supporting unions. As a member of the Screen Actors' Guild I'm currently on strike, demanding along with the Writers' Guild that all workers are paid fairly and on time and are protected against being overworked and underpaid and aren't replaced by AI, a Pandora's box that threatens jobs across industries. My union represents 160,000 people from all backgrounds determined to stand in solidarity against unchecked corporate greed. Thank you to everyone supporting the strike and building and strengthening unions in your workplace. Unions are patriotic and how we take back power.

J. Smith-Cameron (00:28:54):

And if you want to join me and Andrea and other activists across the country fighting back against far-right extremism at the all-important state level—where quality of life issues are determined, laws are made and enforced—and to recreate the progressive victories of Michigan and Minnesota wherever you live, [join us at State Fair, our giving circle that helped flip the State House in Pennsylvania.](#) So for more info on how to join, look for the link in the show notes of this week's episode. Thank you to everyone for staying engaged and fighting back. Together, we will win.

[music fades out]

Andrea Chalupa (00:29:39):

I am joined by novelist and community organizer, Melissa Walker, and former New York State Senator, Daniel Squadron. They are both of the impactful frontline democracy fighting fascist punching through civic action organization, the States Project. Thank you both so much for being here.

Daniel Squadron (00:30:02):

Thanks for having us.

Andrea Chalupa (00:30:04):

So walk folks through all the work that you did in Pennsylvania because they need to understand last... When was that? When did we all get together for Pennsylvania? That was a year ago. We did a big fundraiser together with the cast of *Succession*, raised a ton of money through that, through your organization. And what was the result of all that hard work and investment, grassroots investment?

Melissa Walker (00:30:30):

Well, our work in Pennsylvania in 2022 involved the state house and we were working to try to flip 12 seats to shift the balance of power in Harrisburg. And it was a big lift and most people didn't think it could be done or at least that it would take two cycles, including us. And so it was an incredible victory when we actually were able to flip those 12 seats.

Andrea Chalupa (00:30:53):

12 seats! Huge number.

Melissa Walker (00:30:56):

Huge number of seats, and the final seat was won by 63 votes. These margins are so slim and the tactics that we use in Pennsylvania are really the brass tacks of any campaign. So we work hard to make sure

that in the competitive districts folks have what they need to run a campaign; everything from field teams to mailers to digital ads to television. And then we layered on a few other tactics. One of them, a particularly impactful one, is our door knocking challenge which we ran in Pennsylvania in 2022. It incentivizes candidates to knock on doors. And I'm not talking about field teams, but actually the candidates themselves because especially in these districts that are right on the margins, these districts need a persuasion knock. And field team is great for get-out-the-vote, but a candidate is the persuasion knock.

Melissa Walker (00:31:53):

And so incentivizing candidates to knock on doors by rewarding the top door knockers each month with additional campaign contributions is one of our signature programs. And in Pennsylvania, after the election, we found that candidates who are involved in the door knocking challenge knocked on five times as many doors as candidates who were not involved, and that meant thousands and thousands more doors knocked. And as I mentioned before, that margin of victory to take power in Harrisburg was 63 votes. So those are the kind of tactics the candidates deploy on the ground with our help.

Andrea Chalupa (00:32:26):

Daniel Squadron, you used to be in a seat of power here in New York State. New York State, unfortunately, because of complacency, I would say, by the Democratic machine establishment, it has become a battleground for the House. We lost so many winnable House seats under the current leadership of Jay Jacobs. You've been in the machine. You've been in the belly of the beast as a New York State senator. Obviously we have a lot of questions and we're going to get to Virginia and other things, but one of the things we cover a lot on the show is what do we do about New York State? How do we, us in this so-called Blue State fighting for swing districts, swing states like Pennsylvania, Virginia, which we're going to talk about in today's episode, but how do we also protect ourselves from complacency, from establishment rot, from Jay Jacobs? What are your thoughts on us cleaning up our own act here in New York?

Daniel Squadron (00:33:19):

I just want to highlight, you've described being a state lawmaker as a seat of power, so I appreciate you saying that. I would just modify it slightly to say, being a state lawmaker in a majority is a seat of power. In my experience, seven years in the minority, including much of the Democratic establishment giving a wink and a nod to Democrats who put Republicans in power, I was in the minority. Let me tell you, being a state lawmaker in the minority is being an observer with an all-access pass. It is not a seat of power. Very important to point out as we come back to Virginia and Pennsylvania. Who has power matters a whole lot. Those folks who look at the glamor of the state legislature and say, "Boy, that's a lot of power." It's an unbelievable amount of ability to do good or ill in the majority, very little of the minority.

Daniel Squadron (00:34:14):

Two other things that you said though, you used two metaphors for New York state; the belly of the beast and inside the machine. Both of those I think presuppose a thing to be inside of. It's a lot more dynamic than that, meaning there are a lot of different nodes of influence and power. They all tend to have a set of interests and come together to negotiate those interests. Here's why I say that. I'll go back to my time in the legislature. The idea during much of my time in the legislature, that on a podcast or out there in the giving circles community people would care about state legislatures, was so absurd as to be almost laughable if it wasn't tragic. The idea that the public would ever notice that a small number of Democrats had given Republicans the majority when the establishment was letting it go seemed an impossibility.

Daniel Squadron (00:35:08):

But of course we know that as we headed into the 2018 election and many more people became aware of this, it changed the reality because suddenly there was a new interest; folks who thought they had a bunch of progressives representing them and realized that they had no power because of these turncoat Democrats. New York State has had a Democratic Party chairperson going back over a century; as far as I know, a century and a half, two centuries nearly. And yet, I'm not sure that they have ever been asked about on a podcast of advocates and activists as the first question before, because it didn't seem relevant. There was no interest, no set of pressures around who the chair of the Democratic Party in New York State is. Now there is. That's the first question you asked. Now, what you describe as a rot in the party has perhaps been definitive in controlling Congress.

Daniel Squadron (00:36:09):

So what's going on here? Politics really matters. Who has power? Not who is great on social media or makes us feel excited—who has power really matters. There are ways in which the chair of a party in a state has power. When that power is handed to a small number of interests, they will negotiate their interests and move on when there's a new set of interests like your listeners, that reality can change. Republicans had power in the New York State Senate for almost every year from the Great Depression until 2018 because that was where the interests netted out, including for seven of my own nine years in office with Democrats handing them the power and paying no price for it. In 2018, that changed because regular folks became aware of the impact of a Trumpist majority in New York State's legislature. The governor was held to account for his complicity in that reality and vote candidates ran in Democratic primaries and won races with grassroots support. So, what's going on in New York state? It's a lot of power in New York State and there's a lot of shiny objects that are appealing and interesting to look at on social media and cable news, and ne'er shall the two meet most of the time. Want a change in New York politics? Focus on it like it's a power struggle that matters.

Andrea Chalupa (00:37:45):

And so you're saying you're all in favor of her replacing Jay Jacobs?

Daniel Squadron (00:37:48):

I'm saying that if your listeners are suddenly or newly aware of the power structure in New York, they can do something about it. But it involves real focused work and attention on it. I would say this, I think that the extent to which there are two different things going on; there are folks doing things that are interesting and exciting in politics and getting excited about someone running against Mitch McConnell, and then the extent to which folks with power are generally operating just based on a small number of inside interest groups is terrible. I think that the New York State Chair having to answer for his choices to a broader audience because they make themselves matter is a great thing. And what I say on this podcast has nothing to do with that. What your listeners and others like them are willing to do to look past the shiny objects on social media is going to define the extent to which Jay Jacobs and others inside the inside power political game have to answer for their choices.

Andrea Chalupa (00:38:52):

So Minnesota, Michigan, those are models of what's possible in our country. Those are progressive victories. Those are elected Democrats who actually serve the people, the public good. They're showing us what's possible. They're fighting for raising the quality of life for their citizens. Walk us through what those lessons of Minnesota and Michigan are for the rest of us, especially in the communities you're trying to build.

Daniel Squadron (00:39:21):

Well, I think one is that campaigns that are better funded and better run make a huge difference. We had better districts in the case of Michigan, but still campaigns that are better funded and better run, the work the States Project does, makes a huge, huge difference. Everyone says, "Well, I'm not really interested in contributing dollars to politics. I just want to volunteer." Well, you know, narrow special interests contributed a lot of dollars to politics. So regular folks who just want better outcomes should also get involved. That's one lesson. And it's hard to run campaigns. So groups like the States Project just having expertise and partnership and mentorship, the kinds of tactics Melissa talked about, make a difference. But then the second thing is we are not just trying to win a ball game. We don't want to go celebrate because the blue flag is waved instead of the red flag or whatever; two colors you used.

Daniel Squadron (00:40:17):

It's about outcomes. And I think in both Michigan and Minnesota, what you've seen is you've seen them take on actions and outcomes with no votes to spare. How many times in Congress or how many times in a new majority somewhere have we seen infighting lead to a stalemate? Have we seen tiny victories, technical changes touted as revolutionary improvement? In Michigan and Minnesota, with no votes to spare, they passed more bills in the first hundred days of session than I think the last six sessions combined in the first hundred days. In the case of Michigan, also, the public knew exactly what they were doing. They had six big bills walking in the door. Minnesota had a list that it published; its internal list of things it wanted to do, they published it! They took a picture of it. It was on a whiteboard. It was a great photo.

Daniel Squadron (00:41:13):

Here's why that's important: they want people to know what they're doing. They want people to know that they're raising wages and protecting people's right to private personal decisions like abortion and making sure that every person isn't going to be fired, evicted or refused service because of who they are. They want people to know that a full-time job should be enough to support your family if you're working hard at it. So the lesson is, winning isn't enough. Governing matters. Governing is hard as heck. And when you govern in a way you're proud of and want to talk about, that's a virtuous cycle that itself makes the case for why you should be in power.

Andrea Chalupa (00:41:59):

What are the stakes in Virginia this year?

Melissa Walker (00:42:02):

So in Virginia, we have a very close balance of power. So the right wing is two seats away from governing control of the state Senate. And right now, that chamber is the only buffer standing between the Governor, Glenn Youngkin, and the rightwing agenda that he's been looking to inflict on Virginians. And in the State House, which they call the House of Delegates in Virginia, we need to flip three seats to shift the majority. So our goal is to protect the majority in the State Senate, make sure that seats aren't flipped to the right wing, and to flip the House of delegates. And what that will do is put a wall in front of Governor Youngkin and what he's trying to do with the state. And Virginia is a state where there's a lot at stake. It's been explicitly stated that there will be an abortion ban in Virginia if they are able to get that rightwing trifecta—trifecta meaning the State Senate, the House of Delegates and the Governor's Mansion are all in rightwing hands—and Virginia is currently the only southern state that hasn't enacted an abortion ban since the fall of *Roe*. So that would mean that there are no southern states without a ban since the *Dobbs* decision. And that is a huge stake in this election. And the other thing that's at stake is honestly democracy itself in many regards.

Daniel Squadron (00:43:30):

I know listeners here know, but just the extent to which... We're talking about a constitutional right for half a century explicitly described as such and now state legislatures are batting it. The very close relationship from the constitution to federal power to state legislatures in ascending order of the impact on people's lives, Melissa just described. It's true in the instance of the presidential election itself as well. When Donald Trump lied and tried to fraudulently steal the election, he wasn't just complaining on a recorded call to a Secretary of State. He had a strategy in mind. That strategy was to get state legislatures to step in and declare that someone other than Joe Biden had won their state's electors. Real important. We know the presidency is elected through electors. Donald Trump's strategy was to get states to say they had chosen him instead of Biden. It was all about state legislatures. Now, to their credit—give credit where it's due—the Supreme Court had a reasonably good decision this summer that made clear that state legislatures can't on their own just determine everything happening in a federal election without even the state constitution mattering.

Andrea Chalupa (00:45:06):

And that's *Moore v. Harper*.

Daniel Squadron (00:45:07):

That is the *Moore v. Harper* decision, which was good on the most bizarre and outlandish of the claims and threats. But let's be clear: nothing about *Moore v. Harper* said politicians can't engage themselves in who won the election. In fact, it left the door open to state legislatures and governors acting together to undermine the election. If that door is open, then the only way to ensure a free and fair presidential election is to have states adding up to more than 270 presidential electors—the majority—with legislatures or governors that will stay out of the way, will say, “let the people decide.” You need states that respect democracy adding up to more than 270 presidential electors. Today, there are states adding up to 274 electors that respect democracy just enough. If we lose the Virginia Senate and don't take back the Virginia House of Delegates, we know how Youngkin has governed. States adding up to 261 electors—fewer than 270—will respect democracy. It is very, very difficult for a Democrat to win the White House without winning Virginia. If you have a Republican trifecta with the messages they've been spouting in Virginia, those electoral votes are at risk. Those electoral votes are likely the tipping point for the presidency.

Andrea Chalupa (00:46:35):

So if you want to win Virginia and the electoral college, because right now Donald Trump as it currently stands with the latest indictments, he hasn't been banned in any way, shape or form from running for president. He's still the clear front runner. It very well may be him, apparently even if he's running from prison. Hitler was quite productive in prison. He wrote *Mein Kampf*. Trump can be very productive in prison running for president. And who knows what that's going to look like for us in our country. That's just where we find ourselves now. It's a constitutional crisis. *Gaslit Nation* launched its first episode saying exactly that: we're facing a constitutional crisis. So if we want to win the electoral college, we have to start now with Virginia.

Daniel Squadron (00:47:19):

If we lose the legislature in Virginia, those electoral votes are at risk. Those electoral votes could well determine the presidency. I would also say the idea that only one nominee for president in the current environment is a threat to undermine the outcome may be too optimistic. I think that we are in a time in

which one party has made common cause with a movement that does not care about the outcomes of elections. There's not only a single nominee who creates that risk.

Andrea Chalupa (00:47:52):

Oh, it's the Kremlin Party. We built the show around that. We're very clear on it. We're very clear on all the UN reports warning about the threat of the Republican Party in America. Yeah, we have a Banana Republic Party that wants to turn us into a Banana Republic. So yes, that's the show. *Gaslit Nation*. So one thing I want to ask is with Youngkin running, he tried to distance himself from Bannon and Trump but benefited from Bannon and Trump driving out their base for Youngkin. What Bannon/Trump forces are you seeing emerge in this make-it-or-break-it election in Virginia?

Daniel Squadron (00:48:27):

It feels a little bit like a distinction without a difference. Your first question about New York State, I talked a little bit about power and who has it? The party of Bannon having power, the party of Trump having power, the party of the January 6th insurrection having power. It is that outcome. Youngkin has clearly tried to solidify his role within the Republican Party. He ran as one thing. He has governed, raised the dollars for legislative candidates, been an apologist for legislators who have introduced bills and said things that are just absolutely shocking. The idea that there's one and then the other and to what extent? Power. Youngkin is a vehicle for the party of Bannon and Trump and January 6th to have power. You see that in the lawmakers he supports for election. You see that in the things he says when he thinks mainstream isn't watching. One can't answer in a way that separates them.

Andrea Chalupa (00:49:32):

Yeah, without question. I gave Youngkin the nickname here on the show of Posh Trump because he cleans up nice. He's Trump in a prettier package, which makes him so much more dangerous because it's those damn white suburban women that are going to tip the scales here and Youngkin plays well to those clueless white women in the suburbs. So how do we reach them?

Melissa Walker (00:49:57):

So I will say, to hear the two of you talk honestly makes me want to, like, lie down on a couch and pull a blanket over my head because I just want to... It's very dark. And the thing that I find—

Andrea Chalupa (00:50:07):

Thanks Melissa [laughs] We appreciate that. We appreciate you.

Melissa Walker (00:50:11):

[laughs] Gosh, what could we possibly do in the face of all of these forces that are coming together to do this and how can we possibly be involved in saving our democracy? And the truth is that the things that give me a lot of hope are that we are talking about shifting power in a couple of state legislatures. And again, these are races that are going to be won by a tiny fraction of votes. And so individual people who are listening to this right now who say, "I want to do something about this.", they actually can. They tangibly can, because this is something that we can do in terms of these small districts. We run giving circles like your State Fair giving circle, and when people get involved and put their attention and resources in this direction, they can actually have an impact on these elections.

Melissa Walker (00:51:09):

We are going to win or lose the House of Delegates and the State Senate in Virginia by a tiny number of votes. And so getting involved on an individual level really matters. We talk a lot about how over the next 15 months and certainly starting now, people are going to do a lot of emotional giving, a lot of panic giving, a lot of, "Oh my gosh, I have to do something. I guess I'll just pick the shiniest object I see in front of me. Oh, I hate looking at these Trump polls. I'm feeling anxious. I'm going to donate." And yet there is a very strategic way to donate because campaign dollars are a very sharp knife in the drawer. They're what people need, but they have to be directed strategically. So when you're involved in a States Project giving circle, the strategic part is baked in.

Melissa Walker (00:52:05):

We are in Virginia working with the competitive districts that we need to shift power in Richmond, and that is where we are targeted and focused. And so anyone who's running a giving circle that is focused on Virginia, like you all are, is a person who is leaving a porch light on for strategic political giving for everyone in your network, for everyone who you talk to. And that is a real gift because as we like to say, friends don't let friends give non-strategic political dollars, and this is a really important way to fight back on not only policies that are going to impact Virginians, but as you and Daniel were just talking about, huge forces that can impact our entire country. But if we are able to again flip three seats in the House of Delegates and hold onto the State Senate, that protects those electoral college votes in Virginia. That puts a wall in front of Youngkin's ambitions and the things that he can do in Virginia and the profile that he can build. And it is about winning a couple of state legislative seats. We always say this sentence too, and then I'll stop talking, but it is often cheaper to change the balance of power in a state chamber than it is to win a single competitive congressional seat. Congressional races cost millions and millions of dollars and state legislative races do not. So people organizing people into a giving circle like the one you have can make a huge dent.

Andrea Chalupa (00:53:37):

So your solution is let's just all join with Andrea and J. and others at State Fair Project, which is our giving circle, and by making this smart strategic investment, no amount is too small, but give whatever you can, we can then overwhelm the suburban fascist white women or the Youngkin school board crowd, right? The Bannon/Trump/Youngkin trifecta. We can overwhelm them through the State Fair Project. Because there's no getting through to them, right? You guys don't have any persuasion plan. It's just we're going to grassroots power fundraiser and get out the vote and find our people and make sure that they vote and help them vote?

Daniel Squadron (00:54:17):

I actually think it's important to say everything that Melissa says is true, which is we are not observers to these outcomes. And I think we talked about the hope and excitement of what's happening in Minnesota and Michigan and the risks in Virginia. I think it's important to distinguish some of the power players, some of the cynical grifters who are willing to torch what's best about this country to grab whatever piece of it they can from voters. There are voters who are persuadable and voters who can be talked to. Melissa talked about it in the Pennsylvania door knocking challenge. I just want to be real careful before we write off folks, write off Americans who are faced with a lot of noise and a lot of confusion and often on state legislature aren't thinking about it at all. In fact, one of the things that's exciting and inspiring about state legislative elections is those candidates can individually go out there and demonstrate something that's outside of the lies, that cuts through the myths, that makes clear who they are and the values they have. And so I actually do think that in Virginia and in Michigan, in Arizona, I think in all of these places, there's no question that candidates running good campaigns authentically connected to

who they were and why they were running in their communities, convinced people. And so that is absolutely possible, and in fact, maybe more possible than it seems to folks when you look at tens of millions of votes in a presidential campaign,

Andrea Chalupa (00:55:48):

It's fight where it's small and manageable because we can do it on the state level, where quality of life rights are decided/protected. We're seeing it in Minnesota and Michigan and we could recreate it in other places and just have it eventually spread across the union because demographics are changing. That's what the Republican Party sees. That's why they're putting up this fight and we're going to eventually overcome it. I'm hopeful. When you look at this horrific news cycle that we're stuck in, this hamster wheel of the threat of fascism in the news, how do you feel about whether we can overcome it in the coming years?

Melissa Walker (00:56:22):

It has been incredibly therapeutic for me to be working at the state legislative level because I firmly believe and only have come to believe more with each passing month that I do this that state legislatures are the foundational power in our country, and there are 50 mini congresses, and this is where the right wing built their power. And it has real holding power. We spend too much time trying to shine a chimney on a house with crumbling foundations instead of working at the foundational level. To me, working at that level and seeing what can be accomplished when we talk about local issues and when we stick with people who are going to try to improve lives, that is huge for the entire country. It's not just the states we're working in. That gives me so much hope for states to be able to become the laboratories of democracy, of good policy that spreads. And the more that I work on it, the more hope that I have for the future. And I think that's saying a lot given the last few years that we've all lived through. So I find my hope by focusing here, I really do.

Daniel Squadron (00:57:36):

I mean, we know we can do it because we've done it. If you had told me during my years in the minority in the New York State Senate when Democrats were giving Republicans the majority and no one cared that we'd have hundreds of giving circles, that you'd have tens of thousands of listeners, that we would have flipped Michigan and Minnesota and Maine, that we would've held off super majority in Nebraska. We'd be as close as we are in Arizona. That you could draw a line from people's willingness to engage and get beyond the headline into where it really matters and have an impact, I wouldn't have believed any of it. It's all true in all baseline. It is absolutely possible. It's possible to convince people. It's possible to change the outcomes of elections. It's possible for those elections to have a real influence on power. You need to use your power strategically. We are not just trying to make ourselves feel good about what we're doing. We are trying to figure out how to have the biggest impact with the assets and resources we have for good. If we all did that with whatever we can give to this, the results would be even more amazing than they've already been, and they've already been pretty amazing.

Andrea Chalupa (00:58:50):

Well, thank you both so much for all the work that you're doing, and folks can join me on State Fair. My parents live in Virginia and they're proud voters in Virginia, so I will be knocking on some doors if anyone wants to join me.

Daniel Squadron (00:59:06):

Thank you so much.

Andrea Chalupa (00:59:14):

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the Truth-teller level or higher.

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Andrea Chalupa (01:00:18):

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