Gaslit Nation Transcript

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“Is America Headed Towards a Civil War?”

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[advertisement]

[transition music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (00:33):

This interview with Jeff Sharlet was recorded shortly before the death of the singer and Civil rights leader, Harry Belafonte, and references the impact of his work. The clip you're about to hear is Harry Belafonte reading the statement of the cultural contingent at the March of Washington in 1963, which he helped organize

Harry Belafonte (00:54):

Statement to read on behalf of the cultural contingent and it says—and all the names that I've just read to you endorse this statement: We are here to bear witness to what we know. We know that this country, America—to which we are committed, and which we love—aspires to become that country in which all men are free. We also know that freedom is not licensed. Everyone in a democracy ought to be free to vote, but no one has the license to oppress or demoralize another. We also know—or we would not be here—that the American Negro has endured for many generations in this country, which he helped to build, the most intolerable injustices. To be a negro in this country means several unpleasant things; in the deep south, it often means that he's prevented from exercising his right to vote by all manner of intimidation up to and including death.

Harry Belafonte (02:03):

This fact of intimidation is a great weight and the life of any negro. And though it varies in degree, it never varies in intent, which is simply to limit, to demoralize, and to keep in subservient status more than 20 million negro people. We are here therefore to protest this evil and to make known our resolve to do everything we can possibly do to bring it to an end. As artists and as human beings, we rejoice in the knowledge that human experience has no color and that excellence in any endeavor is the fruit of individual labor and love. And we believe that artists have a valuable function in any society since it is the artists who reveal the society to itself. But we also know that any society which ceases to respect the human aspirations of all its citizens, courts political chaos and artistic sterility. We need the energies of these people to whom we have for so long denied full humanity.

Harry Belafonte (03:21):

We need their vigor, their joy, the authority which their pain has brought them. In cutting ourselves off from them, we are punishing and diminishing ourselves. As long as we do so our society is in great danger, our growth as artists is severely menaced, and no American can boast of freedom; for he cannot be considered an example of it. We are here then in an attempt to strike the chains which bind the ex master no less than the ex slave, and to invest with reality that deep and universal longing, which has sometimes been called “the American Dream”.

[end audio clip]

[theme music up and under]

Andrea Chalupa (04:13):

Okay everyone, it’s a very special episode of *Gaslit Nation*. We have, here, Jeff Sharlet. He is the *New York Times* and national bestselling author of *The Family* and *C Street* and executive producer of the 2019 Netflix documentary series, *The Family*, which is extraordinary. Everyone must watch it. It takes you into the dark heart of the national prayer breakfast and why that crazy event matters. He is the winner of the National Magazine Award for Reporting, the Molly Ivins Prize, and the Outspoken Award, among others. His newest book is *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War*. Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*, Jeff.

Jeff Sharlet (04:56):

Good to be with you. Thanks for having me.

Andrea Chalupa (04:58):

It's a thrill to have you here. So obviously, as I was saying before we started recording, you wrote the book that I wish I had written. It takes the last 10 years of hell that we've all suffered through and puts it into this larger historical cultural context of America and our hype- political polarization and the growing threat of fascism that has taken hold of one party: the Republican Party. So all the stuff we talk about here on this show, we've got questions for you. How close are we to a civil war in America?

Jeff Sharlet (05:30):

Well, I believe we're in it. I believe it's a slow civil war, a cold civil war, and the way I measure that… F or me, you know, I've been reporting on right-wing movements for 20 years and this book in some ways sort of sums up this last decade… Sums up is not the right word. I'm not interested in the blow by blow. I'm not interested in the authoritative account. I'm interested in exploring the stories that are animating this fascist movement that's threatening us all. I would not have used the term “Civil War” even five years ago. After January 6th, 2021, I started noticing scholarly historians, academic historians talking about civil war. And for those who don't know: scholarship, real history scholarship, I don’t mean like, you know, the popular history books that we buy that are wonderful, but the very careful, cautious scholarship knows that history doesn't move fast, right?

Jeff Sharlet (06:26):

And is wary of historical perils. And yet here they are talking about civil war. So I took that seriously, and at the same time I saw the Civil War language migrating from the fringes to the center of the right-wing movement. And what had always been there suddenly we're hearing it more and more. Now, of course, we're hearing it from the top on down. So I went traveling around the country talking to people about civil war, and I was stunned by the answers I heard, which were, the answer was always yes amongst these folks. The only variation was whether they looked forward, they were like, “Yes!”

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs]

Jeff Sharlet:

“Great” or “Yes, I'm sorry, but it's come to that.” I think it's a slow civil war. I think there are casualties now. When we speak of queer folks being criminalized in almost 20 states and the attendant pain and suffering and even suicides that are provoked by that, when we think of pregnant people bleeding out for want of reproductive health.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmmhmm [affirmative]

Jeff Sharlet (07:26):

Those are casualties of the slow civil war, when we think of the dead, of the mass shootings—and I've read all these manifestos and I suspect you have too—and we know that “lone wolves” is not the term even. We don't know what's happened in Louisville yet, but we do know that a 25-year-old man was fired from a job and felt so entitled that he could go and buy a weapon of war to slaughter his coworkers. That is a slow civil war. When we have men with guns, with AR-15s lining up outside schools, libraries, hospitals every weekend, that’s a slow civil war. We're in it now. There are casualties now. And I think it's important for us to recognize that so we can prevent it from speeding up.

Andrea Chalupa (08:06):

Without question. Where did you travel to and why did you pick those locations?

Jeff Sharlet (08:11):

So this book, let's see… Well, let's see. I feel like that old Johnny Cash song, “I've been everywhere”. I mean, I've been reporting on the Right for a long time, and I think I've covered most of the lower 48. And that's shame on me. I have not reported on the Right in Alaska which is a fascinating subculture. This book, the big title essay is called “The Undertow.” I use this metaphor of the undertow that's pulling us out to sea of fascism. And it began for me on January 6th, 2021 when I watched Ashli Babbitt, the young white woman, climb through the window—insurrectionist, domestic terrorist—then she gets shot. And I wanted to follow the martyr myth in the making. So I flew out to Sacramento. I live in Vermont. I flew out to Sacramento, California.

Andrea Chalupa (08:52):

Oh, I was born in Sacramento.

Jeff Sharlet (08:54):

Okay, so you know Sacramento. And Sacramento's interesting. I mean, it's got a serious Proud Boy culture in Sacramento, or as some locals want to call it, the free state of Jefferson, as they hope to secede. Northern California. So I went to a rally for Ashli Babbit in Sacramento. I drove north to Yuba City, and then I decided I'm just gonna drive eastward; the opposite of westward expansion. And that trip took me through Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, New York, and back to Vermont. The penultimate chapter. I really spent some time in Wisconsin. I reported from the most soulless church I've ever attended in Florida. I went to a “men's rights” conference in Michigan. The book really does kind of roam the countryside. And when people say, “Why did you talk to *those* folks? Why'd you go cherrypicking?” I didn’t. I didn't know who I was gonna talk to on any given day. Why did I talk to these fascists? Because they were there. They were the ones I met.

Andrea Chalupa (09:59):

And tell us about the men's rights conference in Michigan; a state where a group of men tried to kidnap and put on trial and likely rape and kill the governor, Gretchen Whitmer.

Jeff Sharlet (10:10):

Yeah, the lack of analysis of misogyny and the plot to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer is just astonishing. We're supposed to talk about it just just so happens a group of guys, literally, in a basement, plan to kidnap this female governor, right? The misogynist rhetoric around her is very strong. The misogyny gets directed… If they don't see a woman as attractive, then they hate her. If they see her as attractive, they might even hate her more. And that is, in a nutshell, the ethos of the men's rights organization. I've covered so many right-wing movements and I always find that they are more complex than the liberal caricature of them, right? Not better, more complex, except for the men's rights guys. They are actually dumber than their caricature. And their caricature is *dumb*. There are real issues.

Jeff Sharlet (10:59):

There are issues of suicide, incarceration, the way boys are educated, the way boys are socialized: these are all real issues. But these guys, they talk about ex-girlfriends and ex-wives and the girlfriends they've never had, but feel that they're entitled to. They see men as the victims of society. Long before the Right was talking about red pilling—that chapter’s called “Whole Bottle of Red Pills”—they had stolen/misappropriated that term from *The Matrix*, a movie made by two trans women, and they were speaking of “red pilling” themselves. They are a vile, vile movement. In 2014, not to say a misogyny fringe, but they were fringe. Now, they are at the heart of the Republican Party. They're on Joe Rogan. They *are* Joe Rogan. They're on Tucker Carlson. And I think of that as part of the fascism as sublimated misogyny versus a celebration of misogyny. And I think that's the undertow. The men's rights… So the book is sort of divided up into parts: before the Trumpets scene, the Trump years, and after. And I'm trying to follow the flow of fascism as, unfortunately right now, it expands.

Andrea Chalupa (12:15):

And was Trump just a product al this? Because as we've seen in America, there's always white rage that follows any sort of Black president. So of course Donald Trump coming after Barack Obama is part of this long American story. So did Trump come from what was already there, or did Trump release the floodgates and they all came out after him empowered by him?

Jeff Sharlet (12:38):

I do believe that Trump is a turning point. I think when Trump came down that golden escalator in 2015, I saw descending the very strongman that American fundamentalism/Christian nationalism has long exported overseas to Philippines where there's Marcos. And now they have the Trump of the Philippines, to the Brazilian generals. And now Brazil has its own Trump of Brazil. I mean, when I say the Trump of Erdogan, the Trump of Turkey, these are their terms. I'm talking in Myanmar, Burma. There's a Buddhist monk who calls himself “the Trump of Myanmar” and is a prime leader in the genocide of the Rohingya Muslims. So we have to recognize, yes, we see the importance of Barack Obama in the formation of fascism and Trumpism, but this is a global fascist movement. That doesn't mean that we don't pay attention to the particulars of Trumpism.

Jeff Sharlet (13:33):

I do think it's a turning point. I'm distressed by my friends and colleagues on the Left who say, “Well, it's always been like this.” No. No, it hasn't. There's always been trouble, but things are speeding up. The penultimate chapter of the book is called “The Great Acceleration”. This is a term the Right took from the Left. A group of Marxist philosophers said, “Democracy was not enough. We need to accelerate past the processes of democracy.” Well, fascist intellectuals said, “Yes, that sounds great.” And they've taken that term and they are speeding things up. Trump sped it up in 2016. He sped up in 2020, even by losing, and it's speeding up now. Let's hit the brakes.

Andrea Chalupa (14:14):

What is it speeding up towards? What do they ultimately want?

Jeff Sharlet (14:19):

Everything. Everything. I think the way to understand me, the way I look at fascism—I'm curious what you would say to this—I think fascism is a gravitational force. I think too many on the Left are are eager to dismiss it as dupes and dummies, right? Not the case. Fascism is a black hole. It consumes everything. I think of the way, for instance, right now, trans kids are on the front lines of fascism. They are the targets. They are taking the brunt. And I hear sometimes my liberal friends say, “Oh, that's just terrible what's happening to the trans kids.” We’ve learned nothing. But it will come for you. Fascism comes for everybody. It comes for fascism. It consumes everything. I think, too, of the fact that… What do they want? They say, “Well, they just want America to be like 1950s.” No, they don’t. First of all, the America of 1950s was not what they imagined to be. We know that. It is a utopian project. Fascism has always been a utopian project. And listeners may say, “Utopia? Isn't that good?” Not necessarily. Utopia is nowhere. That's all it means. It’s no place. But it is an imagination of a world that has not been and cannot be. That's the dream politic of fascism. We've never seen it fully articulated, fully realized, because it can't be. But it can destroy so much on the way there.

Andrea Chalupa (15:41):

Yeah, without question. It always eats its own. Do you see this as something that could potentially break apart the United States?

Jeff Sharlet (15:49):

Potentially? [laughs] In the penultimate chapter, “The Great Acceleration”, I was in Wisconsin after the downfall of *Roe v. Wade* and the passing of Dobbs and Wisconsin became the only blue state in which abortion was completely illegal. They reverted to 1849 law. And by the way, listeners out there say, “Yeah, but they elected that judge now so everything's okay.” Talk to your Wisconsin friends. Everything is not okay in Wisconsin. There was a good victory, but the struggle is long and it lies ahead. But I was out there wandering the state and sort of thinking about what was to come and talking to fascists and so on, and I spent about six months in Wisconsin. I was with—I don't mind saying because they don't mind my saying—my child, who was in a mental health program there and was seeking help.

Jeff Sharlet (16:35):

And when I couldn't be with them, I would talk to folks. And we love Wisconsin. I would move to Milwaukee in a heartbeat. Not everyone can say that, but I would move to Milwaukee in a heartbeat, except that they've got this legislature that is intently criminalizing my child. I have an unusual school district. My kid’s in a public school district. They go to elementary school in Vermont, middle school and high school in New Hampshire. The law says they can learn different things about slavery in each state, about the history of slavery. In New Hampshire, there are schools that are taking down any sign of rainbows, right? So I think we've seen that recent study that shows all the college kids who wanna leave Florida. Would you move to Florida now? There is not—

Andrea Chalupa (17:14):

No. I wouldn’t want a vacation there anymore.

Jeff Sharlet (17:16):

Yeah, exactly. So I think we are coming apart, but could it come apart more feverishly? Yes. And the reassurance people have, they say, “Well, wait till these militia guys see an F-16.” You're right. Of course, the militia's not the threat. The militias are the potential sparks. Think of them as a box of matches, these guys lining up with their AR-15s outside a library. The shooting starts; does everybody stay cool? Or think about what Greg Abbott is doing now, talking about pardoning a man, Daniel Perry, who just shot a Black Lives Matter protester. Shot and murdered. Convicted. Convicted in a court of law, clear and simple. Nope. Nope. In Texas, you don't go to jail for killing a Black Lives Matter protestor anymore. So what is Greg Abbott doing? What is Ron DeSantis doing? They are daring federal authority. They are trying to recreate that moment of the ‘60s, of using National Guard, because either way they win. If Biden were to use a national guard to enforce something, then they're martyrs. If he doesn't, they've faced him down. It hasn't come to that yet. It doesn't have to come to that. But yeah, we are very much on the brink and we know—and you know from your work, and I know—there are right-wing strategists right now, thinking all the time, “How do we provoke that moment?”

Andrea Chalupa (18:37):

But the National Guard was necessary during the Civil rights movement.

Jeff Sharlet:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

Do you think it's going to be necessary again? I mean, if it seems like we're damned if we do, we’re damned if we don’t, do you think Biden—or whoever's the president in the coming years, if it's a democratic (big D little D President), do you think the president should send in the National Guard to protect human rights, to protect voting rights?

Jeff Sharlet (19:04):

So we've already been… In the height of the pandemic, I believe it was six or seven state national guard commanders decided they were not going to obey the requirement for vaccination for their people. Mutiny is a legal term, I guess. I’m not gonna use it [laughs]. But they're just saying, “Yeah, we don't care what the federal authorities says. We’re not gonna do it.” So we've already been there. But I think the greater danger, the greater danger that lies ahead—and I've done a lot of reporting in my book *C Street* on fault lines in the military. And there was an important—you probably saw this—an important op-ed in *Washington Post* a while back; three senior retired generals saying, “Look, the military is no monolith. There are fault lines I've met.” Michael Flynn is not a bad apple, a one off.

Jeff Sharlet (19:51):

There are others like him. The structure of the military contains them. But what happens when they don't know, where they wanna follow the chain of command but they don't know who's in charge? A disputed election in 2024. Can you imagine a way in which there isn't a disputed election in 2024? Who's president? All it takes is one base commander to say, “I think the other guy.” Look, that's the optimistic view because I think looking at the undertow fascism, I think we have to contend with the possibility of a straight out fascist victory in 2024. It's not inevitable, but it is possible. Trump didn't lose by 7 million votes. He lost by 120,000 votes. Those are the votes that would've made the difference, right? That's on the table. And then you have a chain of command issue. I mean, this sounds apocalyptic and I don't wanna be apocalyptic—

Andrea Chalupa (20:41):

Well, we all experienced 2016 together, you know, so I think what you're saying actually sounds very much within the realm of possibility.

Jeff Sharlet (20:49):

Yeah, it is. And I think, you know, 2016, I was one more sucker. From 2015 on, I said, “Look, I think this guy is a contender.” I went around—and I write about this in the book, I write about trying to follow the formation of the theology of Trumpism… And by Trumpism, by the way, I mean a movement that bares Trump's name, just like Reaganism. Reaganism, which really was a very powerful movement from 1980 to 2016, long after Reagan's death, as will Trumpism be. I met a pastor in Omaha, Nebraska (pastor Hank Kunneman), a rising star of the so-called Civil War prophetic right. He believes in civil war. He's a guy you see on TV with Congresswoman Lauren Boebert and so on. I mean, he believes openly, “Let's fight” and he preaches that Trump is coming back.

Jeff Sharlet(21:38):

Either the man himself or his spirit closed in the flesh of another. And I think that's very important for us to recognize. But 2016, back then, I said, "Look, this is a contender.” And in 2015, I went around to my editors and I said, “Let me cover Trump.” And they said, “No, no, Sharlet. You're not funny enough. We need a guy who tells jokes.” And it wasn't until 2016 that I was able to go start going and attending Trump rallies. And I believed, I hate to say it, I believed right up until the day before the election, I was like, “I think Trump's gonna win.” I was sure he was gonna win the nomination, I think he's gonna win the presidency, and then I was like, “No, look at all this information.” 95% chance, I believe 538 said. I had a particular experience and I write about this in the book because it shapes how I understand things. A couple weeks before the 2016 election, at the young age of 44, I hit the genetic jackpot and I had two heart attacks, completely unexpected.

Andrea Chalupa (22:40):

I'm so sorry.

Jeff Sharlet (22:41):

Yeah. I watched the second Trump/Clinton debate in the hospital. [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa (22:48):

Oh my God.

Jeff Sharlet (22:48):

Watching my blood pressure rise with the nurse who was keeping me alive, a huge Trump fan.

Andrea Chalupa (22:54):

Oh my God.

Jeff Sharlet (22:55):

But then I was like, you know what? I guess I'm wrong. When I went to the hospital, they said “95% chance you're not having a heart attack.” And then I had a heart attack and I said, “What happened?” They said, “Well, the other 5%.” Same with Trump, although I think I was probably the only person who woke up after that election and said, "Well, here comes fascism and aren't I lucky to be alive?” And that's kind of animated my reporting since then. I got this second chance to use the knowledge I've been privileged to build up and to report on and to try and give us the context, because fascism wants us to believe it's a monolith, that it’s one big tidal wave. But it's not. You and I know it's a convergence of tributaries; many little streams flowing in and pulling out that undertow current, right? And if we can identify those lines between it, we can see—well, I'm gonna mix my metaphors—I’m gonna say we can see the fault lines and the edifice, and we can see that fascism does not have to gather for us, that we can split the movement. And I think that's probably our hope going forward.

Andrea Chalupa (24:02):

Is this a grassroots movement? Who's driving this? Who are the individuals, the donors, the organizations that are driving this?

Jeff Sharlet (24:13):

I've written in the past… [laughs] It's funny. I'm always a little bit out of step because in 2008, I published a book called *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* and I know you know it.

Andrea Chalupa (24:26):

Excellent.

Jeff Sharlet (24:27):

Yeah, thank you. And and in it, I was writing about the oldest and an arguably most influential Christian nationalist organization in Washington called The Fellowship (or The Family). They run something called the National Prayer Breakfast. Every president since Eisenhower has attended, much of Congress, and they also sponsor dictators around the world. They are not interested in your soul or mind. Well, maybe mine, because I joined them and became a member so I'm forever cursed. I wanted to understand what was going on and do a strange… I wasn't undercover, just strange to the circumstances I became a brother of The Family. But they are a self-described avantgarde of fundamentalism. That's not an artistic term. They mean in the Leninist sense, as in Vladimir, as in an elite that sparks the revolution. And for a long time, I was sort of trying to convince folks.

Jeff Sharlet (25:19):

I'm like, “You just think that the Right is a bunch of hillbillies and numb skulls.” And I think it was the *Washington Post* that famously said fundamentalism was largely, what is it? “Poor, uneducated, and rural.” None of those things were factually true. And I said, “There is an elite, educated, sophisticated right wing, and that's part of it. And it coexists with the popular front.” So now here I am, and I've turned my attention to the popular front because the movement, they imagined a kind of trickle down fundamentalism, a trickle down fascism, if you will. It has trickled down. It came down that golden escalator. And I think that now here I'm saying this and I still hear some saying, "Well, it's just the Koch brothers.” Or, "It's just a few big money donors." It is that *and* a popular movement *and* the Christian right *and* the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and the militias. A social movement doesn't build force unless it's *everybody;* people who wouldn't normally talk to one another lining up together for their cause. So is it a grassroots movement? Yes. Is it an astroturf movement? Yes. Is it Russian influenced? Yes. All of the above. That's what makes it dangerous. If it was just one of those things, I wouldn't be worried.

Andrea Chalupa (26:41):

And how are the courts playing a role in all this? We just saw Trump's judge in Texas outlaw the abortion pill. And then you have Clarence Thomas, who's a kept man by… [laughs] Was it Harlan Crow? Is that his name?

Jeff Sharlet (26:59):

Harlan Crow. Something out of a Batman comic book.

Andrea Chalupa (27:03):

Yes. Nazi fanboy with all his Nazi collections, fine linen, china and all that. So my question is, the courts, they seem to be driving as well this acceleration with their extreme verdicts, which I worry will drive America further apart. You talk about how we're further separating as a country with these extremist cultures, and that'll drive some people outta state. But at the same time, I worry about the so-called blue states where New York State or California, they don't wanna be dictated to by the Supreme Court trying to stop their gun control laws and so on. And so I worry that the left movements might put up independence referendums and say, “Hey, we've got the money, we've got the brain power with all these big industries and so on. We wanna break away and be our own little republic. We don't want this anymore.” That sounds very extreme this April, 2023 when we're recording. But if things continue to get worse and worse and worse, and it's driven by these courts, the extreme Supreme Court, it could happen. I think California would likely try to go first. I worry about the California secessionist movements, and I'm not even talking about what the Kremlin is trying to do. I'm talking about enough frustration on the Left that some so-called blue states might go for it eventually. What are your thoughts on that?

Jeff Sharlet (28:27):

I think it's naive. I think it's foolish. I think it's predicated on the idea that if there's a conflict, we’ll win, which is most idiotic thing. No one wins a civil war. “Well, didn't we win the last one?” That's right. You mean in 1865 when we cured racism? No, we've been in violence ever since. There are those who argue that civil war never ended. It's just been simmering ever since, right? You began the question by asking about judges, and you said they're accelerating and I think that's exactly right. Accelerationism is essentially an intellectual idea, right? To flip the script and borrow from Marxism: heighten the contradictions, bring on the war put into a different language by the so-called Boogaloo Boys, who believe race war is coming. And they are not necessarily on the side of white supremacy.

Jeff Sharlet (29:14):

The Boogaloo boys will try and march with Black Lives matters protestors sometimes. They just want the war to happen. They don't really care. They just want the chaos, the comfort of chaos. And I think that is what we need to understand about fascism. But the judges, the judges who are shaped and informed by the scholars like Patrick Deneen at Notre Dame, the integralists, the new traditionalists, the Rod Drehers going on junkets to Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, yes, they see the courts as a means to hasten that split. But those on the so-called blue side… And I have to say, I dislike the terms blue and red, and I really dislike the term purple. It doesn't describe the lived experience. I come to this out of religious studies, and we talk about the lived experience of religion, right? You can go to Catholic church and think these are what Catholics believe.

Jeff Sharlet (30:12):

And then you start talking to any given Catholic and you find out all kinds of things, and that's where it's at, right? So California, oh, good. Alright. California's gonna become its own country. Leave aside the incredible infrastructure. Leave aside the question of nuclear weapons and bases and military bases. How about we start with the fact that California has more far-right Trump voters certainly than my state of Vermont, maybe than all people of all the people of New England. Yuba City, California. In the book, I go to the Sacramento rally for Ashli Babbitt which devolves into a brawl between Proud Boys and Antifa. It's a regular brawl. They practically know each other. Tons of cops in riot gear. They don't want this to be a thing. The cops are all there and they watch the brawl every now and then, they rest an Antifa.

Jeff Sharlet (31:03):

They don't arrest any Proud Boys. Proud Boys know the rules. Some of them are carrying weapons, but they stay off capitol grounds when they do that. That's Sacramento. I get invited at that rally up to a church in Yuba City, California. The Church of Glad Tidings. Now this is a church that never closed its doors during the pandemic; sort of a mini megachurch, about a thousand people. And as a result of that, sort of developed a national profile. So the Candace Owens and Michael Flynn and all these right-wing figures are to stand on its stage. How did it never close its doors? Well, it's got a sheriff in that county, a constitutional sheriff. This is part of the constitutional sheriff's movement that claims supposedly, according to one study, about 40% of the sheriffs United States, who subscribe to this frankly cockamamie notion that the sheriff is the highest authority in their county.

Jeff Sharlet (31:52):

Well, that sheriff didn't shut down the church. The church started its own militia. Listeners may have seen the viral video of Michael Flynn being gifted an AR-15 at the pulpit of the church, customized by, which he joked he would go hunting in Washington. They may not have noticed that the pastor, Pastor Dave, was gifted another customized AR-15 engraved with what they call the battle verse. Joshua 1:9. Joshua 1:9. Now, the book of Joshua, everyone remembers that's Jericho. Remember Jericho? That sounds good, right? You walk around Jericho seven times? What people forget about Joshua is… What did God command Joshua to do once he got into Jericho? Kill every man, woman, and child. Kill them all. Exterminate the roots, to borrow from heart of darkness, right? And that's the battle verse. I encountered that in Sacramento on the t-shirt of the pastor who opened the rally.

Jeff Sharlet (32:51):

I encountered it at this church in Yuba City that had gotten rid of the cross because they said, “Now is a time of war. The pulpit was made of swords.” They spoke of the “hangings to come" with great joy. I encountered it at Lauren Boebert’s shooters grill, Hooters with Guns in Colorado. Joshua 1:9. I encountered it all across the country. The battle verse. This war verse. People say, “These aren't very good Christians.” Well, I don't think like that. They are speaking of a war theology and I think that is on the table. And it goes beyond just the churchgoers. It really does. Most of the people I speak of in the book don't go to church—Ashli Babbitt didn't go to church—but they believe in a Christian nation, Christian nationalism. And you must know this. I mean, you and Sarah's work, you know, Russia, Putin appeals to Christian nationalism. What is the percentage of Russians—I remember learning this in 2013 when I was reporting there—who actually go to church? Is it single digits? 8-9%. But they love the idea of a holy Russian nation. That's the dilemma we find ourselves in as well.

Andrea Chalupa (34:05):

So who is going to do anything to stop this? Because it sounds like they are really wanting to mass slaughter, that they're making a religion outta mass slaughter. Russia made a religion out of winning World War II and killing fascists, and they took that religion and they projected it onto Ukraine, and they're now gleefully carrying out a genocide in Ukraine. So when people create a religion of violence, they're ultimately going to carry out that violence on a mass scale. So who's trying to stop any of this? How can any of this be stopped?

Jeff Sharlet (34:46):

You mean the listeners? I mean, well, look—

Andrea Chalupa (34:50):

Well if Christopher Wray of the FBI is just a listener. [laughs] Yes. That's who I mean.

Jeff Sharlet (34:54):

I mean, I think, look, the book is about what I call borrowing from the filmmaker Jeff [inaudible], my friend Jeff [inaudible], the Trump scene. The age of Trump, right? In which that approach, that fascist approach defines our American vernacular. And we've been headed toward that for a long time. That's the undertow. That’s the slow civil war. But I couldn't bring myself just to write a doom scroll. So I begin and end the book with, with what I sort of think of as hope notes. And I'm so thankful to my publisher, Norton, for letting me do this because I begin the book with a chapter about… How do you write about the Trump scene? I begin the book with a chapter about Harry Belafonte, you know. Dayo, the Banana Boat song.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmmhmm. <affirmative.

Jeff Sharlet (35:40):

Daylight come and me wanna go home? And I know I'm gonna lose sales… I mean, lucky me, the book becomes a bestseller anyway, but I'm still gonna lose sales. People are like, “I wanna learn about what's happening with fascism! What? Harry Belafonte?” That’s why he's there. One, because he's just turned 96 and I was fortunate enough to spend time with him some years ago. And that is a man long in the struggle. The Banana Boat song, that's a radical song. That's a freedom song. I sang it in elementary school. Nobody told me that. I end the book with an even lesser known figure. Lee Hays. Lee Hays. And the chapter's called “The Good Fight is the One You Lose”. Where's the hope in that? Because I cannot peddle cheap grace. I cannot offer optimism. I can offer hope. Hope comes from, as the great Cornell West says, “hope comes from the place of despair.” That's where you build forward of hope. Right? Lee Hayes. Who is Lee Hays? Well, if you ever heard “If I Had a Hammer”, you know Lee Hays. Or maybe heard Peter Paul and Mary sing it.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mmhmmm. <affirmative>

Jeff Sharlet:

You know, I sang it in elementary school, again, stripped of its meaning. The first time that was performed was 1949 in Peakskill, New York at a concert, an outdoor concert with Lee Hays, Pete Seeger, his songwriting partner, Woody Guthrie and Paul Robeson, who the local newspaper called “the Russia Loving Negro Baritone”. And so the townspeople organized 5,000 strong with air support from the New York State Police and set out to kill them. And Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Paul Robeson and Lee Hays escaped with their lives, right? That's what “If I Had a Hammer” means? And you sing that song, right? You sing it anyways. Harry Belafonte, at the beginning, he told me a story about the struggle is long.

Jeff Sharlet (37:25):

That's why they're there. The struggle is long. I don’t go for crisis language. Trump goes for crisis language. “The final battle”. This, like, you know, wrestling language. The struggle is long. Harry Belafonte in 1964, Mississippi Freedom Summer, they need money. Three civil rights activists had been murdered; Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney. Tortured, lynched. They're gonna stay all summer. How can they get the money? Harry Belafonte, who bankrolled the Civil Rights movement, says, “Alright, I'll fly down and take my friend Sidney Poitier because maybe the Klan will be scared of killing two famous Black men.” The Klan was not scared. They show up as soon as they land, and it's a car chase—a literal car chase—and they just get to town in time. And the activists are there, and Harry dumps the money they're gonna need to keep Freedom Summer going on the table.

Jeff Sharlet (38:13):

And they're singing “Dayo” and Harry changes the word Mr. B. As he's known, Mr. B. He changes the words to “freedom come and me want to go home,” right? The struggle is long. I'm not gonna say Harry Belafonte or Lee Hays, long dead, “If I Had a Hammer”, these songs stripped of their power are gonna save us. I don't know if the songs are gonna save us. I write in the beginning of the book In the introduction, it’s an introduction called “Our Condition”. That's the language I use instead of “crisis”. We're not even in a climate crisis. We're in a climate condition. A crisis suggests what's gonna happen!? Will we we or will we lose? You know, what's gonna happen, Andrea? Are are we gonna win the climate crisis? No. No, we're not going back. The glaciers are not refreezing. This is a condition. We need to live with it. How? That's the work, right? I don't have the answers. This book is written from the middle of things. I think so much work right now either comes from that crisis place—“This is it, this is a final battle!—or from, “Let's look back on the Trump years.” I look forward to looking back on the Trump years in my old age.

Andrea Chalupa (39:24):

Mm, absolutely. And so how does tech play a role in this; Silicon Valley, Peter Thiel, and those guys?

Jeff Sharlet (39:33):

There's a chapter in the book called Tick-Tock, which you know is a QAnon meme. Tick-Tock. Again, the crisis is coming. They love the final battle. They love that apocalyptic language. The funny thing about the apocalypse is it's never happened. But Tick-Tock is about a young woman I call Evelyn. Evelyn, a hipster, lefty, lived in Austin, Texas. I call her Evelyn because hopefully there's a second chance for her and frankly, there are Evelyn's everywhere. I was drawn by the fact that we hear the big cases of like someone who is sucked in by going down the rabbit hole of YouTube and everything else, and some of these horrible QAnon crimes; a man kills his whole family. What I realized is—and I know this as a reporter—when we hear about police killings, the ones we hear about are the tip of the iceberg.

Jeff Sharlet (40:23):

I live in Vermont. We have police killings. Illegitimate police killings. But we're not a big media market. You don't hear about them. So I was interested in the QAN violence that was happening elsewhere and I followed Evelyn. Evelyn didn't make national news. She didn't even make local news. You had to read between the lines to understand what was happening. But when I dug in and discovered here she was, this hipster lefty during that lockdown, and a friend sends her QAnon and describes it to me as “for shits and giggles” and they're just texting back and forth about how ridiculous this stuff is. The friend realizes now that there was a turning point for Evelyn when it stopped being funny. She started missing the joke and she started going down the rabbit hole. And one day Evelyn gets in her little outdated red Fiero, and she gets in her car and she's going to #SaveTheChildren, another QAnon meme based on the idea that 800,000 kids are abducted every year.

Jeff Sharlet (41:14):

This is not true in any way. Or rather, 800,000 kids are reported missing a year, most of them for a few hours because of confusion over custody, or a babysitter doesn't get back in time. A few hundred kids are actually abducted in a year, but Evelyn doesn't know this. And she starts ramming into cars in which she sees kids because she's sure they're being abducted. Thank God no one is badly hurt, but Evelyn's life is ruined. And the people who were chased and battered by her car, they were traumatized. This does, as I say, it doesn't make national news, doesn't make local news. It's something that just basically happened. For Evelyn, it was Instagram. Others, it's TikTok. There's no question that social media contributes to it. A big part of Ashli Babbitt, the central figure in my book, Ashli Babbitt on Halloween, 2016 tweets her first tweet: “#LoveTrump”. Here's a woman that voted for Obama twice, but on social media she found a community that he dragged her out to sea beyond recognition of her family until she was gone.

Andrea Chalupa (42:27):

And how are individuals, are you finding, dealing with this, losing loved ones to these cults and being convinced of all these immediate dangers? What is sort of the individual level struggle that you've come across in your travels, in your reporting and how are the families that are caught in this undertow struggling to pull their loved ones back? One of the questions we get a lot from our listeners is, “I've lost a family member to QAnon, how do I get my family member back?" What would you say to that?

Jeff Sharlet (42:55):

You don’t. I resist strongly. I mean, one of the things I write in the book is that you can't fact check a myth. At this militia church in California, the pastor says, “Did you know there's no word for coincidence in the original languages of the Bible? There are no coincidences. Obviously you're here for a reason,” etc. So I called a friend of mine, professor Seth Sanders, who is one of the leading authorities on ancient biblical languages. And he says, “Yeah, of course there's coincidence. Here it is.” How satisfying it is when an expert flattens a false claim. So of course, I just called the church and they said, “Gosh, we were mistaken so thank you for the correction.” No, you can't fact check your way out of a myth in the same way that I think that the group that's suing my kid's school district, or preparing to sue my kid’s school district, they're very… I teach at Dartmouth College.

Jeff Sharlet (43:46):

They were educated at Dartmouth College. And if they came to me and they said, “Jeff, let us just explain why this transgenderism is a threat”, they’re not gonna convince me. “How do we speak reason to you, Jeff?” They don’t. We don't base our politics on conversion. We base our politics on democracy, on building something beautiful that people wanna be a part of. But what do you say to the folks who lose loved ones? I think, again, of Ashli Babbitt. When Ashli Babbitt was killed on January 6th, 2021, I knew there was gonna be a martyr myth that was gonna build around her and I decided I wanted to track it by traveling, following it in formation across the country. And I started in Sacramento where there was a rally with her mom, Micki Whitthoeft. Micki with an “i”, like Ashli with an “I”. “I" for independence.

Jeff Sharlet (44:33):

Micki, working class woman, wasn't particularly political. Ashli's husband, Aaron, really not political Ashli—not maybe who you’d expect—queer in practice if not in theory, lived with her husband and their girlfriend who made videos. They thought Ashli's love of Trump was so funny. You can see a video of them sneaking in, surprising Ashli while she's watching a Trump rally. They could care less. They were not interested. And I watched Micki's transformation in real time. She was a grieving mother. She'd lost a child. Put everything else aside. Ashli was a domestic terrorist. She lost her child. Her child lost in that undertow of fascism. And she's trying to speak at the podium and look, that's the wrong podium. The wrong Pope at the wrong place. And around the capitol come marching a group of Antifa. It happens to be what would've been the 28th birthday of Breonna Taylor.

Jeff Sharlet (45:27):

And they're chanting, very reasonably, “Black Lives Matter” but Ashli Babbitt's mother is trying to talk about her dead daughter, and the things that she wanted to ask her, and she'll never ask her again. And her voice is wavering. And then something snaps. Her voice turns hard. And the Antifa chant, “Black Lives Matter”and takes her microphone and says, “Ashli Babbit” and starts leading her crowd. “Ashli Babbit”. An answer to Black Lives Matter, an answer to centuries of oppression, what is her answer? One white woman. That is the martyr myth of Ashli Babbitt. She gets sucked out in the undertow too. Aaron Babbitt, her kind of lunkhead of a husband, not political, who embraces him? Fascists. It wasn't inevitable. Trump didn't say… They said, "say her name”, misappropriating a hashtag for Black women brutalized by police for Ashli Babbitt. Trump didn't say it for six months until it was useful to him on the day the Trump organization was indicted.

Jeff Sharlet (46:31):

One word, or one sentence, sorry: press release. Who killed Ashli Babbitt? Doesn't matter that we knew. Later he'd say, “they shot her in the head.” No, they didn't. That didn't matter. The story worked better that way. How do you save the family that's lost to that? How do you save the folks lost to QAnon? I don't think you sit there and argue with them. You're not gonna deprogram them. I actually kind of reject, because I come from religious studies background, I reject the language of cults. It is a new religious movement, a terrifying one. A terrible one. Harry Belafonte says, “You sing your song and you make other people hear your song. You sing your song and you give it away. You make something beautiful.”

[outro music - roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa (47:21):

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

Sarah Kendzior (47:27):

We encourage you to donate to help rescue and recovery efforts in Turkey and Syria following the devastating earthquakes in early February. To help people in Turkey, visit the TPF Turkiye Earthquake Relief fund at tpfund.org.

Andrea Chalupa (47:44):

To help Syrians in need, donate to the White Helmets at whitehelmets.org. We also encourage you to help support Ukraine by donating to Razom for Ukraine a razomforukraine.org. In addition, we encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, and Afghanistan. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to the Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.or and avoid products with palm oil.

*Gaslit Nation* is produced by Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa. If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes. It helps us reach more listeners. And check at our Patreon. It keeps us going.

Sarah Kendzior (48:30):

Our production manager is Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

Andrea Chalupa (48:42):

Original music in *Gaslit Nation* is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demien Arriaga, and Karlyn Daigle..

Sarah Kendzior (48:50):

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Syith of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Andrea Chalupa (48:57):

*Gaslit Nation* would like to thank our supporters at the Producer level on Patreon and Higher…