

## #1384 Beyond Trump. Radical Authoritarianism in America.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [00:00:00] Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast in which we shall learn about what's behind Trump and his autocratic instincts, the enablers, the supporters and the long lineage of authoritarianism. Before we get started on that, though, just quick reminder, we announced in the last episode, we are in a no-kidding-at-all, not-having-fun-or-joking-around kind of way of saying that we are in a break-glass-in-case-of-emergency sort of financial situation. We lost our Amazon affiliate program, which was a huge chunk of money for us every month, the equivalent of about 400 paying members. And so ever since then, we have been in full-blown panic mode. For instance, this episode is a day late. The previous episode was a day late. I'm recording this on a Saturday when I should be taking time off all because we've been working 12, 15 hours a day trying to put together some ideas and campaigns to get ourselves back on track.

So, quick refresher: we have launched a merch store, which coincidentally we were going to do anyway, but we made sure to get that up and going. So, our merch is merch with a purpose. It has the QR code show share built into it, meaning that it's exceptionally excellent at helping share the show, which is our real priority. You know, merch, like. maybe it will make it a little bit of money, and that would be great. But if we could expand the size of the audience by sharing it with as many people as possible, that's the real key.

In addition to our new merch store, we have another new way to help the show. Oh! but it's not ready to be announced yet. So close. So close to being ready to be announced. So, start getting excited about it now. And then when it gets announced, you'll already be appropriately excited. And then thirdly, of course, new memberships would be the number one best, most supportive way that you could help the show right now, when as the saying goes when someone's problem is that they don't have money, the answer is to give them money. So, new memberships is the easiest way to do that. And of course, gift memberships might be the perfect solution for your holiday needs, which we are conveniently in the middle of right now. So if you're a fan of Patreon, you can sign up

there. If you're a fan of simplicity, go to our standard membership system for the easiest possible process for getting signed up. All the details about all of that are at [bestoftheleft.com/support](https://bestoftheleft.com/support). That's [bestoftheleft.com/support](https://bestoftheleft.com/support). Of course, that's linked on our website and in the show notes on the device you're using in every episode.

And now onto today's episode with clips today from the Ezra Klein Show, the AI Franken podcast, the Majority Report, an episode of Check Your Blind Spot, the Power Corrupts podcast, Democracy Now, and Trumpcast.

## The crisis isn't Trump. It's the Republican Party - The Ezra Klein Show - Air Date 11-11-20

**ANNE APPLEBAUM:** [00:03:08] First of all, I agree with you, I don't think Trump himself is personally very interesting, and my book is not about autocrats, it's about the people who

work for them, who create them, who sell their myth and their legend, and who promote them. One of the reasons I wrote about them, as you say, is because some of them in some countries or people who I know, and so it seemed like maybe I had some insight. Both in that book and in a couple of articles I've written on a similar theme in *The Atlantic*, I've tried to stay away from sweeping vast generalizations—they are all like X or they are all like Y. There's a famous historian of Vichy who once wrote that he could never write a book about collaboration, he would write about collaborationisms. Because people's path towards this kind of political change is so different depending on their personality and background and their interests.

The only sentiment I think that you can say that links them, and here we're talking about people who were once part of the center-right or in my case the anticommunist movement in Poland or Reaganism or Thatcherism and who began to change in a different direction over the past decade or so, the one thing that does tend to link them is disappointment.

So these are very often people who are disappointed and they are almost always disappointed with their society. Whether it's the dullness and superficiality of modern democracy. Whether it's the demographic change that they don't want or like. Whether it's the decline in morals and values that they see all around them. Whether, in the case of Britain, it's England's loss of its voice in the world and it's reduction to a medium sized country that acts together with other European countries rather than striking out on its own as it once did. So it's a feeling of loss or disappointment, and sometimes it's quite an extreme form of disappointment. It's a kind of despair—"my society has ended."

I wrote a little bit about someone who was a friend of mine, Roger Scruton, who was a British philosopher who wrote a really extraordinary book about England, his country, he was an English conservative writer. He wrote about England, "I'm writing an Elegy to my country. I'm writing about a country that has died. I'm going to tell you about the values of the country that used to exist." In other words, he's someone who had already moved beyond the idea of decline or decay and to the idea that it was gone.

And I think anybody who has that view of the contemporary world, that it's over, it's finished, "my civilization is dead and gone. My society is decayed.", that view leads you almost inevitably into a kind of radicalism. And you can have that view on the left too, by the way, this is not necessarily at all unique to the right. It's just that I wrote about the right, because that's the piece of it that I know.

But if you have that feeling that it's over, then why wouldn't you try to smash everything? If everything's a disaster, if civilization is dead, if morality is declined, if traditional values can't be recovered, then you might as well have whatever you want to call it, *The Flight 93 Election* or the let's change the system, or let's replace the elite with a new elite. Those are all the same kinds of sentiments.

It plays itself out in different ways. You can find people who are also personally disappointed. So whatever it is about the current political circumstances isn't good for their careers and sometimes that's a factor. They see that by aligning themselves to a movement, they can, I don't know, become more popular or make more money or have more power and sometimes that's it.

And sometimes it is quite philosophical. "My civilization is dead and I'm now going to be part of smashing it." And that's usually the link that you find particularly on the most radical part of the right, as well as the most radical part of the left.

## **Is Democracy in Danger? Legal Experts Dahlia Lithwick and Ian Bassin On Trump, Barr and The Abuse of the Criminal Justice System - The Al Franken Podcast - Air Date 2-23-20**

**DAHLIA LITHWICK:** [00:07:28] We had four prosecutors walk off the Roger Stone case. One walked right out of the Justice Department after Attorney General Bill Barr essentially withdrew their proposed sentencing recommendation for Stone, and that happened after Trump had tweeted, demanding as much. And then we had kind of a lot of drama where Barr goes on ABC and says, I wasn't going to be bullied into doing what the president wanted. So I did what the president wanted, but I wish he'd stopped tweeting. At which point the president continued tweeting.

Then we had a really interesting weekend where we had 2000 former DOJ employees signing a public documents saying that Barr should resign. We had Donald Ayer, who was the Deputy Attorney General under George HW Bush put a piece in the Atlantic saying that Bill Barr's America is freaking terrifying. And we had the Federal Judges Association, which is an independent organization of judges, holding an emergency meeting to try to talk about what was happening at the Justice Department.

All of this happened while Trump continues to tweet threats at the Mueller team, continues to tweet what looked like threats or certainly it seems to be intimidation toward one of the jurors in the Stone jury, and the judge. All that is going on, and as you said, most of life is just going on as normal as the Justice Department becomes kind of suddenly a machine that goes after Trump's enemies and exculpates Trump's friends. It's a worry

**AL FRANKEN - HOST, THE AL FRANKEN PODCAST:** [00:09:05] Ian, is rule of law important in democracy?

**IAN BASSIN:** [00:09:15] It is the cornerstone of democracy, because I think the sculptor who was hired to put the finishing touches on the Department of Justice building in Washington, actually etched into one of the stones in the building, "equal justice under law" so literally it's in the stone of the Justice Department, "equal justice under law". And that's what's at stake. And I agree with you, it should be one of the top topics being discussed by people who want to assume the presidency.

Because I'd go back further than a week, and I hear Dahlia on why this week has been so alarming, but actually I want to rewind back maybe 14-15 years. And here's why I want to go back 14-15 years, because put this all in context, Freedom House - which is an organization that studies democracies around the world, including whether they have rule of law based societies, and it's been doing that since pretty much the end of World War II - had basically been tracking in it's data that democracies had been improving and spreading to more

countries through most of the latter half of the 20th century until about 15 years ago. And about 15 years ago, you start to see that data go into a retreat.

And there are countless scholars who have studied this and pointed out that what is happening in places like Hungary, where Viktor Orbán has dismantled Hungarian democracy or Venezuela where Nicolas Maduro has dismantled Venezuelan democracy, is part of a trend in the 21st century of democracies fading and autocrats rising. And one of the things that all of these autocrats do is they try to turn law enforcement into a weapon to go after their opponents, "Lock her up! Lock her up!" and protect their friends, "Go easy on Stone. Go easy on Stone."

Those societies are not democracies, they're autocracies, and I think it's notable that 2,500, now former, Department of Justice officials who signed that letter point out in it, that society's that use law enforcement to go after the government's enemies and protect its friends, aren't representative democracies and constitutional republics anymore.

**AL FRANKEN - HOST, THE AL FRANKEN PODCAST:** [00:11:22] What's heartening about this is that after Trump was acquitted, even before he was acquitted Susan Collins said that he was gonna learn from this, that he learned a lesson from this. Then he said his phone call was perfect, the next day he said that, and then she voted to acquit anyway. This is just giving him license, he feels, right? He is headed full throatedly toward what we always feared this guy was.

**IAN BASSIN:** [00:11:58] Yeah, Adam Serwer has an excellent piece in *The Atlantic* this week where he basically says we are witnessing the ending days of the Trump administration and the first days of the Trump regime. He sort of invokes a turning point in the end of the Roman Republic.

And there are some who would call that hyperbolic and "sky is falling", and I think it's worth us saying, I hope that it is hyperbolic, right? We hope that he's wrong, but let's not be caught flat-footed if he's right. Because the lesson that most of these autocrats learn is if they push on a check on their power and the check falls, they push further.

And that's the lesson that Donald Trump learned from being acquitted for abusing his power, is that the current Republican party is simply not going to hold him accountable or provide any sort of check.

**AL FRANKEN - HOST, THE AL FRANKEN PODCAST:** [00:12:53] That's what he learned from this. That's what he learned. Right? You keep saying, "well, okay, we're the United States of America, this can't happen here," but we know who this guy is. And we're seeing a Republican party that is completely unable to counter him. Just scared to death of him. And once the fear is there, then he's two-thirds of the way there.

**DAHLIA LITHWICK:** [00:13:26] I think that one of the things that I've been mulling this past week, and I completely agree with Ian that I think part of the problem here is that the rule of law is so baked into any sort of foundational theory of constitutional democracy that everyone believes that it is made of steel. That it is inviolable and cannot be violated and all these systems exist to make sure that the rule of law is protected and what I think we've certainly learned in the last few weeks and months is that actually, no, it's a bunch of soft norms. Some of them are hard norms, but they're just norms.

And if, in fact, Alexander Vindman is to be marched out of the White House for having done nothing more than testify truthfully, something has changed and we don't know what it is and we can't name it and we can't identify it. It seems that, to me, what's really been fascinating is for Bill Barr to simply insert himself into the Stone sentencing recommendation, and then to act as though this happens all the time and that the Attorney General does special favors for the President's confederates and colleagues.

And we all just think, well, maybe that is what happens. Maybe this has always been the case that the Attorney General is just the President's personal fixer. I think it's happening both in a really compressed amount of time and happening in ways that make it not discernible to the naked eye what's going on. If you had told me you could have gotten 2000 former Justice Department employees to sign the kind of statement that was signed last weekend, I would have been shocked, but the fact is, I don't know that anybody noticed or cared.

## **Trump's Authoritarian Lineage w/ Ruth Ben-Ghiat - The Majority Report - Air Date 11-12-20**

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:15:14] You know, the issue with calling him a weak strong man or a semi-failure is that what is the standard we're using? Because I hear this all the time. People write to me and say you're crazy. He's not Putin; he's not Orban, but Putin and Orban started somewhere. Putin has been there for 20 years. Orban has been there for a long time. Erdogan had himself appointed both president and prime minister, and he had the coup. That was his . . . There are these shock events, and that's one of them. So, Trump is just getting started.

And another way to see this is that if we view him through the lens of democratic presidents, then he looks strange. But his aims have never been those of democratic presidents. He's not interested in public welfare, public goods. He's not interested in again, the welfare of his people and couldn't care less. That's why I gave up on COVID. His aims have always been to make money for the Trump organization and to build this personality cult. That's why it keeps having rallies, which again makes no sense by most logics to have rallies and further spread the pandemic, but his ego needs and his needs to keep his following far outweigh those. He also does want to stay in power as long as possible, and now he has the perfect co-conspirators -- I talk about this in my book -- William Barr and Secretary of State Pompeo, who dutifully went in front of the cameras, the latter, and said, Oh yes, we'll have a transition to a second Trump administration. And the other thing to say about Trump is whereas, and this is where his historical perspective puts him, it's interesting to look at him through this lens, that many, many, leaders who had success in domesticating parties, they had founded those parties, like Berlusconi with Forza Italia or Mussolini, or they'd been in a position of leadership in their parties like Orban for really long time. Trump just came in from outside and in four short years, he's wrapped that party around his finger so that they acquitted him at the Senate trial, their 2020 party platform was like dear leader, we're just supporting Trump, and they're sticking with him even now. Only a few senators are going against this pretty naked power grab. So, I see him as extremely successful at the things that he cared about most, which is loyalty and making money for the Trump organization.

**SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** [00:17:58] Well, anybody else, I mean, knock on wood, it appears he failed at maintaining power.

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:18:07] Yes, he did fail, and I don't think ultimately he's going to succeed in staying in power. I'm not using the . . . Some people are using the word that there's a coup going on there. There's an attempt to use every means possible to try, legal means, and Donald Trump's mode of operation has always been to find loopholes in tax and regulatory and financial and in legal structures. That's how he operates. And again, he's got Barr there. And of course he stacked the Supreme Court, so that if it came to that, which there's precedents for, you know, using the courts. Like, courts decide things. So, he was voted out, but the key thing is to look at how he's reacting now. He's not conforming to a democratic playbook. He's refusing to even accept the results.

**SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** [00:19:01] Right. All right. So, where does that leave us in terms of the history of post-strongmen? I mean, it's . . . Let's just assume that things continue on this trajectory, right, where you have Lankford saying, you know, we got to get Joe Biden right into this, but not because he's going to be the president, but just in case he becomes the president, which is maybe in some respects more reprehensible that he's sort of playing along

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:19:39] He's hedging.

**SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** [00:19:41] Right. But let's assume, because it's a totally different interview if Donald Trump actually doesn't leave the office, and we don't know what tha . . . but let's assume that he does. Some time in December, he begrudgingly says, yeah, maybe whatever. In fact, I don't want to do this anymore. Michael Cohen says he's going to go to Mar-a-Lago for Christmas, and he's just not going to come back for the next three weeks, which actually sounds like exactly what I would imagine him doing. But what happens when that's the way a strong man goes out? Or I guess maybe more generically, what happens to a society after a strong man? Like is there . . . There are, I don't know, 30 million evangelicals, maybe more, who voted for him, 70 million people who voted for him, who, you know, not all of them, but a significant percentage of those people see this guy as dear leader, as opposed to just a guy who gave us good tax cuts and is a businessman, et cetera, et cetera. What happens to those people after the fact? And how does the fact that Trump sort of like skulks away, does that drain the energy out of that authoritarian impulse by, and I'm talking to authoritarian in terms of the followers . .

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:21:03] Yes.

**SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** [00:21:04] Or does it keep a significant potential there that Tom Cotton could come up and pick up and walk with?

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:21:14] Or Donald Trump in 2024, because he's the play he plays with. Cause they can't, they always have to be campaigning. They have to have a cause. I mean, Michael Cohen's been right about everything he said, because he knows his subject, but we always have to remember that for regular democratic presidents, the prospect of leaving office is a time to think about their legacy. For someone like Donald Trump, and again, unfortunately, his psychology checks every box of all the leaders that I've studied. The outcome is different. You know, it's not a fascist outcome, but it's like a psychological annihilation for them to leave office. They can't imagine life without being adulated and having power to humiliate others. So, that's why it's very difficult. And many of them meet a bad end. Now, when you think of somebody, the only one who was voted out of office was Pinochet in Chile, and he had a year, over a year, before he actually left office after the vote.

And he tried to sabotage the new democracy as much as possible, because they're very vindictive. And so he stacked the Supreme Court, what you've seen a lot of in Trump world, you've seen a lot of movements of personnel, top positions being reshuffled. This . . . Authoritarianism is about the lack of accountability, and Donald Trump's always been about secrecy and lack of accountability. So, he's trying to protect his secrets. He's getting I call it the end-stage follies. I made a little video for Twitter about end-stage Follies. And so they're trying to do damage control here. But what he will leave is what happened also in Chile and Spain after Franco -- and I'm not saying these are analagous because they things work differently today -- but, he'll leave a deeply divided nation, and it's going to take us a very long time to heal from that polarization. But I predict that whatever role he has, he has to keep this polarization going because the cult of victimhood, Trump's victimhood, is the foundational myth of the Trump world, that he's a victim, and he must keep this going to save face no matter what he actually does.

**SAM SEDER - HOST, THE MAJORITY REPORT:** [00:23:36] In fact, I think there was a reporting today that he's already talking about creating some type of digital media empire.

**RUTH BEN-GHIAT:** [00:23:43] Yes. Truly, it's hard for people who don't have this psychology, and it was not fun to immerse myself for two years in these guys' heads, but you cannot underestimate the strength of their personality cult. And look at Berlusconi. Berlusconi was finally forced out of office because of the Eurozone crisis and this massive sex scandal with underage women and all these things. And he was not allowed to run for office as part of his punishment although he never went to jail. But the next time elections came around in 2013, his party almost won again. And this was his party. It had the same relation as Trump has the GOP wrapped around his finger.

So, even though they leave office, the attachments that they've formed, the leader/follower relationship, it's really hard to dissolve it.

## Check Your Blindspot 12-4-20

**ANNOUNCER:** [00:24:39] It's time once again, to play America's favorite political game show:

**STUDIO AUDIENCE:** [00:24:45] CHECK! YOUR! BLINDSPOT!

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:24:55] That's right. It's Check Your Blindspot, brought to you and powered by our sponsor, the Ground News app, the first-ever news comparison platform that provides readers with objective data about the underlying political bias in all published news stories. The Ground News app features The Blindspot, which highlights news stories that just aren't being covered by one end of the political spectrum or the other. So I use The Blindspot to quiz contestants on theirs. With us today is our reigning champion, Amanda from Boston. Welcome back to the show.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:25:27] Thank you.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:25:28] I am going to tell you about news stories and you're going to tell me which side of the political spectrum is blind to them. Are you ready?

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:25:36] Come at me kid.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:25:38] Excellent. I think we're going to have fun today. Usually this game, all, uh, hard work and drudgery. Not today though.

Okay. So we're diving in to Round One.

In whose political blindspot is this story: The RNC, the Republican National Committee, spent more than \$300,000 on Donald Trump Junior's new book.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:26:04] I did hear about this, which would lead me to believe it's on the right's blind spot.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:26:12] And for the sake of fairness, I just want to clarify, this is not the same story as the RNC spending almost a hundred thousand dollars on Don Trump Jr's book last year; this is completely different.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:26:23] This is new -- did he write a new book? Well, we all know he didn't write it.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:26:28] So would you like to change your answer?

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:26:29] Yeah. And there's no, there's nothing else you can tell me about this really without --

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:26:34] No, it's the exact same story twice because they buy his book every year.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:26:40] I'm going to stick with my answer. [Dings and cheers] Alright!

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:26:47] That is right. I expect that the Right never talks about the RNC buying the books of their people. And this year it's especially pointed because we know that the RNC and the Trump campaign raised 150 or \$170 million just off the post election fraud claims.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:27:08] It's up to 200 million now.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:27:13] Oh, excuse me. And so this is just like, this is a tiny, tiny kickback by comparison.

Like they're only spending 300,000, right? Yeah.

Well done. Let's move on to Round Two. And this one's a two-parter. See? It's more fun that way. So in two different stories, they're both talking about the Los Angeles police department. Okay. Two different stories, one on the right one on the left. You're going to see if you can tell which is which.

Part A, the LA sheriff says deputies can conceal their names during protests.

And part B, the LA sheriff says he won't enforce California's stay-at-home order.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:28:00] Okay. Yeah. So part A is in the Right's blind spot and part B is in the Left's blind spot. [Correct! Applause]

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:28:13] Need we say more?

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:28:14] I don't even know if we, yeah,

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:28:16] Pretty, pretty upfront. Yep.

And for our final round: In whose political blind spot is this story -- more fun though, for this round, we're going with "Name That Tune" rules. So instead of just a few notes to see if you can get the blind spot correct, with just three words of the headline.

Oh, Joe Biden says.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:28:41] I mean, it's going to be in the right's blind spot. O sorry, in the left's blind spot, in the left's blind spot. So I misspoke. [Dings, cheers]

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:28:48] So this because if I gave you the whole headline, it'd be too much of a giveaway,

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:28:53] The left never talks about what Joe Biden says.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:28:57] Joe Biden says. So the original story apparently was the Joe Biden broke his foot.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:29:02] Right. I did hear that.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:29:03] And he explained that he broke his foot while playing with his dog. Did you hear any more details?

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:29:07] That his doctor was pretty open about that and didn't make it a whole conspiracy theory event.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:29:14] So here's the full story as relayed by Joe Biden to Jake Tapper on CNN. Okay. Joe Biden says that he broke his foot after getting out of the shower. His dog wanted to play fetch. He playfully pulled the dog's tail while he chased it down what he referred to as an alleyway in his house on his way to the bedroom where he claims the dog slid on a throw rug, which he then tripped on, and broke his foot. [Crowd: Oh, my goodness]

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:29:50] That's a continuous story.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:29:52] Yeah.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:29:52] That starts with the shower ends with the rug.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:29:54] Yeah.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:29:57] Okay, Joe, it's just like, it's just your funky uncle telling a long story about how they stubbed their toe.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:30:04] Yeah. I mean, he told it pretty quickly and he said he was asked, he's like, Hey, so how's your foot, what's with the boot. And he told that story. He's like, well, it's not a very interesting story. Butc--

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:30:15] It sounds fascinating, so many twists and turns.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:30:17] But here's the thing. Yeah. Especially when Joe tells it and he mistakenly refers to his hallway as an alleyway, it becomes --

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:30:24] Oh, so that, of course it becomes lying --

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:30:27] Well, it becomes a genuinely hilarious story. Left, Right or Center, you should agree that this is hilarious. And the Joe Biden sounds like a cartoon character. So my favorite snarky lead-in from a right wing article is: "In the Thursday CNN interview, the 78-year-old statesman revealed the peculiar details of the incident," which I enjoyed --

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:30:53] "Peculiar" --

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:30:54] No, the "statesman," referring to him as a statesman, but it's a cartoonish story, But my favorite --

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:31:03] They can't call him president-elect, Jay. They have to call him something.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:31:06] I guess there's that too.

But my favorite right-wing take overall was, it was the article. It was just like, who even believes this story. And then they like explain it. They're like, yeah. Right.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:31:17] What did they think? I want to know what they think, he tripped because he's a senile old man. Like, that's why, I guess what they're hoping for. Like, actually he's a completely, doddering old fool and, and he can't be trusted to run the country because he fell down.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:31:36] Well, I mean that, or they're saying that he's playing down the dog abuse by saying he only pulled its tail, because a lot of places were highlighting that too. They're like, Oh wait, he didn't say anything about pulling the dog's tail at first that he was clearly hiding it.

So I don't know. Maybe their theory is like, no, he broke his foot kicking the dog or something. I don't know.

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:31:59] Is this what we have to look forward to for the next four years? This is the kind of stuff.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:32:03] Yes.

Well, excellent job. That's three out of three. I hope you had fun once --

**AMANDA FROM BOSTON - CONTESTANT:** [00:32:11] I liked the new angles.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, CHECK YOUR BLINDSPOT:** [00:32:14] Spicing it up. Yeah. So winner and still champion, Amanda from Boston. Thank you for playing.

That wraps it up for today. It's important to mention that all of today's commentary and analysis is ours alone. Definitely not that of the staunchly unopinionated Ground News app. If you would like to try their service, get a discount on their premium features and let them know we sent you go to [ground.news/best](https://ground.news/best), but I hastened to mention that it's actually a free app and you should use it whether you want their premium features or not. I just want to clarify.

As always, whether for traffic safety or media literacy, never forget to

**STUDIO AUDIENCE:** [00:32:51] CHECK! YOUR! BLINDSPOT!

## From Dictator to Demigod - Power Corrupts - Air Date 8-1-19

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:33:20] So now we're going to get to the multi-billion dollar question. Why do dictators behave like this? What's the point? Are they crazy or are they strategic?

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:33:30] So maybe the dictator just really wants a cult of individuals who believe that he can fly or that he can, that he never has to use the bathroom or some other crazy thing like that.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:33:40] That's David Siegel, who is an associate professor of political science at Duke University. And he studied cults of personality from a theoretical perspective, trying to figure out why they exist.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:33:52] So that was the early arguments tended to be focused more on just satisfying and dictators ego, basically.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:33:59] And sure, of course, ego has something to do with it. But it only goes so far as an explanation.

It doesn't make that much sense to believe that all of these various dictators in different regions in different time periods, all came up with the same solution to satisfy their ego. There has to be something more.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:34:15] Some of the more recent arguments were more instrumental, so more focused on what the dictator actually gains from that cult.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:34:23] So let's put ourselves in the very fancy shoes of a dictator now. The most important thing that you care about is making sure that you stay in power, because if you get toppled from power, you're likely to be jailed, forced into exile or killed in cold blood by the very people that you had tortured or oppressed before.

**ANNETTE BOHR:** [00:34:42] And the entire reason d'être of the regime is to perpetuate itself, and to perpetuate the status quo, which involves the cult of personality.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:34:53] So clinging to power is goal number one. And in order to do that, you've got to think about two levels of society, the educated and wealthy elites, and the masses, a.k.a. everybody else.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:35:05] These are authoritarian regimes. And in general, the mass public has a role in maintaining regime maintenance only insofar as the entire population doesn't rebel.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:35:14] In other words, the dictator of North Korea, or Turkmenistan, or Libya or Equatorial Guinea, or Eritrea, really only has to care about ordinary people enough to ensure that there's no revolution and no uprising.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:35:26] The dictator lives in sort of constant worry that the population could rebel.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:35:31] Other than that, though, as long as they're not taking to the streets, those ordinary people don't matter as much to you. But elites are a different story. Maintaining their loyalty is something that requires constant attention. After all, if a powerful army commander turns against you, you could be ousted in a coup. If a wealthy family turns against you, you might lose some key support or some key funding. And if a family member turns against you, you might face being murdered or supplanted by someone else who wants to wear the proverbial crown.

**JASON PACK:** [00:36:03] You can't rule by force alone because you need to get 1% of the elite to work with you voluntarily, because you can't be at a bayonet point for the oil minister and you can't bribe the media guy.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:36:19] So when it comes to elites, some studies suggest that the cult of personality is a clever way to solve an important dilemma.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:36:26] A lot of those focused on what's known as the loyalty competence trade-off.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:36:31] Which is exactly what it sounds like: a trade-off between people who are more loyal and people who are more competent.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:36:37] So the dictator might want multiple things. One of these things is competence, and this is simple skills. And those skills enable the follower of the dictator to be more useful at the dictator, but it comes at a cost.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:36:51] The idea here is that people who are highly competent are less likely to be blindly loyal. They're critical thinkers. And they're rarely people who are keen to be henchmen who just follow orders. But for a dictator, you really need some people who are willing to walk off a cliff for you. People who would just do, as you say, no questions asked, no matter how ruthless, no matter how cruel, no matter how outlandish. And one way that you can test whether someone is blindly loyal to you or not is to figure out whether they have

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:37:22] a willingness to lie.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:37:24] If someone is willing to lie for you, it's a decent predictor of whether they'll be loyal or not. And the more outlandish the lie they're willing to tell, the more likely that they'll be loyal. But even still it's way easier to figure out if someone is skilled than if someone is loyal.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:37:39] And we say there are probably ways in which the dictator can figure out skill from other signals, right? So the dictator does not choose these people from birth for the most part, where the people have had previous occupations, previous tasks. And you can identify in a lot of cases, how skilled the person is.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:37:56] So a cult of personality isn't really used to try to figure out who is skilled and who is not. But that doesn't mean that it's a useless tool.

**ANNETTE BOHR:** [00:38:04] It's a tool to ingratiate and express loyalty.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:38:08] So basically the argument in a nutshell is to show how the dictator can set up a cult of personality and ask all of his subordinates to engage in over-the-top behavior in support of a dictator, and by observing this behavior and seeing how far the subordinates are willing to go along that line, no matter how ridiculous it makes them seem.

**ANNETTE BOHR:** [00:38:30] So this provides an outlet for sycophancy, and it's an accessible way to express fealty and obedience to the ruling regime in order to curry favor.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:38:42] If someone is willing to publicly proclaim something ridiculous, like, yes I do in fact, believe that Kim Il-sung wrote a book just about every day of his life. Or they're willing to promote the Green Book like it's a religion, then that person is signaling that they're likely to be a loyal henchman.

If you really want to impress the dictator, by the way, make sure you promote the regime propaganda, even when you're far away from the country and seemingly beyond the surveillance of the state security services.

So for example, one of Muammar Gaddafi's henchman, a guy named Musa Kusa, well, he showed his loyalty by promoting the Green Book ideology, even when he was a student in the United States.

**JASON PACK:** [00:39:20] When he went to Michigan State, he wrote his master's thesis about Kadafi and ideology and how the Green Book emerges naturally from the society. And yes, that was a vetting mechanism that a certain guy who could rise up in the ranks of the regime wrote his master's thesis when he's away from the eyes of the state about how great Khadafi is.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:39:44] And when you impress the dictator with displays of loyalty, there are usually rewards.

**ANNETTE BOHR:** [00:39:48] Loyalty is offered in exchange for protection and privileges.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:39:53] But there's still a problem.

Once everybody in society is told to say that Kim Il-sung wrote 18,000 books or that Kim Jong-un won a yacht race when he was nine years old. Then it's not really like you're going out on a limb any longer. Once it's become the accepted wisdom, it's just commonplace. Like yeah, everybody knows he won the yacht race.

So you're no longer having to risk anything to say something that is objectively crazy. And that means that these public performances become less and less useful over time. So you need to find new ways of testing people.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:40:25] You'd want to see public costly displays of obedience,

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:40:29] And that's precisely why these cults of personality get increasingly wild and weird over time with a sort of ratcheting effect.

**DAVID SIEGEL:** [00:40:36] As behavior becomes normalized, you have to ask for more extreme behavior.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:40:41] You have to come up with more and more outlandish claims to test people. If they stick to the script, no matter how outlandish it is, and that might be an indication that you can trust them. But of course there's always the risk that they're parodying regime propaganda, not out of loyalty, but out of fear.

**ROBERT E KELLY:** [00:40:57] Yeah. I mean, the question of belief is a tough one, right? Because of the hidden preferences problem, namely, you've got somebody pointing a gun at your head. So obviously you're going to say that Kim Il-sung wrote 18,000 books. My sense is in the elites, they know it's bunk. I mean, they know.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:41:11] This is a key point.

It might not really matter whether the elites are true believers or not. If they're willing to at least pretend, they're probably willing to be loyal at other times too. And even if they privately think that Kim Jong-un is a ruthless tyrant, they're being conditioned to tow the party line simply out of fear.

So it works on two levels. On the first level, you can assess loyalty, and to convey a clear message on the second level that behaving like a robot who has been programmed to spread regime propaganda is the only way to get ahead in a totalitarian society.

**ANNETTE BOHR:** [00:41:45] It's the way things run. It's the way that you move up. It reflects a means of social mobility. It reflects a means of protection. You must declare your loyalty in order to attain any sort of social mobility, privileges, and to operate within a system that will,, somehow work for you and your family.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:42:12] So you get the idea. With a cult of personality, dictators get a sort of three for one deal. You brainwash your people by feeding them absurd lies that they must repeat if they want to avoid jail or worse. You figure out who will be the most loyal cronies that you can make into your top advisers. And you scare elites into obeying you or else.

So if you're a dictator, all of those three things are really useful, but there's no free lunch, even in a dictatorship. The cult of personality brings with it a hidden cost.

**JASON PACK:** [00:42:47] When you demand that advisors tell you how great you are, your decision-making instantly becomes compromised.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:42:54] And that's how something that started off as a strategy becomes a liability.

**JASON PACK:** [00:42:58] That kind of cult of personality shows that dictators are not purely strategic. Because when they get buttered up so much, because their egos need this constant reinforcement, they then let their own decision-making processes be influenced by the cult of personality that they themselves have built up.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:43:16] Telling lies can be dangerous when you start to believe in them yourself.

**JASON PACK:** [00:43:21] And this is a fascinating thing I always try to tell people about Kadafi. Yes, Khadafi was cunning, but he actually believed in his own stuff.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:43:30] And this is where we crossed the line from political science into psychology.

**JASON PACK:** [00:43:34] As he got older, he became more vain. And this is a fascinating study in psychology. He was a handsome, charismatic man, loved by the people, for a small period of years. Then as he got older and maybe he was suffering from various diseases, he wasn't charismatic anymore. He certainly wasn't handsome. He did many facial surgeries. He tried to have an even more bizarre cult of personality, probably because he missed the adulation.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:44:03] And then we get to this final point: bizarre can actually be beneficial. The weirder it is, the more likely that people are to take notice. You've probably heard of Muammar Gaddafi, and that's no accident.

**JASON PACK:** [00:44:16] What he successfully did in a Trumpian fashion was understanding media gimmicks to raise his profile. I mean, genius, way ahead of his time in terms of manipulating a media narrative.

He invited a thousand models to a conference in Milan where he told them to convert to Islam. You know, how could the media not cover that: a thousand Italian models, you know, all being convinced about how Islam would keep them thin and drinking wasn't the way for them to get the right agents in their careers or the right husbands.

**DR. BRIAN KLASS - HOST, POWER CORRUPTS:** [00:44:52] And even though much of the media coverage portrayed Gadhafi as a bit of a kook, he was a larger than life kook that put Libya on the map.

**JASON PACK:** [00:45:00] He punched above his weight, for lack of a better term. Reagan says in the eighties, that Kadafi is the second greatest opponent of American influence in Africa, i.e. ahead of the Chinese, but below the Soviets. That's amazing, right?

## **Juan González The Media Has It Wrong. Record Latinx Turnout Helped Biden. White Voters Failed Dems Part 2 - Democracy Now! - Air Date 11-5-20**

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** [00:45:17] Well, Juan, even though, as you say, it's very surprising that White women voters voted for him in greater—for Trump—in greater numbers in this election than they did in 2016, given Trump's consistent assaults on women of all kinds, I guess the thing that's striking is also the fact—I mean, Trump did win over 60 million votes, 68 million votes—that given what he's done and said to and about African Americans, Asian Americans, the Latinx communities, that any increase—first of all, that any people would vote for him, and on top of that, that there would be an increase at all, even if marginal.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** [00:46:08] Yes, well, I agree with you, Nermeen. I think the issue to understand—again, that's why I raise the nature of U.S. imperialism. I do not think that we should underestimate the reality, because everyone knew why they were voting in this election—there were very few undecided voters. And I think one of the things that still has to be answered is how, once again, the polls were so wrong, not about necessarily about the vote for Joe Biden, because most of the polls gave Joe Biden about 51% sometimes 52% of the vote, or 50%, which is more or less what he's been getting, but that there was a severe underestimation in all the polls, once again, of how many Americans were voting for Trump. And I think that we've got to understand, increasingly, these polls are highly suspect and cannot be trusted.

But I think the key thing to understand is that, unfortunately—and I've been saying this now for years, when I get a chance to do analysis rather than just ask questions—is that there is a significant portion of the American people, including among African Americans and Latinos and other groups, who are perfectly happy with the United States being the world's imperial power, and who, to some degree or other, believe that they are invested in the continued national chauvinism and expansionism and bullying of America around the world. So, this vote also represents, even if Joe Biden wins, that there are many Americans who are perfectly happy with our country being a rogue state in the world and lording over the rest of the world and insisting that its interests are first. There is a national chauvinist movement in America and a movement that believes authoritarianism is the way to go.

We cannot underestimate this, and hopefully the progressives will attempt to organize understanding that. And the work that has to be done, though, is in the White community, is in among White Americans. That's where the organizing needs to be done, because that is the population that is increasingly shifting more and more to a national chauvinist and a White supremacist view of the world. And I don't think that we can sweep that under the rug and act like it's not happening, because it is happening. And that's, I think, the key lesson, that, yes, Donald Trump got more votes this time than he got last time, and there's a reason for that.

## **How Trump Hacked the Presidency - Trumpcast - 11-13-20**

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [00:49:14] Now, I know you cite, among other things in the book, Trump's pathological mendacity and his mercurial personality as representing insults to the office of the presidency. We've had lots of guests on this show try to summarize what distinguishes him from other presidents, what makes him the most appalling president. But of those mendacity or his personality or his conflicts of interest: what do you think, what trait or practice of Trump do you think did the most damage to the country in the last four years?

**JACK GOLDSMITH:** [00:49:46] It's very hard to pick out the worst sin or the worst personality characteristic. I mean, if I had to summarize it, I would say that we've never had a president who was completely uninformed about the nature of the office that he held, and just every element of the office that he reported to exercise, he just abused. Most of his abuses were not actually -- and this has been confounding to people -- we're not actually illegal acts. They were acts within presidential discretion that were things that no president would have -- past president -- would have done. And a lot of it was at the verbal level. He said things that were hugely disruptive and destructive that no president would have considered saying. So it's hard to summarize it. I mean, his authoritarian rhetoric was very damaging even if he didn't always follow through. The massive conflict of interest between his public duty and his private interests with his business and the like, and not just as business, but his reelection and the like, the extent to which he abused the pardon power. I mean, the list is long, but I would say the key characteristic is this is someone who was utterly indifferent to the kind of informal norms that define the office. And he abused his power in many, many directions, even without violating the law.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [00:51:06] So you use that word norms, which I've been puzzling over, I think for four years. What are norms? I mean, I sort of, at various times, I've tried to substitute other words, but something about "norm" seems too weak to describe the things that Trump shattered.

**JACK GOLDSMITH:** [00:51:23] Well, first of all, let me say, we can talk about this later if you want. I'm not sure he shattered them. He violated them, but whether he shattered them, depends on what happens next. But norms are usually distinguished from law, from legal obligations, and legal obligations are things that impose duties that if you don't carry those out, you violate the law and there are various legal remedies or related remedies. So you can be sued, you can be prosecuted, you can be impeached and the like.

Norms are non-legal, but their expectations of behavior and they inform the kind of culture of the institution and the reason they're norms is because it's thought to be the case that their violation will impose penalties, but not legal penalties, more like political penalties or social penalties. Norms have grown to be hugely important in governing the presidency since the post-Watergate era, since the post-Watergate post-Vietnam round of reforms that we had in the seventies.

The reason why norms have been so prevalent in regulating the presidency are several. One is some aspects of presidential power are very hard for Congress to regulate because of the Constitution. The Constitution gives the president vast power over the Executive Branch. And that means that if we want to control abuses within the Executive Branch, for example, the president weighing in on law enforcement matters that concern his own interests, it's very hard for Congress to regulate that under the Constitution. So we have built up a set of norms

over the last 50 years which presidents have basically complied with. That prevent presidents from doing things like that.

Now the downside of norms and the thing that I think that I detected a note of skepticism in your question, is they don't have the same bite as law. But it doesn't mean they're not important, and it doesn't mean they're not consequential. And in fact, they were actually usually consequential, even in the Trump administration. People haven't seen this, but norms operated quite robustly, even if not perfectly, to prevent a lot of Trump's abuses from becoming realized. Yeah, I can give you examples if you want.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [00:53:27] Yeah, please tell me.

**JACK GOLDSMITH:** [00:53:28] So remember when Trump was going to -- everyone was sure we're going to have a Constitutional crisis -- because Trump was going to fire Mueller or Trump was going to stop the Mueller report. It didn't happen. And if you read volume two of the Mueller report, you see that many of Trump's subordinates just wouldn't carry out those orders. And they wouldn't carry them out because they were still beholden to the norms, even if he wasn't. And they were also worried about legal violations. Remember all those people that Trump insisted that his justice department prosecute? It didn't happen. And that is also because, and, and the list goes on. Even in the justice department, headed by William Barr, where Barr has violated some norms, but people thought he was carrying Trump's water. And in fact, Trump is furious with Barr right now. He may even fire him during the transition because Barr in fact, didn't carry out a lot of Trump's orders.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [00:54:16] Right. And the fact that he gets frustrated with them when they start to sort of push back on his orders are slow on some of his orders. And then he's just done with them entirely is always amazing to me when they've, they've gone so far out on a limb and risked their legacy entirely. Someday he may decide that Giuliani didn't go far enough for him and then, you know, we'll know we're in real trouble.

Okay. So, you know, the story of the race to the south pole -- go with me here for a second -- between the Norwegian explorer, I think his name was Amundsen, and then the British one, Robert Scott. So this is something that always comes to mind when I think about norms.

So at least in the children's book version of this, Amundsen beat Scott to the south pole, because he was willing, his team was willing to eat their dogs. And Scott's team said we are British. We are not going to eat our dogs. And the lesson of that is either, you know, there's something very humane and wonderful, and being a gentlemanly competitor like Scott, who wouldn't do something so inhumane as eat dogs, or the lesson is Amundsen won.

And I feel like if there were something we don't do that, we are American, right? We don't mess with the transition, the orderly transition of power, a transfer of power from one president to the next, or, you know, we don't threaten our enemies, as they might do in Ukraine with incarceration. What would that "we are Americans, we don't do X thing" look like if you could sort of summarize it, like that we don't eat our dogs or we don't solicit intervention in our elections from a hostile foreign power. Tell me what you think the "we are American, we don't do X" that Trump did do.

I mean, again, the list we could be here for hours going over the list of things, lots of things like that, with the transition. I mean, Trump is perfectly within his rights to exhaust all of the legal remedies he thinks he has. So far there seems to be no "there!" there at all. And that's fine. But he's violated the expectations that have defined the offices for many, many decades now, by not only not conceding in an election, he doesn't have a duty to concede this yet, it's a norm. It's an expectation of right behavior that presidents who lose do do, and the losing candidate does for the good of the nation, because there's this sense of patriotism or this greater duty. Trump has not conceded when he should have, and moreover, and much worse, he has basically charged that the election was fraudulent when there's no evidence of that and the like. So I mean the list of things that we don't do, that, that one doesn't do that Trump has done it, and it's literally, there are dozens and dozens of things, the way he has treated his intelligence agencies, the way he's treated the press, the way he has intervened in law enforcement matters, the way he's tried to shape the law to serve his personal interests and to protect himself.

I mean, I can't summarize it into one thing. Some people summarize the one thing that Trump has done wrong in terms of the constitutional oath, that every president takes an oath to uphold the Constitution. And people who believe as I do that, Trump has abused his office terribly, but hasn't necessarily violated a whole bunch of laws, say that he has violated the spirit, if not the letter of the oath clause, because he hasn't, he basically has not conducted himself in office with what appears to be in many, many contexts, the best interest of the country.

And that's a contestable judgment. Trump supporters think the opposite, but that's my view.

## **The Secret Code of the Proud Boys - Trumpcast - Air Date 10-1-20**

Five words, "Stand back and stand by" Trump's words very explicitly to the Proud Boys. Tell us about the Proud Boys and tell us about what you think Trump meant with those words.

**NICHOLE HEMMER:** [00:58:10] So the Proud Boys are a violent far right street gang. They have been active since 2016. They were founded by Gavin McInnes, who was one of the co-founders of Vice media. And it was originally established as a kind of a "fight club" that was about weird, very physical masculinity. There was some racism shot through it. There was some White supremacy shot through it. There was a kind of a stew of far-right ideology behind the Proud Boys.

And when Donald Trump said "stand back and stand by", he actually made pretty clear what he meant with his next sentence, because he then said somebody needs to do something about Antifa and the left. And that's precisely what Proud Boys have seen as their kind of job over the last four years is to go out there and be the arm of enforcement for Trump's calls to beat up protestors, to beat up Antifa to beat up the left. That's what they've been doing.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [00:59:08] There's a particular relationship that this brings to mind, since Mike Godwin said Godwin's Law no longer obtains, that it's no longer wrong to compare anyone to Nazis. Let's just liberate ourselves to compare this dynamic between Trump and say the Proud Boys or the Oath Keepers, or other far right

street gangs, as you say, to Hitler's relationship with the paramilitary, originally the Brown Shirts, and then the SS.

So there are always these groups that are kind of rent-a-cops or something, or they do security. I know the Proud Boys did security and had done bodyguard work for Milo Yiannopoulos and Ann Coulter. And then spent time, what they say is we're just manning the door here, we're just making sure things don't get out of hand. But then there's an element of drinking in it and then they look very chip on their shoulder about if there is some kind of fight, they're quick to put it down or some kind of rebellion. And they give dirty looks to people, and they menace people, and they intimidate people, and then this becomes a kind of paramilitary.

But it's a very structured relationship. What's strange is that they seem like a spontaneous street gang on the one hand and on the other, they seem to be taking their orders pretty directly from really important show folk in the far right, including Ann Coulter, and now Donald Trump. Talk us through how that might work.

**NICHOLE HEMMER:** [01:00:28] Sure. So there's actually a kind of divide in far right groups like these militias and street gangs. There are some who position themselves as opposed to the government and that particular kind of libertarianism where they see themselves at war with law enforcement and with government organizations.

And then you have these groups that have been particularly organized during the Trump administration that see themselves as an arm of the government, enforcing the will of Donald Trump, seeing themselves as an extension of the police and law enforcement. And that's really where a group like the Proud Boys fall.

They are a structured street gang and it's easy to see that as a spontaneous thing, but they have rituals, they have uniforms. They are an organized gang, but they do have relationships with people like Roger Stone, even. The Proud Boys have relationships with people in the government and they're being encouraged by people like Donald Trump. And again, this is something that goes - it's not a 2020 phenomenon - it goes back to 2016 when Donald Trump was calling on his supporters to beat up protestors. This is just a formalized version of that.

I think we're going to look back at this summer in particular as a turning point moment. Remember it was not that long ago that Donald Trump was ordering federal law enforcement to attack peaceful protestors in front of the White House. I mean, that was a massive turning point moment.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [01:01:58] Yes. Yes.

**NICHOLE HEMMER:** [01:01:59] And now this idea that you're going to bring in unofficial paramilitary forces. And again, I think it's worth saying that you were talking about how when Donald Trump makes these calls, it can kind of word salad and he's all over the place, but that kind of elliptical speaking style, which we saw in Charlottesville as well in 2017 is a tactic. Right? And one of the things that you have to follow is do people understand him?

White power groups, after Charlottesville, celebrated when the president made his "very fine people" comment. And the Proud Boys celebrated, and these militia groups said, they heard

it loud and clear, "stand back and stand by. We are ready to go." That's one of those dangerous signals. And that elliptical speaking style allows them to say, "Oh, you know, I didn't mean it," to media.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [01:02:51] This is relevant to so many chapters in this long desolate book that we've been reading for the last four years. I always think about Michael Cohen's testimony—Mr. Trump talks in code. He just always says - and Cohen's example was he'll say, "isn't this the greatest tie you've ever seen?" and what are you going to say to that? And this was a very specific legal issue for Cohen because had he been asked to lie? Had perjury been suborned by Trump?

And ultimately Mueller didn't make that case because Trump had said something to Cohen, like, "wouldn't it be nice if the timeframe of the Moscow deal was this other timeframe?" Now, is that asking him to lie? Cohen said, "I know the code, so that was asking me to lie."

**NICHOLE HEMMER:** [01:03:41] That's something that you see with elicit activity.

**VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN - HOST, TRUMPCAST:** [01:03:43] Right? Yes! And also, "I hope you can see your way clear to letting Mike Flynn go." And then how Trump's sons defended him, "he was just expressing a hope. It was just a warm hope in his mind." And then this thing, as you point out, he says, "Proud Boys, stand back and stand by" word, word, word, and then "something has to be done about Antifa and the left."

So is he saying go beat up Antifa and the left? Not exactly, but "something has to be done" every prosecutor has said it, he talks like a mob boss. And, and this is where you can really illuminate this, when you talk to the right, and I get this a little bit from the David Duke podcast we had at Slate, often they're being told "no sieg heils for now." You know, "just for now, don't carry the Nazi stuff. We're laying low for the time being, and then you'll be able to flare up again." This very specific, I didn't quite get this - actually, I'm listening to another podcast about skinheads in Chicago and that they want to carry the Nazi flag, but they're told carry the Confederate flag.

When they're training you, that's the stand back, and then later you'll be able to have this more florid demonstration. And so it's not chastening to be told, addressed directly, and told stand back. It's just like, "right, we got it. We're with you. And then we'll have this full wave in Portland and then we'll be able to fly our true fascist colors." And all that code is something you're so familiar with from your books.

**NICHOLE HEMMER:** [01:05:17] Yeah. It's something that you actually saw I think a great example here is Charlottesville, somebody like Richard Spencer had been steeped in White power politics for years, and he latches onto the issue of this Confederate statue removal in Charlottesville, because he sees that as a way of both mainstreaming his ideas and broadening his base in a way. Can he make common cause with these other right-wing groups and make a space at the table for his White power politics?

And that's the idea behind what was initially thought of as the Unite the Right rally. We're going to unite all of these different groups. Now, there were some groups, including eventually the Proud Boys, although there were Proud Boys there, but Gavin McInnes had told the Proud Boys not to go to Unite the Right, but by the time that the rally actually happens, you really only have the worst neo-Nazis and Klansmen left on the speaking slate.

So it didn't actually manage to expand and unite these groups because other groups were like, "if we're too associated with these kinds of violent Nazis, we're going to lose legitimacy for our cause. So we're going to go over here. We're going to say, Oh no, we're not associated with that kind of political violence," and attaching themselves more fully to Trumpian politics or more mainstream right wing politics in order to get more of a hearing for themselves. But those underlying ideas that they're super okay with, Nazis and Nazi flags and the Klan, that's all still there. It's just not surfaced because there's a political price to pay for it.

## Summary

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [01:06:55] We've just heard clips today starting with: the Ezra Klein Show, featuring Ann Applebaum on Trump's enablers and what drives people to radicalism; the Al Franken podcast spoke with Dahlia Lithwick and Ian Vacin about the breakdown of the rule of law; the Majority Report discussed the authoritarian lineage Trump's been following; then we heard an episode of Check Your Blind Spot; followed by the Power Corrupts podcast explaining why dictators and wannabes lie so wildly and make their supporters repeat the lies: Did you hear that Trump had the biggest inauguration in history?; and then Democracy Now spoke with Juan Gonzalez about the clear-eyed vote of millions of Americans who want the US to be a rogue bullying state in the world.

That's what everyone heard, but members also heard two bonus clips from the Trumpcast, one on the problem of Trump busting norms and another on the authoritarianism of groups like the Proud Boys. For non-members, those bonus clips are linked in the show notes and are part of today's transcript. So, you can find them if you want to make the effort, but to hear that and all of our bonus content delivered seamlessly into your podcast feed and tremendously support the show, sign up at [bestoftheleft.com/support](https://bestoftheleft.com/support) or request a financial hardship membership, because we don't make a lack of funds a barrier to hearing more information. Every request is granted; no questions asked. And now we'll hear from you.

## Call to increase existing membership pledges - Josh from Wilmington, DE

**VOICEMAILER - JOSH FROM WILMINGTON, DE:** [01:08:24] Hi, my name is Josh. I'm from Wilmington, Delaware, been a member for many years. So I just heard about the losing your 400-member equivalent. So I was wondering if every current member took an equal share of covering that loss, how much would each person have to give or increase their current membership by? Tell me that. I will increase mine and hope that everybody increases theirs by the same amount. And then you're covered. I know that's unlikely that everybody will do it, but start with me and see how it goes. Thanks.

## Responding to Rutger Bregman - Lynda from Illinois

**VOICEMAILER - LINDA FROM ILLINOIS:** [01:09:05] Hi Jay!, my name is Linda and I live in Illinois. First of all, I wanted to say that I've been listening to Best of the Left for at least a decade, and I've learned a great deal from it. I've always liked listening to the voicemail part

of the show too, because I find listener input to be very valuable, and I really like your thoughtful analysis of it.

I thought about calling you in the past but my social anxiety got the better of me, but this time I thought I would give it a try. I feel compelled to say something about the clip you played from *History Extra* with Rutger Bregman. I found his talk to be interesting, but on further analysis it seemed to avoid important information that would help with understanding.

I noticed that it's taught to not include any mention of class consciousness. He talks about societies and cultures and the four's if they just happened and are logical consequences of social order. The main thing that got me going is when he said for all of history - and I'm guessing he was saying up until European capitalist colonized, industrialized, and globalized the world - people were I quote "sick, poor, hungry, stupid, dirty, and ugly."

This seems crazy to me. I feel like he's definitely looking at the world with a White supremacist lens. I believe that the reason that vast swaths of population were looked at this way is because they were intensely oppressed by the small minority of extremely wealthy aristocracy and/or Lords that ruled over them.

These rich hoarded all the wealth for themselves, and the struggle for liberation was always on the mind of the poor and oppressed. Bregman mentioned that the thinking of Marx/Lenin is out of the question—it is in the past and cannot lead to any type of utopia he said. I definitely think he's gotten this wrong.

The reason that there are poor people is because of lack of political will of rich people and the class of people that hang on to the rich and live off of them. The rich need the poor to oppress so they can be richer and rob those people and the earth have resources so they can continue to become richer.

It is capitalism in general and it's the most brutal unbridled form as we have here in the U.S. that creates poverty. The Netherlands, where Bregman is from, is another settler colonial rich country, which has more social programs because they have socialists in their government who believe in a more egalitarian form of state rule because it's much more moral.

So, I guess where I'm trying to say is that those poor people that he described as "sick, poor, hungry, stupid, dirty, and ugly" were, and are actually amazing and wise human beings that have always been struggling against oppression and fighting for a fair and equal world and the right to a dignified place in that world.

And that's all I have to say Jay!, thank you for listening. Bye.

## **Final comments on utopian thinking and criticizing ideas and implementation separately**

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [01:11:49] Thanks for listening, everyone. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work for the show. Thanks to the Monosyllabic Transcriptionist Trio Ben, Dan, and Ken for their volunteer work helping to put

our transcripts together. Thanks as always to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets and activism segments, and frankly, a whole bunch of other stuff. And thanks to all those who called into the voicemail line or wrote in their messages to be played as 'voicedmails.' If you'd like to leave a comment or question of your own to be played on the show, you can record a message at (202) 999-3991 or write me a message to [jay@bestoftheleft.com](mailto:jay@bestoftheleft.com).

First of all, quick response to Josh. Thank you for the obviously kind message. The answer to your question, how much additional is needed: I ran the numbers. It's about \$3 per patron would get our heads above water. Now, ideally, I mean, before we took this big hit, I had dreams of getting to the point where we were well above water or where I could have a full-time research person instead of just part-time research people. I mean, I can only imagine the beautiful things that I could do with a full-time researcher and an associate producer. So anyway, with that dream set aside for the moment for obvious reasons, it would take about \$3 per existing patron to get our heads above water, but that includes supporters who currently are only chipping in a buck a month on Patreon. And it also includes people who are donating a lot already. You know, like a while ago, Dave from Olympia wanted to increase his contributions so much that I had to make a new level for him and named it after him. So now our membership levels are, as they go up in value, Patron, Member, Professional Protestor, Social Justice Warrior, Radical Leftist and then Dave from Olympia. So, I mean, if you really wanted to support the show, you too could be a Dave from Olympia and chip in a hefty amount each month. So, you know yes, of course, existing members increasing their contributions will help, and I appreciate anyone who wants to do that. Some have already begun, but it's just not fair or reasonable to think that we're actually going to get there with just existing members who are either not giving very much because they presumably can't or those who are already giving a lot.

So, if you're not already a member but could be, really, this is the time to please think about signing up. And of course, as I've mentioned, gift memberships and merch are all the rage this holiday season. And we have another way to help the show coming up, but I can't announce it yet. We are so close to being able to announce it. So, keep an eye and ear out for that.

Secondly, in response to Linda on Rutger Bregman, this is in reference to a clip that was on the reposted episode, the most recent reposted episode, so if you missed that, this is what she's talking about. She mentions Rutger Bregman who is an author talking about utopias. He makes this comment about how people in the past were all sick, poor, hungry, stupid, dirty, and ugly. Real quick, here's that clip:

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** [01:15:23] For a long time, there was only one utopia, and this is what historians and anthropologists called the buddy utopia. So, as I said earlier in the interview, in most of history, most people were sick, poor, hungry, stupid, dirty, and ugly.

So in the past, everything was worse. So it shouldn't be a surprise that when people dreamed of a better future, they mainly dreamed of, you know, a world without, uh, where, where you wouldn't be hungry, where you, everyone would have a roof above their head, et cetera.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [01:15:56] Okay. So that's the first clip that Linda was referencing, and I agree that taking words at face value certainly has its place, and is

usually a good place to start. I will admit that I am hearing this with a rather forgiving filter because I have heard Rutger Bregman interviewed many times, I read his book and I've just never heard or, you know, come across any red flags about him that made me think that he doesn't understand class issues. In this clip, which is a small part of a longer interview from about three years ago, and I don't remember any of the rest of it, in this clip, he doesn't talk about class, but my general perception of him is that he is not the kind of person to not understand the concerns that Linda is bringing up. So, I hear that clip and I think, you know, sick, poor, hungry, you know, that that's not a judgment; that's people in the past -- very much for the reasons Linda was describing -- were kept in poverty by the ruling class and were often sick, poor and hungry. He says that people were stupid. You could say that's a judgment call. Again, I could be wrong; I don't know exactly what he means by it. My interpretation though, again, is that he means something more like ignorant, that basically they are so busy surviving that they don't have the time to be anything other than ignorant. Not a judgment on their actual capacity to retain knowledge. Dirty and ugly: I mean, again, that these are sort of references to the time people have available to them, whether they have time to maintain proper hygiene or, you know, now that the beauty industry is a classic example of overindulgence and wealth looking for somewhere to go, and so we're able to spend lots of money making ourselves pretty.

So again, I could be wrong, but that's how I hear that clip. And the reason why it didn't throw up a red flag for me when I initially heard it. For someone hearing it without the additional context, then I absolutely understand where Linda's coming from. And if he means something other than my impression, then yeah, it's a little sketchy.

I don't know that it's from a white supremacist perspective, thinking that the unwashed masses of the colonies are stupid, dirty and ugly. It's just, that's just so far removed from Bregman's usual go-to and how he talks about people in the world. I would just be shocked if that's what he meant, but following up there, the second reference Linda made saying, and look, I gotta be honest, I think she may have misheard what Bregman said. She said that he mentioned Marx and Lenin, and I don't think he actually does. He mentioned Lenin, Stalin and Hitler, and I'll play that clip with plenty of context:

**RUTGER BREGMAN:** [01:19:22] You shouldn't take your utopian visions too seriously. You should take them very seriously and not so seriously at the same time. What we've seen in the 20th century is that there were many utopian thinkers who were obsessed with their blueprints and their five-year plans, and if reality didn't turn out the way they wanted it to be, then they'll just force reality. I mean, that's what Leninism and Stalinism and Nazism was all about. And after that, we said no more utopian thinking for us. Utopian thinking is simply too dangerous. But if you go back again to Thomas More, the original utopian thinker, you'll find a version of utopian thinking that's actually really powerful and, um, has a lot more space for humor as well.

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** [01:20:07] So, as I said, I don't think he mentions Marx anywhere in that clip. He did obviously just then mention Lenin, but it wasn't Lenin and his utopian thoughts. It was his lack of ability to, in the way he phrases it, keep a sense of humor about it. And the idea that when the ideas that you have don't work out exactly as you want them to, you then decide to enforce your ideas with terrible authoritarian-style government, which can and should be criticized separately from their political ideas. Now, I, you know, a lot of their ideas are also terrible, so you can criticize their ideas and their

implementation. But I think it's good and thoughtful and nuanced to understand ideas and implementation as being separate things that need to be either praised or criticized separately and independently.

So Linda, thanks for the comment. If I missed something or misinterpreted what you were saying or anything like that, please call back in and we'll continue to chat about it in one way or another. As always, for all of you, keep the comments coming in at 202 999-3991 () or by emailing me to [jay@bestoftheleft.com](mailto:jay@bestoftheleft.com).

That's going to be it for today. Thanks to everyone for listening. Thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships@bestoftheleft.com/support as that is absolutely how the program survives. For details on the show itself, including links to all of the sources and music used in this and every episode, all that information can always be found in the show notes on the blog and likely right on the device you're using to listen.

So, coming to you from far outside the conventional wisdom of Washington DC, my name is Jay, and this has been the Best of the LEFT podcast coming to you twice weekly. Thanks entirely to the members and donors to the show from [bestoftheleft.com](http://bestoftheleft.com).