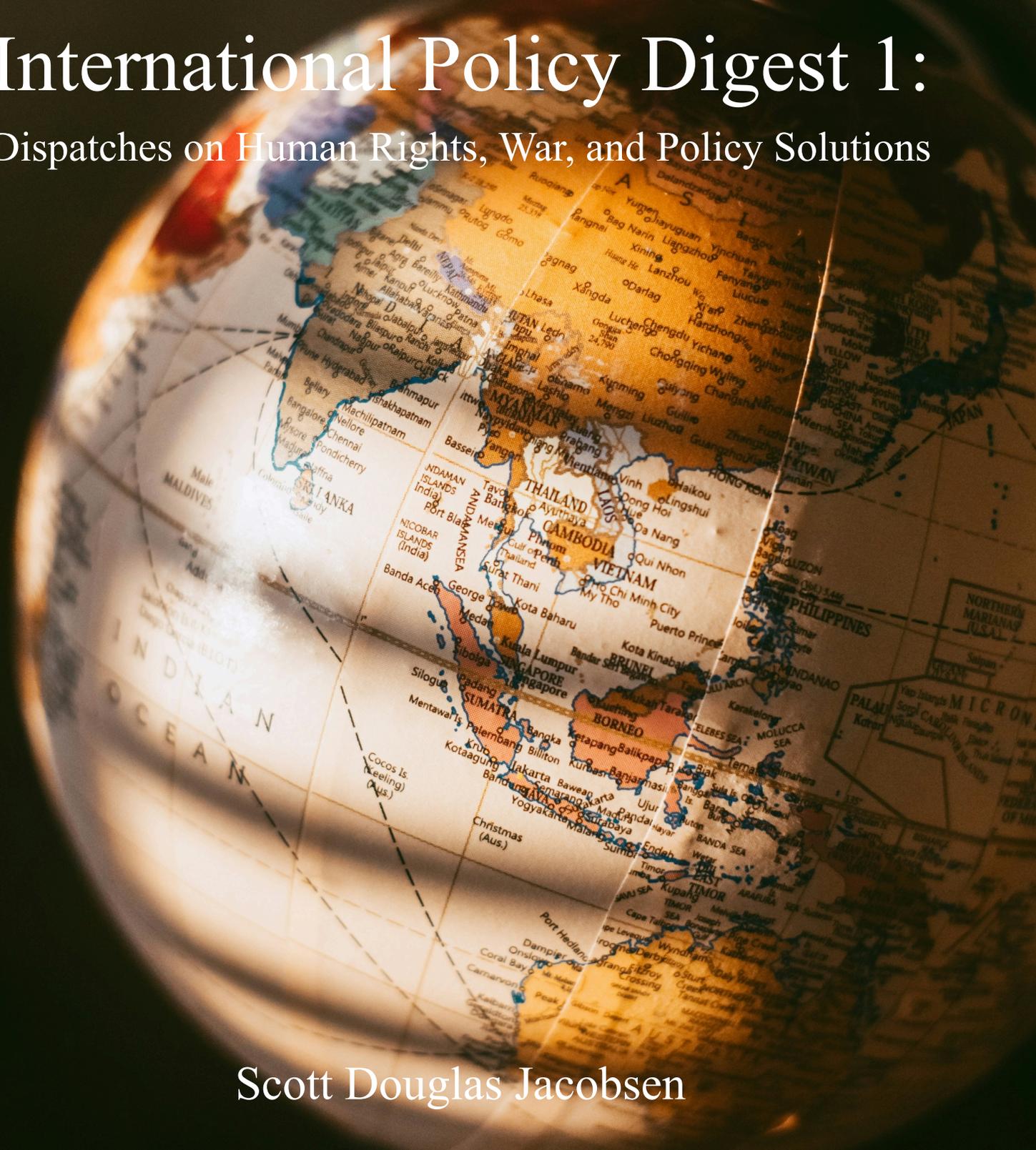# International Policy Digest 1:

Dispatches on Human Rights, War, and Policy Solutions

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Introduction by John Lyman

IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

International Policy Digest 1: Dispatches on Human Rights, War, and Policy Solutions

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To John Lyman for taking me on board and providing the time for the editorial expertise.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

March 27, 2026

Introduction: John Lyman

Every era believes its crises to be unprecedented. And yet, as the pages of this collection make clear, what distinguishes our moment is not merely the scale of upheaval but its simultaneity. War and disinformation. Corruption and democratic aspiration. Gender inequity and economic fragility. Addiction and public health failure. Each unfolds at once, overlapping and reinforcing the other, testing the resilience of institutions that many assumed were sturdier than they have proven to be.

International Policy Digest: Dispatches on Human Rights, War, and Policy Solutions gathers reporting and interviews that refuse the comfort of abstraction. These are not essays content to linger in theory. They move through drone workshops in Canada, diaspora studios in Toronto, university lecture halls in Kyiv, and newsrooms in exile. They ask what it means to defend democracy when democracy is both an ideal and an unfinished project.

The collection opens with a question that seems almost deceptively straightforward: What works? In the examination of drug policy reform, the data is stark. Tens of thousands die annually from opioid overdoses. Punitive approaches have yielded overcrowded prisons and hollow victories. The argument for decriminalization and harm reduction is not ideological; it is empirical. When policy is anchored in public health rather than moral panic, lives are saved. Portugal's experience looms large in this debate, as does the evolving consensus among global health bodies. The essay does not pretend that addiction can be legislated away. Instead, it insists that governments can choose policies that compound suffering or reduce it. The difference is measurable.

From there, the focus shifts to gender equity, but not in the slogans that often dominate public discourse. The unpaid labor of women—care work, domestic management, the invisible architecture of daily life—emerges as one of the most undercounted pillars of national economies. When unpaid work accounts for up to 40 percent of GDP in some nations, we are not discussing a marginal issue. We are confronting a structural blind spot. The argument here is not accusatory; it is corrective. A society that fails to value care will find itself impoverished in ways that spreadsheets cannot fully capture. Policy innovations in Latin America, Europe, and Canada suggest that recognition is possible, that redistribution is not utopian but practical.

And then the book turns decisively toward war.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not treated as a distant geopolitical chess match but as a lived reality. Through conversations with journalists, legal scholars, technologists, and members of the Ukrainian diaspora, the war becomes granular. It is heard in the fatigue of reporters operating under shellfire. It is seen in the legal architecture being rebuilt even as missiles fall. It is felt in the uneasy calculus of whether territorial concessions could ever purchase peace.

In these interviews, figures such as Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky are not caricatures but nodes in a larger system of power, propaganda, and resistance. The war is framed as the largest European conflict since World War II, but also as a test of the international order constructed in its aftermath. The United Nations resolutions, the debates in Ottawa, the anxieties of recent arrivals in Canada—each becomes part of the same narrative arc.

The diaspora emerges as a moral force in its own right. In Canada, Ukrainian journalists and filmmakers labor to keep global attention from drifting. Afghan reporters, scattered across continents after the Taliban's return, attempt to stitch together a profession under siege. Ethiopian voices seek to pierce a silence that has too often shrouded mass suffering. In each case, exile becomes both wound and weapon. The work of storytelling becomes a form of resistance.

The interviews with anti-corruption advocates in Ukraine reveal another front line—one less visible than trench warfare but no less consequential. Institutions such as the National Anti-Corruption Bureau and the High Anti-Corruption Court are described not as bureaucratic footnotes but as bulwarks against a return to oligarchic capture. Reform, we are reminded, is not linear. Gains are followed by setbacks. Constitutional

courts can unravel years of progress in a single ruling. Yet the persistence of civil society, often reinforced by international partners, keeps the project alive.

Technology complicates everything.

Artificial intelligence has become both tool and threat. In the hands of autocracies, it generates deepfakes, synthetic voices, and tailored disinformation at scale. In democratic societies, it can fortify investigative journalism, secure communications, and document war crimes. The interviews explore this duality with urgency. Information warfare is no longer metaphorical; it is strategic doctrine. When a fabricated video can circulate globally in minutes, the battlefield expands beyond territory into perception itself.

Even the conversation with a Canadian drone manufacturer underscores this transformation. Warfare is no longer the exclusive domain of vast standing armies. Small firms, armed with 3D printers and AI chips, can influence events thousands of kilometers away. Canada's role—often caricatured as merely financial—appears here as industrial and material. Equipment, not just aid, flows outward.

Threaded through these dispatches is a consistent belief in agency. Not naïveté, not blind optimism, but the conviction that systems are human constructions and therefore subject to human revision. Drug laws can be rewritten. Care work can be valued. Anti-corruption frameworks can be strengthened. Disinformation can be countered. Even in war, institutions can be built rather than abandoned.

This is not a book of easy answers. It does not pretend that international law alone can halt aggression, or that transparency automatically inoculates a nation against corruption. It acknowledges fatigue, division, and moral ambiguity. Some Ukrainians, worn down by years of conflict, contemplate territorial compromise. Some democracies hesitate in their commitments. Some global institutions falter.

Yet across these pages, there is a throughline: silence is rarely neutral. To remain quiet in the face of injustice, corruption, or falsehood is to allow them oxygen.

The writers and interviewees collected here do not claim heroism. They claim responsibility. Journalists document torture under the Taliban. Legal scholars draft whistleblower protections amid bombardment. Diaspora organizers hold conferences in foreign parliaments to remind lawmakers that wars do not pause simply because headlines do. Public health advocates marshal statistics against stigma. Gender equity campaigners insist that care is infrastructure.

If there is a unifying argument, it is this: policy is not an abstraction. It is the architecture of human consequence. When poorly designed, it imprisons the vulnerable, undervalues labor, or permits corruption to metastasize. When thoughtfully constructed, it can save lives, redistribute dignity, and fortify democracy under strain.

In an age of compression—of attention spans, of news cycles, of outrage—these dispatches demand duration. They ask the reader to dwell in complexity rather than flee to certainty. They challenge the assumption that distant conflicts are safely distant, that domestic inequities are merely private matters, that technology is either salvation or doom.

The world described in these pages is unstable, but it is not immutable. The crises are profound, but they are not beyond response.

What remains is the choice to engage.

This book is an invitation to do precisely that.

John Lyman

February 28, 2026

The Drug Epidemic & Decriminalization

2018/10/01

There are 70,000 to 100,000 individual deaths from opioid overdoses each year. It is estimated that there were 99,000 to 253,000 deaths from to illicit drug use in 2010 and 8,440 overdose deaths occurred in the EU28 in 2015. This is a clarion call for us to make the world safer for the next generations. What can we do?

One of the main global organizations for the health and wellness of the public is the World Health Organization. The main collective entity representing the world's population, and which produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 70 years ago, is the United Nations. Both the World Health Organization and the United Nations issued a joint statement calling for the decriminalization of all drugs.

Former Portuguese Prime Minister António Guterres launched the decriminalization of drugs in Portugal. Today, Guterres is the Secretary-General of the United Nations and is also calling for decriminalization globally, as well. The late Kofi Annan also made a call for the decriminalization of drugs around the world as did the Global Commission on Drug Policy which is comprised of 12 powerful former heads of state.

In Canada, two of the three major federal or national political parties have also called for the decriminalization of drugs. The main health officials of some of the most populated city centres in Canada—Vancouver, Montreal, and Toronto—have called for decriminalization. The reason is stark, and clear. Canadian citizens are dying because of overdoses. The punishment-oriented or punitive approach is the methodology for dealing with drugs most visible in countries like the United States. They imprison and fine drug users or holders to make an example of them. The evidence indicates that these measures tend to increase drug use and overdoses, not decrease them. That is why the experts are not calling for more criminalization of drug users. It impacts the poor and minorities disproportionately.

But what is the alternative: harm reduction. Decriminalization is part of the process of implementing a harm reduction philosophy. There's a wide range of policies, programs, and practices devoted to the reduction of harms associated with drug use. When HIV was becoming a pandemic, harm reduction began its early development processes. Some of the first beneficiaries were drug users who got high with needles. In Canadian society, we see the work of safe needle exchange sites to reduce the transmission of HIV and infectious diseases. Without a clean needle, HIV can spread from user to user through contaminated needles. Canadian health providers are also distributing a drug called naloxone, which can block the opioid receptors of the body, thus preventing opioid overdoses.

The criminalization of drugs is the problem. Illicit opioids are often laced with fentanyl, a deadly drug. Regulating fentanyl in opioids would save lives. In Portugal, there are no arrests for drug possession and more people have begun to receive treatment. As a direct result, the total number of people having addiction problems, HIV/AIDS, and drug overdoses have plummeted in Portugal.

Given the demographics of who is imprisoned or fined, the public health benefits would help to the most vulnerable members of society. They would receive treatment, while also avoiding being imprisoned from drug usage. This would do wonders to end the prison-industrial complex in the US, which disproportionately impacts minorities.

The next steps in the fight to end drug addiction will be education of the global public about the empirical benefits of decriminalization. We should work towards a national and international collective set of efforts to solve the issue of drug abuse and overdoses. Human beings have used drugs for thousands of years. We have the means to reduce the harm to those all over the world impacted by addiction, drug abuse, and overdoses.

The best part of these solutions is that they are typically low-cost, low-risk with a high-payoff. They respect the individual to make their own informed choices about drugs and provide the health services to the public. It respects all involved parties, produces real positive outcomes for the population, and works to create a more stable world for all.

Who can help work towards these goals? Our communities, policymakers and researchers, to name a few. Then, there are those heading out into the world as the next generation of educated workers and leaders. You are the future of the world. The problems of the drug epidemic are one of those grand challenges recognized by the most influential organizations and people in the world as a problem. Become a part of that future. We need you….

Redefining Gender Equality: The Hidden Value of Unpaid Care Work

2024/11/07

Unpaid work performed by women accounts **for as much as 40 percent** of GDP in some nations, a staggering statistic that underscores the imbalance. Achieving gender equality requires addressing these disparities—redistributing unpaid labor, childcare, and household responsibilities. Globally, women and girls **perform** over twice as many hours of unpaid work each day as men. How should we respond to these numbers? While indifference or pessimism are tempting reactions, neither helps move us forward. Instead, learning, taking action, and recognizing the potential for change offer a path toward a more equitable society.

Empowering women, in turn, empowers men and strengthens communities as a whole. Although women face unique challenges, this isn't an attempt to paint them solely as victims but to provide a statistical grounding for understanding inequalities. Across the world, women—particularly those from minority and migrant backgrounds—experience greater disparities in both paid and unpaid labor. These gaps are more than statistical; they're solvable issues.

Globally, women make up around **80 percent** of paid domestic workers, meaning they often engage in caregiving professionally and continue it at home without compensation. Of course, every situation varies, and these responsibilities should ideally be balanced based on individual circumstances. Yet, on a societal level, we must address the gross disparities in workload if we're to build a fairer system. Poverty, in many cases, can be traced back to these unequal burdens.

Investing in women isn't just an investment in individuals—it's an investment in the broader economy. Increased time spent on unpaid labor limits women's potential earnings, creating long-term financial constraints and heightening the risk of poverty. Recent international initiatives suggest there is growing recognition of this issue. National strategies, such as those passed in Panama, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil, have established care systems that aim to alleviate these burdens and provide more equitable access to support.

The International Day of Care and Support serves as a reminder of the importance of these systems. UN Women acknowledged notable progress in various countries. Kenya's use of its first national Time Use Survey, for instance, informed the development of its national care policy. The Philippines' Caregivers Welfare Act protects caregivers' rights, while Spain has introduced a strategy for community-based long-term care. Canada, meanwhile, is working to provide affordable, inclusive childcare options in collaboration with provincial and Indigenous partners, supported by a $30 billion investment over five years.

These advancements represent steps toward a society where care and support are valued equally across genders. Every initiative that shifts the balance of unpaid labor brings us closer to an equitable future, where the contributions of all citizens—paid or unpaid—are fully recognized and rewarded.

Canadian Ukrainians: Amplifying Voices Amid War

2024/11/23

In an era where global attention spans are fleeting, Mykhailo Tymuliak, a former reporter for Kontakt, a television program based in Canada targeting Ukrainians living abroad, emphasizes the vital role of the Ukrainian Canadian diaspora in keeping **Ukraine's struggle against Russian aggression** at the forefront of international discourse.

As media coverage dwindles, Tymuliak discusses the pressing need for continued awareness, international support, and community building among Ukrainians in **Canada**.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I returned from Ukraine on September 14th. This marked my most extended trip to the country and my second visit since the full-scale invasion began. The journey lasted just under a month, taking me to locations as close as 10 kilometers from the Russian border. One of the farthest points I reached was Sumy, a city whose proximity to Kursk made the tension palpable. However, we had to turn back, warned that proceeding further would be too dangerous—an entirely reasonable caution given the circumstances.

Experiences like these tend to linger. For many who leave such intense environments, returning home often brings a sense of decompression. The nervous system, taut from constant vigilance, begins to relax. Only then does clarity emerge, allowing for a deeper reflection on events that are too overwhelming to process fully in real time.

How vital is it for the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada to document personal stories, foster community ties, and report on the ongoing challenges faced by their people?

Mykhailo Tymuliak: The task of the Ukrainian diaspora is to draw attention to Ukraine abroad. After nearly three years of full-scale invasion, many in the Western world have started to forget about the war, and media coverage has dwindled. The diaspora must remind the world that the war is ongoing, the Russian invasion continues, and their crimes are escalating. Ukrainians in Canada are actively working to maintain global attention and raise awareness about Ukraine.

Jacobsen: With numerous conflicts around the globe—from the Israel-Hamas crisis to the overlooked struggles in Sudan—why should the Russo-Ukrainian war command our focus? What makes this war so crucial amid a world of competing crises?

Tymuliak: The Russian war against Ukraine is the largest conflict in Europe since World War II, involving immense military resources, advanced technologies like tanks and drones, and numerous international players. Russia's allies, including Iran and China, provide support, while Ukraine receives backing from many Western nations, emphasizing the global importance of defending democracy and sovereignty. This war is uniquely clear-cut, with Russia as the aggressor and Ukraine defending itself.

In contrast, the Israel-Hamas conflict is more nuanced, with Western nations occasionally urging Israel to avoid actions that could escalate the situation. While the suffering of civilians in Palestine is tragic, Israel's actions are driven by its security concerns.

Focusing on the Russo-Ukrainian war remains critical because Russia and its allies threaten democracy and aim to reshape the global order. Maintaining global attention on Ukraine is vital to countering these broader threats.

Jacobsen: Beyond the impact of war, your work in filmmaking stands out. What kinds of films have you created, and what topics have you explored? Preserving and revitalizing arts and culture often holds immense significance for diasporas like the Kurdish community in Canada, which I'm familiar with. Do you see parallels in your own work?

Tymuliak: As a journalist, I cover topics related to the war in Ukraine, volunteering, and political processes around Ukraine.

I created several stories highlighting individuals with unique ties to Ukraine. One was about a man of Ukrainian descent whose great-grandfather emigrated to Canada. Although he had no strong connection to Ukraine and had never visited before the war, the 2014 annexation of Crimea compelled him to act. In 2015, he joined the Ukrainian army as a tank operator. He served for several years and eventually chose to stay and live in Ukraine. After the full-scale invasion, he rejoined the fight until retiring at 60.

Another story featured a former police officer from Montreal, originally of French roots, who had no prior connection to Ukraine but felt a duty to support it. As a drone operator, he trained Ukrainian soldiers and participated in combat during multiple deployments. His expertise was crucial in countering Russian tanks on the battlefield.

Both individuals emphasized that the war in Ukraine is not as distant from Canada as it might seem. They believed Canada has a vested interest in Ukraine's success and highlighted the importance of Canadian support. Sharing these stories is meaningful because they inspire awareness and action for Ukraine's cause.

Jacobsen: How do Ukrainians generally view President Putin's justifications for the aggression —rhetoric that has been widely condemned? Claims about neo-Nazis, though less prominent now, were once central to his narrative. In a notable interview with far-right television personality Tucker Carlson, he even delivered an extended monologue about history. Based on your experience and conversations, how do Ukrainians typically respond to such narratives?

Tymuliak: We should critically examine what is true and what is fabricated. Putin often seeks to justify his actions in Ukraine through distorted historical narratives. For instance, when he told Tucker Carlson that he invaded Ukraine because 400 years ago, someone signed a contract making Ukraine part of Russia, it was absurd. Surprisingly, such claims still find an audience in the Western world.

The interview with Carlson elicited mixed reactions in the West. On the one hand, many laughed at Putin's outlandish reasoning, exposing how detached he is from reality. On the other hand, it's concerning that some in the West still entertain the idea that Putin's actions have any logical basis or that the war could have valid justification.

Ukrainians generally view Putin's justifications as nonsensical and disconnected from reality. His reliance on vague, centuries-old references highlights the irrationality of his actions, making it clear to many in the West that his reasoning lacks any credible foundation.

Jacobsen: I've come across diverse perspectives among Ukrainians about the practical realities of ending the war, even among everyday citizens. Some hold the hope that international

condemnation will eventually translate into tangible outcomes. For instance, the AES11-1 resolution at the UN General Assembly saw 141 member states opposing the full-scale invasion, demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops and the return of annexed territories. To put this into perspective, the annexed regions represent a substantial portion—between 18% and 20%—of Ukraine's land. This viewpoint reflects a broader reliance on the mechanisms of international diplomacy.

But other opinions diverge significantly. I spoke with a younger couple whose outlook surprised me. While they were critical of both Putin and the aggression, they expressed frustration with Ukraine's political landscape even before the war. Their discontent stretches back to the annexation of Crimea, which some call the "lighter invasion." Now, amidst the ongoing conflict, they find themselves disengaged. Their focus has shifted toward simply living their lives, even if it means reluctantly accepting the loss of territory seized in violation of international law.

These voices contrast with the majority, which aligns with the international consensus. Yet, this minority—willing to prioritize peace over reclaiming land—raises difficult questions. How do we reconcile such pragmatism with the principles of justice and sovereignty? And what do these perspectives reveal about the psychological toll of an unending war?

Tymuliak: Throughout history, global conflicts often began with a surge of volunteers willing to defend their land and national interests. Many are prepared to make sacrifices in the early stages of war—within the first months or years. However, as wars drag on, public willingness to continue the fight diminishes. Over time, the desire for peace often grows stronger.

In Ukraine, some now argue that conceding territory might stop the war. However, this perspective is flawed. The war cannot end unilaterally; its conclusion depends entirely on Russia's decision to cease aggression. If Ukraine were to give up regions, Putin would likely view this as a victory and a validation of further aggression, emboldening him to push further. His goal is control over all of Ukraine, making any territorial concessions a strategic mistake.

The international community must uphold international law and support Ukraine reclaiming its 1991 borders. Ukraine cannot achieve this alone, as Russia's resources far exceed its own. That's why the United Nations and global allies must develop a comprehensive strategy to help Ukraine regain its territories—whether through military, political, or diplomatic means. Failing to do so would set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other powerful nations to act with impunity.

Many Ukrainians remain committed to fighting for their land and sovereignty. However, as the war continues, the toll on people increases, and many seek ways to bring the conflict to an end. Yet, the reality is that Ukraine cannot stop the war on its own. The decision lies solely with Putin and Russia.

Conceding even 20% of Ukraine's territory will not bring peace. Instead, it would embolden Putin, proving that aggression leads to results without consequence. There is no reason to believe he would stop at that point. On the contrary, it would incentivize him to push further, threatening Ukraine and the broader international order.

This is why the international community must assist Ukraine in reclaiming its territory. Whether through diplomacy, military aid, or political pressure, a solution that does not involve sacrificing

Ukraine's sovereignty must be found. While it's understandable that some Ukrainians desire an end to the war at any cost, conceding land will not achieve peace. It will only prolong the conflict and strengthen Russia's resolve.

Jacobsen: For Ukrainians in the diaspora who have recently arrived—those not from second, third, or fourth generations fully integrated into Canadian society but deeply rooted in Ukrainian heritage—what do they most need as they adapt to life here?

Tymuliak: Canada has provided Ukrainians with the most important thing—a safe environment. Approximately 300,000 Ukrainians have come here under a special program from the Canadian government, and we are all very grateful to Canada and its people.

Canada offers various programs to support refugees from different countries, often providing significant resources like housing and basic needs. However, for Ukrainians arriving under the CUAET program, support is limited to a one-time payment of $3,000. After that, they are told, "This is for you; make the most of it."

Some Canadians misunderstand that the government spends heavily on Ukrainians. Most Ukrainians do not rely on government assistance. They arrive with work permits and quickly find employment. Ukrainian Canadian organizations also play a significant role in helping newcomers with information on how to find jobs, housing, and other resources.

Ukrainians coming to Canada often bring some savings and rarely require shelter. They seek safety and the opportunity to work and earn an income. While their work permits are valid for three years, there is no clear pathway to permanent residency. Recently, extensions were allowed until March, but there's uncertainty about what will happen if the war in Ukraine continues. This lack of clarity creates anxiety about the future, as Ukrainians cannot make long-term financial or life plans.

For instance, many hesitate to take car loans or buy houses because they don't know if they'll have to leave Canada when their permits expire. This uncertainty is the biggest challenge Ukrainians face now. They need clear guidance from the government about their long-term prospects.

Eight months ago, I asked Pierre Poilievre about this, and he admitted it would be difficult to send Ukrainians back if the war continued. But the question remains: what will happen when the permits expire? Until this is addressed, Ukrainians in Canada will continue to face significant challenges in planning their futures.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mykhailo.

Journalism in Peril: Said Najib Asil on Supporting Afghan Journalists

2024/11/24

Said Najib Asil, president and CEO of **Free Speech Hub**, has steadfastly advocated for Afghan journalists and the broader cause of press freedom. Founded in 2019, the organization, after facing disruptions, resumed its vital work from Toronto on May 1, 2023. Its mission is multifaceted: connecting Afghan journalists across the globe, documenting the precarious conditions of the press under Taliban rule, and offering crucial mentorship and support systems, including mental health services.

Despite the Taliban's draconian restrictions and the immense economic pressures bearing down on the media landscape, many journalists continue their work, undeterred by the considerable risks. They face a litany of threats—imprisonment, harassment, and violence—with executions becoming a grim reality for some. Reports paint a harrowing picture of torture and other forms of targeted abuse, underscoring the perilous conditions journalists endure to tell their stories.

For Asil, Free Speech Hub's work represents more than advocacy; it is a lifeline. The organization remains committed to safeguarding journalists and championing their right to report freely, no matter the odds.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: One year later, we're speaking again with Said Najib Asil, who now serves as the president and CEO of Free Speech Hub.

To start, could you outline the foundation of Free Speech Hub? What does it offer for Afghan journalists—whether they fled the country abruptly or managed to leave lawfully before the Taliban's return to power?

Said Najib Asil: Thank you so much. Free Speech Hub is a non-profit organization that supports Afghan journalists and advocates for press freedom and freedom of speech in Afghanistan. The organization was established in 2019 in Afghanistan with a board of 15 media managers. Unfortunately, after August 15, 2021, and the fall of Kabul, all members of Free Speech Hub's board of directors left and relocated to different countries.

After three years, we resumed our operations in Toronto. Today, we focus on the state of media in Afghanistan and the journalists now in countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. Approximately 7,000 Afghan journalists left the country after the fall of Kabul and are currently living in various countries around the world.

Through Free Speech Hub, we are working to unite these journalists and create a more strategic response to support freedom of speech and expression in Afghanistan. We are in touch with journalists within Afghanistan and in neighboring countries such as Pakistan and Iran, as well as in countries like Canada, the United States, and European countries. The situation has drastically changed since August 15, 2021, when the Taliban regained power for the second time.

Before that, after 2001, when the U.S. and around 40 other countries were present in Afghanistan, the country's media and freedom of speech situation was significantly better. Over the past two decades, over 600 media outlets, including TV stations, radio stations, and

newspapers, were established across the 34 provinces of Afghanistan, engaging around 10.000 to 12,000 journalists nationwide. Based on surveys conducted by international organizations, Afghanistan was considered one of the most accessible countries in terms of freedom of expression and press freedom, outperforming China, Pakistan, India, and Iran.

These were significant achievements for Afghanistan's media over the past two decades. However, since the Taliban regained power, more than 7,000 journalists have left the country. Ninety percent of Afghan women journalists lost their jobs or can no longer pursue their passion. The Taliban now use the media outlets that are still operating in Kabul and other provinces as propaganda tools for their agenda. The concept of free speech or press freedom no longer exists in Afghanistan. This is the dire reality under the Taliban regime. Over the past three years, more than 300 Afghan journalists have been beaten, harassed, and tortured.

This is the overall bigger picture for Afghanistan. Through Free Speech Hub, we are in touch with journalists based in Kabul and other provinces. We document what's happening in the country daily and provide reports on what's happening regarding freedom of speech and expression in Afghanistan.

We also work with journalists in countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey, where around 700 Afghan journalists reside. They still await long-term protection and resettlement from various countries and organizations. We work with these journalists, advocate on their behalf, and connect them with international support organizations for journalists.

We are drafting letters to these organizations and working with embassies and ambassadors of these countries to explore how we can bring these journalists to safety and secure long-term protection. In countries like Canada and others, we are working with journalists, especially those connected to media organizations established over the past three years. We provide courses and mentorship programs and connect them with mental health professionals to support them. After arriving in new countries, many of these journalists need help to continue their work in journalism.

Some of them have taken on labor-intensive jobs, such as working in construction, driving for Uber, or other service roles. However, we are trying to reconnect them with media organizations in various countries.

Over the past ten months, we have seen several achievements in Canada. We organized three conferences in Toronto. We held a conference in partnership with the Dashty Foundation in the Canadian Parliament, where we invited MPs, senators, and ambassadors from the Netherlands and Australia, as well as permanent residents of Canada, the Canadian ambassadors to the United Nations, and Afghan journalist activists for a one-day conference. We highlighted the current situation in Afghanistan and urged the Canadian government and other countries to extend support for the future of Afghanistan.

Through these conferences, we aim to push governments to provide safety for Afghan media and journalists, especially given the daily challenging circumstances that many journalists face. These are some initiatives we are working on through Free Speech Hub.

Jacobsen: You've mentioned reports of torture—specifically 300 documented cases. What forms of torture are these journalists enduring? What kinds of stories are emerging?

Asil: We have documented 300 cases through international media support organizations. When we connect with journalists inside Afghanistan, they share that the Taliban imposes strict restrictions on critical topics that journalists are prohibited from covering, such as security issues, the national budget, and stories involving women, freedom of movement, and freedom of speech. These issues are among journalists' biggest concerns; they cannot work or report on them independently.

When some journalists are reporting stories for exiled media from Afghanistan, the Taliban, along with security organizations, imprison these journalists and exercise complete control over them. We have received several accounts detailing very different experiences, where journalists have shared their stories and even pictures showing the torture and beatings they endured at the hands of the Taliban.

Jacobsen: What about executions?

Asil: We do not have any specific cases involving journalists, but overall, executions are occurring daily in different parts of the country.

Jacobsen: Some courageous individuals—names withheld for their safety—are practicing what can only be described as guerrilla journalism, operating covertly within Afghanistan to evade Taliban surveillance. What words of encouragement would you share with those risking their lives under a theocratic regime? These individuals, whether secular or moderate, continue to uphold the principles of a free press.

Asil: As I mentioned, Afghan journalists have accomplished a great deal over the past two decades. Many journalists inside the country want to cover different stories freely. However, the Taliban imposed extensive restrictions, preventing them from doing so.

Despite this, some journalists continue to report, albeit in secrecy. They must hide their identities and cannot openly oppose the Taliban. Suppose the Taliban identifies any critical reports from a media organization. In that case, they immediately contact the news manager, the media organization, and the journalist directly, often resulting in the journalist's immediate imprisonment. This makes the situation highly challenging for journalists.

Many journalists want to continue their work but need help overcoming severe obstacles. Additionally, most journalists are under significant financial pressure. They need employment to cover their daily expenses, pay bills, and support their families. The media industry often becomes their only viable job option, regardless of the content the media organizations produce and distribute to the public.

Journalists remain in the profession not only for their passion but out of economic necessity, to receive a salary that helps sustain their lives and those of their families. This financial situation is another significant challenge Afghan journalists face. Conversations with journalists reveal that they understand and value the principles they stand for but acknowledge that current conditions make it impossible to uphold them fully.

Pushing journalism in Afghanistan means addressing these economic realities. Salaries are vital for journalists to pay their bills and support their families. The financial strain compounds their challenges, making the profession difficult and dangerous.

Jacobsen: Thank you again.

Asil: Thank you so much.

Oleksandr Kalitenko on Ukraine's Battle for Transparency

2024/11/29

Oleksandr Kalitenko, a Ukrainian legal expert, stands out as a pioneering figure in the fight against corruption. One of only three Ukrainians awarded a government grant to study in Lithuania, Kalitenko pursued a graduate degree in European Union and International Law. His academic journey began with a specialization in Commercial Law and culminated in a master's thesis supervised by the head of Lithuania's Constitutional Court.

Kalitenko's international legal training extends beyond academia. He gained practical experience at a leading Swedish law firm that twice earned the prestigious British Legal Awards for the best European law office. His résumé is also enriched by voluntary work and a deep commitment to public service, including researching whistleblower protections across the European Union. His findings informed recommendations for Transparency International Latvia and an expert group led by Latvia's prime minister, shaping the groundwork for future whistleblower legislation.

Between 2014 and 2018, Kalitenko spearheaded grassroots campaigns such as "**They Would Not Be Silent**," which aimed to dismantle public stigma against anti-corruption activists and promote a culture of accountability. This work earned him a European Union grant and further cemented his role as a thought leader in transparency and governance.

Kalitenko's influence extends into Ukraine's evolving legal landscape. Since 2014, he has been crucial in drafting and advocating anti-corruption legislation, often amid immense political and social challenges. He has lectured widely, coordinated volunteers, and co-authored studies on Ukraine's burgeoning anti-corruption ecosystem. His insights on asset declaration, conflicts of interest, and governmental transparency resonate at national and international forums.

Currently serving as a legal adviser at Transparency International Ukraine, Kalitenko is at the forefront of efforts to reform Ukraine's anti-corruption infrastructure amid the turmoil of war. He underscores the importance of building robust institutions from the ground up, citing Ukraine's distinct reform trajectory and significant achievements in public procurement and asset declaration—areas where, remarkably, it has outpaced some European Union countries. Despite setbacks, such as delays in establishing the High Anti-Corruption Court, Kalitenko remains optimistic about Ukraine's zero-tolerance approach to corruption and its capacity for transformative change.

For Kalitenko, the path forward lies in maintaining momentum, fostering international partnerships, and addressing systemic challenges head-on. His vision reflects hope and a determination to see Ukraine emerge stronger, more transparent, and more just—a model for other nations grappling with corruption.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As a legal adviser at Transparency International Ukraine, your work spans anti-corruption and commercial law, mainly focusing on international legal frameworks. You completed a thesis in Lithuania analyzing the responsibilities of states and international organizations for wrongful acts. Can you walk us through the key findings of your research and how they inform your current anti-corruption efforts?

Oleksandr Kalitenko: That was a crucial part of my master's thesis, which was the final stage of my program at Vilnius University in Lithuania. They offer an LLM program focused on International and European Union law. I chose this topic because I was interested in comparing the responsibilities of states and international organizations.

I selected one of my professors, who later became the head of Lithuania's Constitutional Court. At that time, he was my professor in international organizations, so it was a logical choice to have him as my thesis supervisor. My research was exciting because I began by examining how the United Nations responded to international crises, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Unsurprisingly, some international organizations could have responded better to crises. History seems to be repeating itself, as we saw recently with António Guterres's visit to Russia and his meeting with Vladimir Putin, a wanted war criminal. Even while working on my thesis, I observed that international organizations often failed to respond adequately to crises, which influenced my decision to pursue my current career.

After completing my studies in Lithuania, I decided to volunteer for Transparency International because non-governmental organizations are often more effective than bureaucratic government bodies. It was a natural decision for me. I started as a volunteer and intern at Transparency International Ukraine in 2014, following a successful internship with Transparency International Latvia in Riga. I chose the Baltic because I was very interested in how these post-Soviet states became successful members of the European Union, NATO, Schengen area, etc., and what needs to be done in Ukraine to follow a similar path.

During my internship in Latvia, I began researching international best practices for whistleblower protection. This interest originated from my master's thesis, where I noted that whistleblowers often spoke out about issues within international organizations. Still, their concerns were not met with proper responses. This led me to collect information for the new whistleblower protection law in Latvia, which was under development in 2013.

Whistleblower protection wasn't a prominent issue in Ukraine then, particularly during Viktor Yanukovych's rule. Therefore, I chose to focus on the Latvian model and worked as part of a team to contribute to developing whistleblower protection frameworks.

The Latvian prime minister headed it, and the goal of this working group was to collect all the international best practices and recommendations to draft a strong whistleblower protection law in Latvia. Later, I can say that my future work—I've been working for Transparency International for 10 years, currently with the Ukrainian chapter—has been very much connected with whistleblower protection and anti-corruption prevention. I believe it is far more effective to protect whistleblowers through legislation than to be a typical lawyer who can only protect one client at a time. For example, fighting for good laws that protect many people, including whistleblowers, is much better.

That was the conclusion of my master's thesis: I want to protect as many people as possible. In addition to whistleblower protection, I work on legal issues related to asset declarations and conflict-of-interest prevention and the analysis of international best practices in anti-corruption

measures and policies. I'm also involved in the CPI (Corruption Perceptions Index) analysis. Transparency International releases this study annually. Part of my expertise is analyzing trends in martial law, corruption, and what we observe in our CPI studies.

Jacobsen: What were the most significant findings from your research on whistleblower laws across EU countries?

Kalitenko: The EU has a directive on whistleblower protection related to reporting breaches of EU law. This year, another directive was adopted to combat what's known as SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), used to harass whistleblowers. In such cases, companies with large legal teams or even government-influenced organizations might start legal proceedings against whistleblowers to distract them from their reporting by burdening them with lawsuits.

The European Union now has these two directives. We've researched the implementation of the first directive on whistleblower protection for breaches of EU law. Unfortunately, the implementation has not been ideal. Some countries missed the deadline set by the EU for integrating the directive's provisions into their national laws.

Sadly, some countries introduced draft laws that were not fully aligned with the EU directive. This wasn't very helpful because the EU had set good standards with this directive, especially when it was introduced five years ago. But again, the real issue is the question of implementation.

There has been some progress, and the situation is better than it once was. However, Transparency International conducted research that revealed almost every country still needs to fully implement the EU directive on whistleblower protection, even five years after its adoption. So, again, it could be a better result. I had higher expectations, but this may reflect a lack of political will to adopt it properly.

Jacobsen: Shifting to Ukraine, what unique challenges do whistleblowers face, particularly under the updated legislation passed before the full-scale war with Russia?

Kalitenko: Before the war with Russia, we updated the law on whistleblower protection. Unfortunately, some provisions of this law had gaps that still needed to be addressed.

One such gap, for example, is that only corruption whistleblowers are protected in Ukraine. This does not align with the EU directive, which provides a broader definition of whistleblowers. Whistleblowers reporting on human rights violations, transport safety, food safety, or medical equipment safety should be protected, not just those reporting corruption. But currently, the law only protects people who report corruption, and this issue needs to be fixed.

Another issue is that some forms of protection exist only on paper. For example, the law provides for psychological assistance and support for whistleblowers. However, this exists only in theory, as no proper system has been established to offer real psychological support. Another issue involves the unified portal for whistleblowers and their reports.

This portal was created last year as a user-friendly platform, a one-stop window for whistleblowers to report potential wrongdoing. However, we have found that it lacks sufficient

anonymity and confidentiality measures to protect whistleblowers in line with international best practices. This is another area that needs improvement, and the portal is currently administered by Ukraine's National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP). We have submitted recommendations on what needs to be fixed in the portal and are working with them to address these issues.

There are other concerns as well. For instance, whistleblowers who disclose state secrets are not protected, nor are those who expose minor corruption.

The law also covers whistleblowers and their close relatives, but it does not protect those who assist whistleblowers. According to the EU directive, such individuals should be covered as well. Of course, we also have recommendations from the OECD and other international organizations. Still, some significant issues remain with whistleblower protection in Ukraine.

Jacobsen: During the "They Would Not Be Silent" campaign, you sought to reshape public attitudes toward corruption and whistleblowers. What were some of the most challenging obstacles you encountered in running that campaign?

Kalitenko: We launched that campaign in 2015. It was needed because of the post-Soviet attitude toward whistleblowers. People often referred to whistleblowers as "snitches," implying that they were not good citizens because they exposed wrongdoing that should have been kept silent. So, we tried to change this perception with the help of donors, partners from advertising agencies, and companies like McDonald's, KFC, and some cinema theatres that aired our video campaign.

We depicted the moral authorities of the Ukrainian nation. These figures are shown in our currency, the hryvnia, and the banknotes. These individuals are famous writers and moral figures studied in schools, teaching young people about values and what is right and wrong. The campaign showed these figures with their mouths closed by rubber bands, conveying that these moral authorities would not remain silent in the face of corruption. We wanted to create an association for average Ukrainians with these figures, showing that they, too, should not be silent when they witness corruption.

We launched this campaign when sociological data showed that only about 30% of Ukrainians were willing to report corruption. This was a very limited number, and we wanted to raise it, moving closer to Western societies, where 90-95% of people declare that they would report wrongdoing.

We consulted psychologists, who explained that it would likely take about 15 years to change such attitudes and perceptions about whistleblowers in society. This is a big issue, and it won't change with just one or two campaigns, even if they are nationwide. So, we started this campaign and continued similar efforts in the following years.

I was proud of the results of these campaigns. We surveyed whether the average Ukrainian had seen our advertisements and what they thought about them. Of course, the war has accelerated the process, but according to the latest survey data, 81% of Ukrainians are now ready to become whistleblowers and report corruption.

Jacobsen: Campaigns like this often aim to shift public perceptions. With 81% of Ukrainians now expressing a willingness to act as whistleblowers, how has your work influenced this shift in attitudes toward anti-corruption efforts?

Kalitenko: We've had to combat certain perceptions among Ukrainians. For instance, in our later campaigns, we addressed the common belief that if a corrupt official steals money from the budget, many Ukrainians saw the state budget as an abstract concept, not something concrete or connected to their lives.

One of our campaigns aimed to show Ukrainians that they directly contribute to the state budget through their taxes. Even if they don't realize it, they pay taxes when they go to the grocery store and buy food because we have a VAT (value-added tax). This was an important message, as many people didn't understand the direct link between their actions and the state's resources.

Some people also pay taxes when they refuel their cars, as there are additional state taxes on fuel. Taxes are also added to cigarettes and alcohol products, so it's not just about income taxes. Together with our partners, we provided an online calculator that allowed people to enter the amount of money they spent and earned each month, such as their salary. It would show them how much tax they were paying to the state. We wanted to foster the perception that the state budget is not an abstract concept. When a corrupt official steals, they steal from us.

This was another successful campaign that I'm proud of because many Ukrainians didn't see themselves as taxpayers, but they are. Through this and other campaigns, we also offered legal advice for everyday operations where people might encounter corruption, such as in the education system, hospitals, or state administrative licenses.

Public polling showed that even Ukrainian youth at the time were not motivated to defend their rights for various reasons. Some believed there was no point in protecting their violated rights; others didn't know how to do so legally or didn't trust the system, including the judicial system. Instead, they turned to corrupt schemes to get services from the state.

We wanted to show how misguided this behavior is. If you've already paid taxes and then paid a bribe for a service you should receive for free, you're not being clever by gaming the system— you're being foolish. You've paid for the service twice: once with your taxes and again with the bribe. That's not intelligent behavior, and we aimed to change that mindset.

According to the latest data, since 2007, the readiness to protect rights among Ukrainians has been at its highest level, at around 52%. More than half of the population is willing to protect their rights. I see this as an essential element of living in a legal state—living according to the law and protecting your rights through legal means, not corruption.

Jacobsen: As Ukraine pursues closer ties with the EU, public pressure often drives governments to introduce or refine policies. Are any significant anti-corruption policies currently being proposed or implemented locally or nationally?

Kalitenko: Ukraine has adopted a comprehensive anti-corruption strategy, with concrete measures across different sectors to combat and prevent corruption. These anti-corruption policy documents have also received positive evaluations from our European partners.

The National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP) is now monitoring the level of implementation of these anti-corruption documents. Recently, some changes were made to reflect the current conditions better. Still, these are solid, evidence-based strategic documents that address the challenges and problems we face today. With measures, indicators, responsible persons and institutions, and deadlines for implementation, these documents should serve as a vital tool for combating corruption. However, this is just one instrument. Another critical tool is asset declaration.

The unified registry of electronic asset declarations was reestablished last year on a public online platform. Now, officials have submitted millions of asset declarations into this system, visible to investigative journalists, civil society activists, or anyone interested in examining a local official's declaration. This is a significant prevention tool, as these asset declarations cover a wide range of assets and can reveal inconsistencies or lies and cases of illicit enrichment, potential conflicts of interest, or assets acquired without proper justification.

The third instrument I would highlight is reestablishing the obligation for political parties in Ukraine to submit their financial reports for verification. These financial reports are also public, allowing anyone to see a political party's donors and how it spends its money. This is another essential tool that was reestablished last year. Like the asset declaration registry, it had been closed to public access following the full-scale invasion but has now been reopened.

Additionally, I recommend the complete restoration of competitive processes in public procurement. We have a good tool called Prozorro, the electronic public procurement system, which investigative journalists use extensively to monitor for wrongdoing in this area. So, overall, despite the war with Russia, Ukraine has demonstrated significant progress in fighting corruption.

Our Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) has shown that countries fighting a war typically decline their scores as corruption increases under such circumstances. However, Ukraine gained an additional 3 points last year, one of the best results globally. The CPI covers nearly 200 countries and territories, and Ukraine has shown a remarkable upward trend. Over the past 10 years, we have gained 11 points, placing us among the top 15 countries in terms of improvement.

We have now reached a level comparable to other EU candidate states, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Turkey, Serbia, and North Macedonia. This means we are on par with those countries regarding perceived corruption and are ready to be a successful candidate for EU membership.

However, we still have significant potential to continue fighting corruption. The corruption scandals that have appeared in the media over the past few years indicate that our anti-corruption institutions—the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU), the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO), and the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC)—are functioning well. These institutions were built from scratch and can still demonstrate effective results, even in wartime.

Jacobsen: Managing long-term projects like these involves ensuring volunteers deliver consistent results. How do you set performance expectations and maintain quality across such diverse efforts?

Kalitenko: We have setbacks, of course, but this should also be adequately reflected in the volunteers' expectations when they submit their CVs for consideration to avoid future disappointments. Anti-corruption work is a marathon, not a sprint; our Corruption Perceptions Index clearly shows this. While we've gained points in some years, we've also lost points at times. For instance, we lost points when anti-corruption activists were attacked on the national and regional levels. There were setbacks due to delays in the formation of the High Anti-Corruption Court. Before it was established, cases investigated by NABU and SAPO were transferred to general courts, where they often collected dust because the judges did not prioritize them.

This caused a significant delay in demonstrating a solid track record in anti-corruption efforts. We also faced a considerable challenge in 2020 when the Constitutional Court made a scandalous decision almost to cancel the entire asset declaration system and limit the powers of the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, which is responsible for verifying such declarations. Though this was eventually reversed after a few months, over 100 cases investigated by the anti-corruption system were closed, and some officials were even acquitted in court.

The article on illicit enrichment was also canceled in the criminal code by the Constitutional Court. This hurt the anti-corruption fight, as cases of illicit enrichment involving officials were closed. So yes, we've had rollbacks on our anti-corruption path. Still, international partners and civil society have played a significant role in helping us move forward. Their conditionalities—such as those set by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or European partners for financial aid, grants, and credits—have been powerful levers.

However, Ukraine did not meet all of these conditionalities. I recall a case from about seven years ago when Ukraine lost nearly €600 million in aid because we failed to start properly verifying officials' asset declarations. That was a sensitive issue for us. But together with our international partners, civil society has been able to advocate for anti-corruption measures and push for political will at the government level.

Jacobsen: International partners like Canada and the United States have offered varied support —financial aid from Canada and arms assistance from the U.S. Beyond monetary contributions, what forms of international help—be it expertise, personnel, or institutional collaboration— would be most impactful in strengthening Ukraine's anti-corruption initiatives?

Kalitenko: International partners have contributed significantly to Ukrainian reforms, and it's not just about sending cash. For example, they've helped by nominating internationally recognized experts to selection commissions for key positions within major institutions. This kind of support—expertise, and personnel—can be far more impactful than just financial aid, as it ensures that the right people are appointed to lead vital anti-corruption and reform efforts.

I could mention the NABU, SAPO, and other institutions, so one option for international partners is to nominate strong experts to select commissions for heads of Ukrainian institutions and as independent external auditors. For example, we've already seen an audit report on the efficiency of the National Agency on Corruption Prevention (NACP). This report, published last summer, was the first time any anti-corruption institution in Ukraine faced an external audit. Another audit will be conducted soon, and the National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) also began its audit last month, with the participation of international experts.

This involvement is crucial because it brings international expertise and best practices. For example, the NACP audit included an expert from the United States. These experts provide valuable recommendations based on their international experience, which is essential for our reforms and understanding the lessons learned. So, bringing in expertise is another critical role international partners can play.

Jacobsen: Zero tolerance for corruption is a bold and aspirational standard. Given the ongoing war, is this goal feasible now, or should it remain a long-term target? How do you balance the urgency of wartime anti-corruption measures with the ambition of zero tolerance?

Kalitenko: Ukrainian society has already demonstrated a strong zero-tolerance attitude toward corruption. It's not just about people declaring their readiness to be whistleblowers—there's a broader societal shift. Before the full-scale war, about one-third of the population justified corruption as a useful tool to solve problems or access services more quickly than others. But now, that mindset has changed significantly.

It's not just about petty corruption, though it has its cost. Now, Ukrainians show much less tolerance for corruption overall, and this shift has created a more favorable political environment. People no longer justify corruption as they once did, which is a significant change. This zero-tolerance attitude is essential for the war effort and the long-term success of Ukraine's anti-corruption reforms.

After the Maidan Revolution, Ukraine announced that its number one goal was combating corruption. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, we've had setbacks along the way. Still, it's impressive that reforms, including anti-corruption efforts, have continued even during the full-scale war. I expect the pace of reform to accelerate even more after the war.

We've already set reasonable standards for the region. For instance, our whistleblower protection and asset declaration systems set a high bar—not even all EU countries have the same level of asset declaration coverage as Ukraine or the same level of transparency in public procurement. It's an optimistic sign that we've been able to build this anti-corruption infrastructure from scratch. I don't think it's accurate to say that Ukraine should follow the example of more prosperous countries. Our circumstances are unique, and some decisions we've made here are exclusive to our situation.

Of course, we should still follow international recommendations. But I'd argue that we've already exceeded specific EU standards in some areas, like public procurement. So, yes, we have some promising sectors where Ukraine could even set best practices for other countries. I'm optimistic about this.

We should continue to find and follow our path because our circumstances—especially during a full-scale war—are unique, and we must address them appropriately.

Jacobsen: A final question, turning briefly to Russia: Has the war led to increased corruption within Russia's control areas, or has it prompted reforms or tighter controls?

Kalitenko: We haven't researched this point in-depth, but I can tell you the facts from the Corruption Perceptions Index. According to the CPI, Russia's score has decreased, meaning the perceived level of corruption has increased.

Jacobsen: Oleksandr, thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you.

Kalitenko: Thank you for your questions and for the invitation to do this interview.

AI in War and Propaganda: Anna Mysyshyn on Disinformation, Democracy, and Digital Governance

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Anna Mysyshyn stands at the crossroads of law, technology, and global governance—a Ukrainian legal scholar whose expertise in AI policy, cybersecurity, and digital governance places her at the vanguard of some of today's most pressing challenges. With a Ph.D. in Law from Ivan Franko Lviv National University and an LL.M. in Innovation, Technology, and Law from the University of Edinburgh, Anna's academic credentials are as impressive as her practical achievements.

As the Director and Co-Founder of the **Institute of Innovative Governance**, she leads transformative initiatives to foster digital inclusion and ensure secure transitions to digital landscapes. Her career spans international platforms, from working with the United Nations and UNDP in Ukraine to serving as a fellow in the Canadian Parliament. Most recently, as a research fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Anna has focused on the cutting-edge application of advanced technologies in the war in Ukraine—adding a timely and poignant dimension to her already remarkable career.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: AI has rapidly transformed the landscape of propaganda. How is this technological evolution reshaping its use in today's political and social contexts?

Anna Mysyshyn: Focusing on the Ukrainian situation, the rapid advancement of AI technologies has significantly enhanced the ability to generate and disseminate disinformation and propaganda on a massive scale and at unprecedented speed. The advent of generative AI, deepfakes, and voice-cloning technologies has dramatically transformed the landscape of information warfare and general information dissemination.

Emerging technologies, particularly generative AI, are widely utilized in informational warfare to spread propaganda and disinformation. Russia, for instance, deploys false narratives through highly sophisticated and interconnected networks. These networks include AI-generated content disseminated via traditional state-controlled media, social media platforms, and other technological mediums. Despite being a country with significant economic challenges, Russia has capitalized on these technologies to amplify its influence.

Jacobsen: Do these emerging forms of information warfare offer a cost-effective strategy for states or other actors?

Mysyshyn: This represents a relatively low-cost but highly impactful form of warfare. Before its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia had already invested over $9 billion in propaganda campaigns, primarily using digital platforms and traditional media outlets like newspapers. However, with the emergence of technologies such as generative AI, especially after the boom in AI platforms like OpenAI in 2022, propaganda has evolved into a hybrid format.

This modern approach combines traditional media with advanced AI tools to confuse audiences, erode trust, and manipulate public perception of political figures and situations. By employing

generative AI, propaganda becomes not only faster and cheaper to produce but also more convincing and harder to detect, posing a significant threat to information integrity and democratic resilience.

What makes this even more concerning is the scalability of AI-driven propaganda. With tools capable of generating thousands of variations of the same disinformation narrative, actors like Russia can target specific demographics with tailored messaging. These campaigns exploit existing social and political divisions, creating a ripple effect that destabilizes societies.

A critical challenge today is detecting AI-generated propaganda. These hybrid methods show that AI technologies are not only accessible but also more persuasive to the general public.

Jacobsen: In terms of impact, how effective are these AI-driven tools? Do they lead to significant shifts in public opinion, or are their effects more subtle and insidious?

Mysyshyn: AI technologies enable Russian propagandists to craft highly targeted and emotionally charged narratives that are difficult to differentiate from authentic content. Platforms such as TikTok, often viewed as harmless entertainment spaces, are increasingly used to spread harmful disinformation. This is particularly effective because many people consume information on social media without fact-checking tools or sufficient media literacy skills to verify what they encounter.

Since people are inclined to trust the information they read or see in the media and are often unaware of the extent to which AI can fabricate content, the impact of disinformation becomes even more significant. This highlights the urgent need for enhanced fact-checking resources and improved media literacy to counter the rising influence of AI-driven propaganda.

Unfortunately, people often believe everything they see and read due to low media literacy skills. Russia understands this and is increasingly disseminating information using a mixed approach. They combine real, factual information with AI-generated, fake narratives. This combination easily confuses individuals because they may read one publication that contains truthful information but then encounter a second one – AI-generated and presenting a false narrative, which they might also perceive as true. This mix of techniques makes it easier to mislead individuals lacking media literacy or fact-checking skills.

The effectiveness of these tools lies in their dual impact, combining immediate and long-term effects. In the short term, they can change public perception, especially when deployed during war or political instability. Fabricated videos or AI-generated "official" statements can rapidly erode trust in public institutions, fuel polarization, or incite unrest. However, their more insidious and enduring impact becomes evident over time. Disinformation campaigns work gradually to weaken societal cohesion, erode trust in democratic institutions, and amplify social divisions.

The cumulative effect is that the public becomes increasingly confused and skeptical of all information sources, fostering an environment where truth is devalued and irrelevant.

Jacobsen: You referenced generational differences and AI tools tailored to these variations. Could you delve deeper into what sets these apart?

Mysyshyn: Yes, indeed. Media literacy skills are critical core competencies, especially in generational differences and the rise of generative AI tools. As AI technologies become more sophisticated and accessible, the ability to critically evaluate and verify information is essential for navigating the modern media landscape.

For younger generations, who are digital natives, media literacy involves understanding how algorithms and AI shape the content they encounter on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube. Many are unaware that tailored content is designed to capture attention and provoke emotional responses. Teaching them to question authenticity and recognize manipulation is vital for building resilience against disinformation.

For older generations, media literacy requires addressing their trust in traditional media formats. This demographic is particularly vulnerable to AI-generated content mimicking authoritative sources, such as deepfake videos or fabricated news articles. Developing their ability to identify such fabrications is crucial to countering the spread of false narratives.

What's particularly concerning is how generative AI tools exploit the unique habits of each generation. Younger audiences are targeted through short, visually engaging content on social media, while older audiences are influenced by AI-driven material that reinforces existing trust in traditional media. Addressing these tailored approaches requires generationally nuanced media literacy strategies to equip all individuals with the tools to discern fact from fiction.

Jacobsen: What distinguishes misinformation from disinformation, particularly in their intent and impact?

Mysyshyn: Disinformation refers to deliberately false or misleading information spread to deceive or manipulate, while misinformation is incorrect information shared without malicious intent. For example, Russian propaganda often uses disinformation to manipulate public opinion by spreading false narratives about the war in Ukraine. However, misinformation can also occur when individuals with low media literacy or even major media outlets share misleading content without fact-checking. In both cases, spreading false information can have harmful effects, even if the intent differs.

Jacobsen: In what ways should information warfare be conceptualized as a legitimate form of modern warfare?

Mysyshyn: Information warfare is a form of warfare because it targets societal trust, cohesion, and decision-making processes, often intending to destabilize or weaken an adversary. While it lacks the physical devastation of traditional warfare, its effects can be equally profound, especially in highly polarized or vulnerable societies. AI technologies have amplified these impacts, transforming information warfare into a sophisticated tool for manipulation and disruption.

In a paper I wrote for the German Marshall Fund, I examined how Russia has weaponized generative AI, deepfakes, and voice-cloning technologies to erode trust, destabilize Ukraine, and influence international perceptions of the war.

For example, AI-generated deepfake videos, such as one depicting President Volodymyr Zelensky announcing Ukraine's surrender – spread rapidly on social media and caused widespread confusion, even after being debunked. Similarly, altered audio tracks using voice-cloning tools have been employed to create fake messages from Ukrainian leaders, sowing discord and demoralization.

These disinformation campaigns are designed to weaken Ukraine internally and undermine international support, particularly from Western allies. By spreading manipulative narratives, such as fabricated stories of corruption, inefficiency, or infighting, they seek to create skepticism abroad about the legitimacy and effectiveness of Ukrainian leadership.

This erosion of trust can reduce public support for aid and military assistance, which is vital for Ukraine's defense efforts. Information warfare's objectives align with traditional military goals, which are to weaken the enemy and disrupt their strategies.

Jacobsen: What strategies should democratic societies adopt to counter these evolving threats effectively?

Mysyshyn: Democratic societies can address the threat of AI-driven information warfare through a multifaceted approach that includes education, technology, policy, and collaboration. Public education, particularly media literacy, must equip individuals with the skills to recognize and counter disinformation.

In 2023, our Institute of Innovative Governance developed a guide and conducted lectures on AI and disinformation at leading Ukrainian universities. Initiatives like StopFake, Nota Yenota, and various government-led programs have strengthened Ukraine's efforts to build media literacy and societal resilience. These programs emphasize core critical thinking strategies, such as questioning sources, verifying information, and analyzing biases, which are essential in helping individuals navigate the modern information landscape.

Developing trust in media is equally critical. Societies must support independent journalism and fact-checking initiatives that prioritize transparency and accountability. For example, Detector Media has played a vital role in Ukraine, fostering trust by exposing disinformation and providing verified reliable news. Similarly, public awareness campaigns must focus on promoting trustworthy media outlets and encouraging audiences to engage critically with the content they consume. Trust in media is a cornerstone of societal cohesion, especially during war or political instability.

Investing in advanced detection tools is another crucial step. Ukrainian organizations such as Osavul and Let's Data, Mantis Analytics, and international companies like Originality.ai and OpenOrigins have played key roles in developing technologies to detect and debunk deepfakes and AI-generated propaganda quickly and effectively. These tools counter disinformation campaigns that exploit emerging technologies to spread fabricated narratives designed to mislead or destabilize.

By combining media literacy, critical thinking, trust-building in media, and cutting-edge technological solutions, democratic societies can build resilience against the growing threat of AI-driven information warfare. Ukraine's proactive approach demonstrates how these strategies

can be implemented effectively to protect domestic and international audiences from manipulation.

Jacobsen: How are autocratic regimes leveraging these technologies to pose new and unique challenges to the free world?

Mysyshyn: Well, these regimes exploit technological innovations to wage information warfare, conduct cyberattacks, and surveil populations both domestically and abroad, creating significant risks for open societies. Russia has weaponized AI to create and disseminate deepfakes, voice clones, and other forms of fabricated content.

Autocratic regimes also pose a technological challenge by exporting surveillance tools to suppress dissent and monitor citizens. China, for instance, has developed sophisticated facial recognition surveillance systems that track individuals' movements, online behavior, and even emotional responses. These tools are being exported to other autocratic states, enabling a global spread of authoritarian control mechanisms that undermine freedoms and human rights.

Cyberattacks are another dimension of this threat. Autocracies increasingly use advanced cyber capabilities to target critical infrastructure in democracies, including energy grids, financial systems, and public health databases. The United States, Europe and other democracies face a dual challenge: protecting their values while countering autocracies' misuse of emerging technologies.

Jacobsen: Could these same technologies be harnessed to empower dissenters and dissidents within authoritarian regimes?

Mysyshyn: Yes, these technologies can empower dissenters and dissidents in less free countries by providing tools for secure communication, spreading information, and documenting abuses. They also play an increasingly important role in accountability and justice, particularly in wartime scenarios. Technologies based on blockchain provide a decentralized and tamper-proof means of recording evidence of human rights abuses.

Additionally, AI-enhanced tools can assist in verifying, categorizing, and securely storing such data. Communication platforms such as Signal, powered by advanced encryption technologies, have become lifelines for activists and defenders. To maximize the empowering potential of these technologies, democratic societies and international organizations must support secure, open-source tools, invest in training for activists, and push back against the misuse of technology by authoritarian regimes. These efforts and ongoing innovation can help level the playing field for dissenters fighting for freedom.

Jacobsen: Finally, in the face of blatant and absurd narratives—like labeling Ukraine's Jewish president as a neo-Nazi—what tools and resources does Ukraine need most urgently to counter such misinformation?

Mysyshyn: Ukraine needs a comprehensive strategy to combat misinformation, combining technological innovation, public education, media collaboration, and international support. The sheer absurdity of certain disinformation only highlights its manipulative intent and potential to mislead, regardless of how outrageous it may seem.

These narratives often exploit preexisting biases, emotional responses, and gaps in media literacy, making them surprisingly effective. Once again, this emphasizes the crucial need for critical thinking and diligent fact-checking – because, in a world saturated with disinformation, questioning the narrative is not just a skill but a responsibility.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Anna.

Mysyshyn: You're very welcome! It was a pleasure. Thank you for your time as well.

Shaping Modern Warfare: A Canadian Firm's Contribution to Ukraine's Defense

2024/12/06

Andrew Sliwa is the Managing Director of Custom Prototypes, a Toronto-based company that blends cutting-edge design with precision fabrication in various industries.

Under his leadership, the company has gained international recognition, notably clinching the Advanced Finishing category at the 2018 AMUG Technical Competition with a stunningly accurate recreation of a Praetorian Guard helmet. Since its modest beginnings in 1995, when just two employees crafted handmade prototypes, Custom Prototypes has become a leader in advanced 3D printing technologies.

Sliwa's dedication to innovation and quality has firmly established the firm's reputation in the prototyping world.

Amid the ongoing war in Ukraine, his team has pivoted to developing state-of-the-art **drones** tailored for military applications, prioritizing extended range and AI-driven functionality. Beyond his technological ventures, Sliwa has become an outspoken voice on Canada's defense spending, emphasizing the vital role of equipment manufacturing in supporting Ukraine's resistance and highlighting technology's transformative potential in shaping warfare's future.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: To begin, could you share your name and the position you hold?

Andrew Sliwa: I manage Custom Prototypes based in Etobicoke, Ontario. I run a service bureau specializing in product development. We are a small manufacturing facility utilizing various short-run production processes, such as 3D printing, CNC machining, plastic vacuum forming, and more.

Since the war in Ukraine began, we decided to contribute to the war effort. We recognized that we were in a good position to develop drones.

Jacobsen: Given the situation in Ukraine and the expanding role of drone technology, how critical do you think it is to develop drones with extended range and increased payload capacities?

Sliwa: Drone warfare is fundamentally changing the battlefield. Drones have become incredibly effective tools. Most drones we see today are commercial models modified to carry payloads.

Operators can locate and destroy targets with FPV goggles. However, FPV drones typically have a limited range—they can travel up to about 20 kilometers, but maintaining a video link restricts their operational range.

Jacobsen: Is using drones as signal relays to amplify their operational range technically viable? What are the limitations and possibilities of this approach?

Sliwa: There have been attempts to use relay stations to extend drone range. However, this method has practical limitations.

For this purpose, we are developing a fixed-wing drone designed for longer distances and higher payloads. The technology we are integrating includes an AI chip programmed with flight loops and a target area map. This technology compares the map with real-time imagery from the onboard camera.

This makes the drone nearly independent of GPS and pilot input, which means it cannot be easily jammed. Additionally, flying at low altitudes makes it challenging to detect and intercept. This drone can cover distances of up to 200 kilometres.

It is primarily designed as a one-way attack drone, meaning it does not return. However, it can also be used for reconnaissance missions if needed. That's the concept behind it.

Jacobsen: Your drones, which can travel up to 200 kilometers while carrying heavier payloads, clearly offer advanced capabilities. Could you elaborate on their costs and the specific advantages they offer over other models?

Sliwa: I do not want to discuss the cost of this drone because we are not at the point where we can accurately price it. Drones of this class, fully equipped with electronics and motors, typically cost around $100,000. Historically, these drones were developed as targets for military use, primarily for anti-aircraft defence training.

However, in Ukraine, drones of this kind are being repurposed to fly deep into Russian territory to destroy ammunition depots and other critical infrastructure. They sometimes launch 100 to 300 drones simultaneously, knowing that many will be intercepted by anti-aircraft systems or jammed.

The costs of deploying 300 drones are significant, but the potential payoff—such as destroying an ammunition depot the size of a city—is far greater than the cost of the drones.

Jacobsen: Shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, on March 2nd, the United Nations General Assembly convened an emergency session. During this meeting, Resolution A/ES-11/1 was passed, strongly condemning Russia's actions and calling for the withdrawal of troops from all occupied territories in Ukraine. How do you interpret the significance of this resolution in shaping global solidarity with Ukraine?

Sliwa: Wow, and you remember all that.

Jacobsen: The resolution received overwhelming support—141 votes in favor against only five opposed, with abstentions aside. Nations like North Korea, which eventually sent troops to support Russia, stood in opposition. The global response highlights a near-universal consensus backing Ukraine. For countries not aligned with this sentiment, are they, in your view, isolating themselves from the dominant international ethos? How does Canada's role, largely providing financial and material support, exemplify this alignment?

Sliwa: That's accurate. There's a common belief that Canada sends money, but that's incorrect. Canada sends equipment manufactured in Canada. The funds allocated go to Canadian companies that produce this equipment, which is then shipped to Ukraine. We don't send cash alone; we send valuable equipment instead.

Jacobsen: Yes, I wouldn't want to oversimplify it by saying Canadians give money—money alone isn't a weapon you can fire.

Sliwa: That's correct.

Jacobsen: For Canadians seeking clarity, what's the simplest way to illustrate how their financial support contributes to practical outcomes in the war? Specifically, could you detail how such funds are helping manufacture affordable, locally produced Ukrainian defense equipment and why that approach matters?

Sliwa: Wow, that's a political question. All decisions in support of Ukraine are political and based on debates and discussions. How much we allocate to defence has been a topic of debate for a long time. Canada doesn't even meet its NATO spending commitments. As NATO members, we are supposed to allocate 2% of our GDP to defence.

So, 2%, but we are only at about 1.4%. Among NATO countries, we are among the lowest contributors. Most NATO countries pay their share, but Canada does not.

We feel secure simply being next to the United States and assume they will defend us if something happens. However, we fail to recognize that we share a border with Russia. Russia even planted a flag under the North Pole, claiming it as Russian territory.

How concerning is that? They claim the North Pole as their territory, yet we neglect our military. It doesn't seem to be a priority for Canada, which is unpleasant.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Andrew.

Telling Ethiopia's Truth: Gezahegn Demissie on Silence, Suffering, and Global Responsibility

2024/12/08

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie is an Ethiopian journalist, filmmaker, and advocate for immigrant voices whose work straddles continents and cultures. A founding member of PEN Ethiopia and the Executive Director of Bridge Entertainment, Demissie has made it his mission to amplify stories that matter. Now based in Toronto, Canada, he helms New Perspective አዲስ ቅኝት, a community journal and radio show-turned-podcast dedicated to fostering dialogue within the Ethiopian diaspora.

Since arriving in Canada in 2015, Demissie has chronicled the immigrant experience and delved deep into Ethiopia's complex historical and political terrain. His first short documentary for CBC Short Docs, *Tizita*, was a collaborative effort with Canadian production houses Primitive Entertainment and Rhombus Media. Demissie's contributions to journalism have earned him recognition, including the 2019 National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada Award and a 2021 Community Champion Award from Arif Varani, MP for Parkdale in High Park, Toronto.

In this interview, Demissie unpacks the enduring impact of **Ethiopia's political upheavals**, tracing the scars left by Marxist regimes, ethnic federalism, and unrelenting internal conflict. From the collapse of the monarchy in 1974 to the tumultuous shifts of power in 2018, he examines the roles played by the Derg, the TPLF, and other factions in a narrative defined by war, famine, and dislocation. Against muted global attention, Demissie calls on the Ethiopian diaspora in Canada and beyond to advocate for meaningful solutions, urging Canadians to use their platforms to spotlight one of the world's most urgent but overlooked crises.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I'm speaking with Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie from PEN Canada to explore the Ethiopian context. We aim to bring attention to the devastating and often overlooked mass killings that have occurred during the recent war—a topic largely unfamiliar to Canadian audiences.

Let's begin by setting the stage. Could you provide a historical perspective on how the fall of the monarchy, the rise of military Marxism, and the collapse of the Soviet Union set the stage for the conflicts we see today in Ethiopia's semi-autonomous regions?

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie: Ethiopian history is complex, connecting to significant historical events, even with references to Greek mythology, such as the story of Andromeda. Ethiopia is an ancient country, but this particular story begins with the fall of the monarchy in 1974.

Over the past 50 years, Ethiopia has experienced significant instability and turmoil. When the monarchy ended, a military group known as the Derg took power, proclaiming itself Marxist, and remained in control for 17 years. During this time, from 1974 to 1991, there was an intense civil war.

Interestingly, the rebel groups fighting against the Derg were also leftist and Marxist in their ideology. After 1974, no major political group in the country was unaffiliated with some form of Marxism.

These groups are often identified as Maoist, Stalinist, or aligned with other leftist ideologies. Still, they all shared a common ideological foundation. By 1991, the main rebel group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), managed to seize central power. Eritrean rebels secured independence for Eritrea, making Ethiopia a landlocked country.

Today, Ethiopia's population exceeds 130 million, making it one of the most populous countries in Africa, alongside Nigeria and Egypt. It is also the most populous landlocked country on the continent. After 1991, Ethiopia adopted an ethnic federal system, with the TPLF-led coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), implementing this structure.

The TPLF-led government ruled through a divide-and-rule strategy, dividing regions along ethnic lines, which created an ethnically segmented system.

While apartheid was ending in South Africa, a system of ethnic federalism was taking root in Ethiopia. When the TPLF was removed from power in 2018 by a coalition led by Prime Minister **Abiy Ahmed**, they retreated to the Tigray region, where they maintained military strength.

The TPLF had substantial resources and diplomatic support from allied nations, which made them formidable. This eventually led to a conflict with the federal government, which mobilized resources from all over the country to confront the TPLF forces. But after one year of war, the result was the loss of more than 1,000,000 innocent civilians and soldiers from both sides.

Jacobsen: This is a fascinating yet challenging narrative for a Canadian audience, which often frames political developments through simpler binaries—sometimes shaped by American perspectives or broader ideological histories. We tend to associate post-colonial transitions with the gradual march toward democratic ideals. However, Ethiopia's story diverges sharply with the rise of Marxist militarists and the imposition of systems akin to apartheid among its diverse ethnic groups. Could you unpack this dynamic?

Demissie: No. The Marxist group that took power in 1974 was different. Another Marxist group became a rebel force fighting the military Marxist group that had overthrown the monarchy. By the end of the Cold War in 1991, the rebel Marxist group succeeded in ousting the military Marxists and taking power. The global political landscape had changed, so they presented themselves as champions of democracy, attempting to establish a multi-party system—at least in rhetoric.

They portrayed this to the Western world to gain approval, claiming to adopt democratic ideals. However, in practice, they implemented an ethnic federal system. They enshrined it in the constitution, making it impossible to remove today. This ethnic federal system, which was established in 1991, is one of the main reasons the country is now at war with itself.

The same group that introduced this system later fought against the federal government. By 2018, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which had been in power for nearly 30 years, faced internal conflict within its political coalition. The sentiment grew that it was time for them

to relinquish power, as they were a minority holding control over political power, economic resources, and the military.

Jacobsen: Was there significant domestic or international pressure on the Marxist government to step down then?

Demissie: Yes. Other groups aimed to take power, leading to clashes and conflicts within the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)—a coalition of four major parties from the Tigray, Amhara, Oromo, and Southern Nations. Eventually, the Oromo and Amhara factions aligned and pushed the TPLF out of central power, relegating them to their stronghold in Tigray province in the north. From there, the TPLF planned to regain control, which sparked the bloody war that claimed over a million lives.

Jacobsen: How pivotal has ethnic federalism been in fueling Ethiopia's internal conflicts?

Demissie: Absolutely. Ethnic federalism is a primary factor in these conflicts. Ethiopia is unique because it avoided colonization and remained independent when European powers divided Africa at the Berlin Conference in 1884. The ethnic divisions entrenched in the federal system have fueled the ongoing ethnic and territorial conflicts.

Ethiopia successfully defended its territory from colonial invasions. However, the Italians returned in 1935 under Mussolini's fascist regime. Still, they were ultimately defeated again, this time with the support of the British. That is history, and it shows that the Ethiopian people have always stood united against foreign aggression. There has never been successful foreign aggression in Ethiopian history.

Jacobsen: Ethiopia's federal constitution, which divided the nation along ethnic lines, seems to have sown the seeds of discord. Do you believe this system, implemented by rebel Marxists, was an inevitable crisis waiting to unfold?

Demissie: The first Marxist group, or the military Marxist group that took power in 1974, officially declared Ethiopia a socialist state. They claimed the country the Socialist Republic of Ethiopia, clarifying their ideology. It aligned with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries during the Cold War, so their stance was purely ideological. They distanced Ethiopia from Western affiliations, even reducing diplomatic relations until the 1984 famine.

The 1984 famine claimed millions of lives and was widely publicized, including through the "We Are the World" concert by Michael Jackson and others, which raised funds for aid.

Jacobsen: The period also saw severe famine, driven by drought, reduced agricultural output, and crop failures. Could you elaborate on the pretext for this humanitarian catastrophe and its broader implications?

Demissie: It presented an opportunity for the Americans to re-enter the Ethiopian political scene. Until then, the military government had kept the Americans out, working exclusively with Soviet advisers. The country was run on a strict socialist ideology.

However, when the rebel group took power in 1991, socialism was nearly obsolete because the Soviet Union had collapsed. The new leaders couldn't continue under the communist or socialist

banner, so they needed something new to justify their rule. That justification was ethnicity. They adopted this system under the pretext of historical grievances.

Jacobsen: In these instances, scapegoating is often a universal tactic. How has this dynamic played out in Ethiopia's political and ethnic struggles?

Demissie: They argued that Ethiopia's ethnic groups had been subjugated and oppressed by one dominant group, the Amhara. The Amhara were blamed for much of what had happened in the country's history, similar to how the Anglo-Saxons are sometimes viewed in Western history.

So they used the Amhara as a scapegoat and blamed them for all the country's problems, turning them into the enemy of Ethiopia's 80-plus ethnic groups. This ideology governed the country for the last 30 years. The current government, which took power in 2018, is led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for negotiating a peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Eritrea was once part of Ethiopia. After Eritrea became independent, another war broke out between the countries over UN-demarcated borders and political disputes. The TPLF in Ethiopia and the EPLF in Eritrea had fought against the military regime. However, when they became leaders of their respective countries, they went to war in 1998—a bloody conflict that lasted until 2000.

A United Nations peacekeeping mission was eventually established along the border, creating a buffer zone for over 20 years. In 2018, Prime Minister Abiy ended that "no war, no peace" situation and received the Nobel Peace Prize. Then, there was a claim that Donald Trump was involved. It was peculiar. During his first term as president, Trump claimed he brokered the peace deal, but Prime Minister Abiy received the Nobel Prize. Trump publicly stated that he should have received recognition for the peace agreement.

But in reality, Abiy Ahmed facilitated that peace. Despite the peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which led to renewed friendships between their communities in the diaspora, this peace was short-lived. The Tigray group initiated conflict again, resulting in a war that claimed over a million lives, adding to the devastation wrought during the previous 30 years of destabilization and division.

What concerns me deeply is why the world, including Canadian and Western media, has not paid attention to this bloody conflict. I feel everyone should be aware of it.

Jacobsen: Yes, we are all responsible.

Demissie: Thank you. We are all human, and Ethiopia, throughout its history, has fought against fascism, notably against the Italian fascists. It participated in the Korean War in 1950-1953, and the Ethiopian Kagnew Battalion was highly regarded during the Korean War. There is a statue commemorating them in Korea.

Ethiopia has also been a key player in fighting terrorism in East Africa—in Sudan and Somalia— and has supported peace processes in Rwanda and West African countries like Liberia. Ethiopia does not deserve to be ignored or abandoned by the world. The Ethiopian people have paid the price for global peace and humanity, and they should not be left out or overlooked.

But look at what's happening now. The war continues. While the fighting in Tigray has been halted, there is still severe conflict in the Amhara and Oromia regions, with people dying every day. Famine and drought loom, and most young people go to war instead of plowing the land.

Jacobsen: Young people are fighting instead of farming, which is a serious issue.

Demissie: Child soldiers have become a common sight, which is deeply concerning. This situation requires urgent attention and emphasis. The regional political situation is dynamic, involving neighboring countries like Somalia and Egypt due to the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** (GERD).

Significant tension has been between Egypt and Ethiopia **over the dam built on the Nile River**. The country is torn apart by internal and external political issues, requiring careful handling. Ethiopia has 130 million people, so if it disintegrates, the resulting human crisis could spread globally and become uncontrollable.

Jacobsen: Beyond the historical causes, young people are now fighting instead of farming, exacerbating the crisis. Looking at the present, what are the major flashpoints—politically, ethnically, and provincially? Where are the weapons coming from, and which regions are most vulnerable to famine?

Demissie: The most serious conflicts now involve the Fano militia in the Amhara region and the federal government, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and the federal government. These two regions, Amhara and Oromiya, are the most populous in the country. The Amhara region accounts for about 24.1% of Ethiopia's population, while the Oromiya region comprises nearly 35.8%.

Jacobsen: And the conflict has been ongoing for over two years now?

Demissie: Yes, for more than three years in these regions. The continuous fighting prevents young people from engaging in productive activities like farming, which results in economic stagnation and food shortages. If this continues, a disaster is inevitable. Weapons are entering the country through various channels due to open borders. Ethiopia shares a long border with Sudan, which is currently unstable. This makes it easy for arms to be smuggled from Sudan into Ethiopia. The border with Somalia is also porous because Ethiopian soldiers are fighting alongside Amhara and Oromo forces, leaving an insufficient workforce to secure the entire country. It's a loose, fluid situation.

Another challenge, Ethiopia is landlocked, while Somalia has a significant outlet to the Indian Ocean. This geographical factor adds tension to the complex relationship between the two countries. Ethiopia is pursuing a memorandum of understanding with Somaliland, **to secure access to the sea**. However, the central government in Somalia is not pleased with this arrangement, which has created tension in the region and could potentially lead to another conflict. The situation is highly complex.

While this unfolds, Western and Eastern powers remain focused on conflicts in the Middle East and Europe, neglecting this part of the world. This is concerning from a peace and collective security standpoint.

Jacobsen: This conflict has now dragged on for more than two years. What efforts have been made toward international resolutions through entities like the United Nations or other peacekeeping forces? Has any humanitarian intervention been akin to the long-standing UNRWA aid in Palestine?

Demissie: No, not in the same way. There was support in the past from organizations like UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme (WFP) to provide aid in war-affected areas like Tigray and other provinces. However, this time, it's much more difficult. United Nations workers have been killed while performing their duties, making it challenging for them to provide support. They are doing their best to help, but as the crisis expands and affects more regions of the country, it becomes increasingly challenging to meet the need. Countries may pledge support but often must follow through, as their priorities are focused elsewhere. While humanitarian aid exists, more is needed to address the problem's scale. The support available does not match the severity of the situation.

Jacobsen: How has the Ethiopian government managed—or failed to manage—this escalating crisis?

Demissie: The United Nations and the World Food Programme have accused the government of using aid as a weapon of war by cutting supplies. Additionally, some of the warring groups, particularly in Tigray, have been caught selling food meant for humanitarian aid outside the country, leaving their people to suffer under their leadership. The level of corruption is severe, and there is currently no effective law enforcement body. The country is verging on a stateless situation, with the central government maintaining control only in the capital and some major cities. Various warring groups and militias control the rest of the country.

Yet, the media seems to project an image of control and productivity. They claim control, producing millions of tons of food, but it's just propaganda. The reality is quite different—like trying to fill half a gun with empty promises. The situation remains dire.

Jacobsen: Canadians focus on conflicts that are closer to their economic or geopolitical interests, such as Ukraine-Russia or Israel-Palestine. That perspective is understandable, but what should Canadians remember about staying engaged with global crises like Ethiopia's, where they might influence change as voters?

Demissie: Close to 100,000 Ethiopian Canadians live in Canada, an important point. They are good citizens who love this country, myself included. We fled from the same rebel groups that ruled Ethiopia for 30 years and eventually silenced dissenting voices and the media. Canada offered us refuge during those difficult times, and now we are citizens and taxpayers here. We need dedication from our leaders and fellow Canadians.

It is not an obligation but a question of humanity. Canada has a long history of standing for humanitarian causes. Now, I am asking Canadian society and leaders to understand the suffering of the Ethiopian diaspora community. Many members of this community are experiencing great distress due to the situation in Ethiopia. They cannot stop the war or protect their loved ones, who are often forced to flee their homes, which various warring groups destroy.

This harsh reality deeply affects the psychological and emotional well-being of the Ethiopian diaspora, making it challenging for them to remain as productive as other citizens. I urge Canadians to recognize the severity of this crisis, show empathy, and utilize media and democratic platforms to raise awareness about the situation in Ethiopia.

I am reminded of a time when the entire Western world united in support of Ethiopia, as seen during the "We Are the World" concert for famine relief led by Michael Jackson and others.

So why the silence now, when the crisis is even more dire? That is my question. Have we changed our values or lost faith in humanity? Are we no longer the same compassionate society we once were, or do we still hold those core principles as Canadians?

We must leverage our influence to shed light on the tragedies unfolding in Ethiopia and beyond, including in countries like Sudan.

Jacobsen: Finally, what message would you like Canadians to take away from Ethiopia's ongoing crisis and its potential role in fostering a more informed global perspective?

Demissie: So, I ask my Canadian friends, fellow Canadians, and everyone living in Canada to understand the situation and do whatever they can to help.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Demissie: Thank you so much, Scott, for giving me the chance.

The Fragile Balance: Leon Langdon on Free Speech and Combating Religious Hatred

2024/12/16

Leon Langdon joined **Humanists International** as an Advocacy Officer in September 2023. He brings a wealth of experience from his prior roles at the UN Security Council and in the NGO and education sectors. At Humanists International, he focuses on advancing the organization's work at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and supporting member organizations in navigating UN human rights mechanisms, such as the Universal Periodic Review. Langdon holds a law degree from University College Dublin and a master's in international relations from New York University.

In this interview, Langdon delves into pressing developments at the UNHRC, including the contentious non-renewal of Resolution 16/18 and the adoption of a resolution targeting the desecration of religious books. He highlights Humanists International's advocacy to uphold freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and freedom of expression while combating **blasphemy laws** that disproportionately target minorities and undermine **human rights**. Langdon underscores the importance of frameworks like the Rabat Plan of Action in addressing hate speech without eroding free expression.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for joining me, Leon. As an Advocacy Officer at Humanists International, you're at the forefront of critical global issues. Let's start with a broad question. How would you characterize recent UN Human Rights Council developments regarding efforts to combat religious hatred?

Langdon: The current trends are troubling. For context, over the years, there has been a consensus between the most significant actors in this arena: the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the European Union (EU), which often acts on behalf of the West, including the United States.

These organizations have historically agreed on how best to balance the right to freedom of religion or belief with efforts to combat hatred based on religion or belief. This consensus was reflected in two parallel resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council: the EU-led resolution on FoRB and the OIC-led Resolution 16/18 on combating religious hatred. Both resolutions have been renewed annually since 2011, up until this year.

The trends you're referring to include two key developments: the introduction of a resolution addressing the desecration of religious books and symbols in 2023, its attempted renewal in 2024, and the non-renewal of Resolution 16/18 in 2024. These actions are deeply concerning as they undermine what was a hard-fought consensus on countering hatred based on religion or belief. Achieving this consensus required many years of negotiation, substantial compromise, and significant effort among the world's major actors.

Seeing this progress eroded is undoubtedly worrying for us at Humanists International.

Jacobsen: Humanists International has been vocal about its concerns regarding resolving the desecration of sacred books and religious symbols. Could you elaborate on the organization's key apprehensions?

Langdon: In 2023, we raised several issues regarding this resolution. We voiced our concerns during the emergency debate called at the UN and in a joint letter with numerous other NGOs.

First, we highlighted that prohibiting the defamation of religion and protecting religious ideas, institutions, and symbols not only contravenes the guarantees of freedom of opinion and expression but is also prone to abuse—most often targeting religious minorities. Ironically, these minorities are often the very groups the resolution claims to protect. Second, we stressed the long-established distinction between criticism of religion or belief and attacks on individuals because they adhered to a particular religion or belief. This difference is crucial to maintain.

Third, we noted that equating the desecration of religious books and symbols with incitement to hatred is problematic. Such acts do not always constitute incitement, and this oversimplification disregards the need for a case-by-case approach. Resolution 16/18 and the Istanbul Process, including the Rabat Plan of Action's six-part threshold test, provide a robust framework for determining whether an act constitutes incitement.

Ignoring this framework undermines years of work and legal clarity.

Jacobsen: Despite strong opposition, the resolution passed. In your view, why did it gain sufficient support?

Langdon: In my opinion, two factors played a role. The first is the broader geopolitical environment. This resolution was introduced in response to several incidents in Europe involving the burning of the Qur'an.

There was anger and shame about those incidents in certain states. The second factor was the assertion by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that this would be a one-time resolution. It was brought in during an emergency debate. At the time, there was no discussion that this resolution would be renewed or that its renewal would lead to the subsequent non-renewal of Resolution 16/18. Some states, especially given the political context at the time, could sympathize with the sentiment. This is evident in the failure to renew the resolution a second time, despite the OIC's attempts.

Jacobsen: Humanists International has actively engaged in negotiations on religious tolerance. What has been the organization's role in shaping these discussions?

Langdon: Broadly speaking, we are one of the UN's only explicitly non-religious or humanist organizations, and that is a vital voice we bring to the table. Within that role, we work to champion the balance between freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. Additionally, we highlight how laws, such as blasphemy laws at the national level, can be used to undermine the rights of non-religious individuals and religious minorities.

Jacobsen: The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation often leads these resolutions. How does its approach differ from broader human rights principles?

Langdon: The OIC's approach elevates religion, including religious books and symbols, to a pedestal, whereas international human rights law places the human being at the center. Religious books and symbols do not enjoy protections under international human rights law; people do. Moreover, these laws are often used to undermine human rights. Their subjective nature makes them prone to weaponization. This can take two primary forms.

Firstly, these laws are used to attack religious minorities who are expressing their freedom of religion or belief. In such cases, the majority in power often claims that the minority's actions amount to blasphemy. This undermines their freedom of expression and violates their right to freedom of religion or belief.

Secondly, these laws are weaponized for political purposes. Accusations of blasphemy provide a convenient means for individuals to attack or undermine political opponents. Once an accusation is made, the state apparatus is often deployed against the accused, resulting in significant abuse of power.

Jacobsen: The annual resolution on combating religious hatred was withdrawn this year. What were the reasons behind this decision, and what does it signify?

Langdon: According to the OIC, Resolution 16/18 was withdrawn because Western countries had not done enough to combat hatred based on religion or belief. As I mentioned, this is a huge shame and part of the troubling trends we've discussed. Ultimately, it undermines the hard-fought consensus that had taken many years to achieve and had been in place for over a decade.

Jacobsen: Lobbying is a cornerstone of Humanists International's advocacy. How have these efforts influenced the outcome of the renewed resolution?

Langdon: To my knowledge, we were the only NGO to speak during the informal consultations, the term used at the UN for negotiating resolutions. Our advocacy efforts were, therefore, particularly significant in shaping the discussion surrounding the renewal of this resolution.

As we have yet to receive a web link from the informal consultation organizers, we had to go to Geneva and speak in the room. During the session, we presented our case to the states, explaining why the resolution should not be renewed and why the OIC should return to Resolution 16/18. We also circulated a briefing document to over 100 states and received numerous supportive responses.

Building on this, we met with state representatives in Geneva, representing countries across several continents. We presented our position to them and addressed their questions and concerns. Because advocacy and lobbying are difficult to quantify regarding outcomes, it is challenging to attribute the resolution's withdrawal to our efforts accurately.

However, we mobilized a substantial lobbying effort at short notice, and ultimately, the tabled resolution was indeed withdrawn. Regardless of directly attributing the outcome to our advocacy, we were pleased.

Jacobsen: Blasphemy laws remain a contentious issue in international human rights debates. What are the potential risks of reintroducing blasphemy language into UN resolutions?

Langdon: At the highest level, reintroducing blasphemy language into UN resolutions undermines the consensus I've mentioned several times about effectively countering hatred based on religion or belief. That consensus is not merely symbolic; it provides a framework for addressing religious hatred and incitement. It includes a six-part test under the Rabat Plan of Action for determining when incitement warrants criminalization and when it should be addressed through other means.

At another level, according to Humanists International's latest research and the "**Freedom of Thought Report**," 57% of the world's population live in countries where blasphemy is punishable by law. These laws are inherently subjective and are often used to target religious minorities, including, though not exclusively, the non-religious.

Blasphemy laws violate individuals' right to freedom of expression and infringe upon their right to freedom of religion or belief. While we and others lobby countries to repeal these harmful laws and raise awareness through initiatives like the "Freedom of Thought Report" and our advocacy at the UN, our efforts are undermined if governments can point to a UN Human Rights Council resolution that seems to support such laws.

This week, we were encouraged to learn that UN Secretary-General António Guterres cited our submission for his report on countering hatred based on religion or belief. In his report, Guterres underscored two critical points: first, that blasphemy laws are incompatible with international law, and second, the alternative mechanisms we outlined for addressing these issues. Such affirmations from the UN help our advocacy efforts far more than having a UN Human Rights Council resolution that contradicts these principles.

Jacobsen: Striking a balance between combating hate speech and safeguarding freedom of expression is a recurring challenge. What strategies or frameworks, such as the Rabat Plan of Action, offer practical solutions?

Langdon: We support and advocate for implementing the EU-led FoRB resolution and the OIC-led Resolution 16/18, along with their follow-up initiatives. Within this framework, we emphasize the importance of the Rabat Plan of Action's six-part threshold test, which provides a clear structure for balancing freedom of expression with combating hate speech.

We also actively support and engage in measures that address hate speech without infringing on freedom of expression. For example, we champion educational initiatives, address the root causes of hate speech, and promote positive counter-speech strategies.

Jacobsen: Leon, thank you for the opportunity and your time today. I appreciate it.

Langdon: Of course.

Building for the Future: Sustainable Solutions for Ukraine's Reconstruction

2024/12/16

Seyfi Tomar is Vice President of Ebs Global, a Canadian construction firm focused on creating durable and sustainable structures, from hospitals and schools to mid-rise buildings, focusing on cost efficiency and environmental responsibility. Seyfi passionately advocates for prefabricated steel systems, customizing designs to reflect local cultures while delivering eco-friendly solutions.

As a key sponsor of Rebuild Ukraine initiatives, Seyfi spearheads efforts to restore infrastructure in war-torn regions, blending Canadian expertise with international collaboration. His approach combines advanced technologies like recycled galvanized steel to address housing shortages and infrastructure demands.

Despite challenges such as securing funding from organizations like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Export Development Canada (EDC), Seyfi remains committed to scaling sustainable solutions, prioritizing speed, affordability, and cultural integrity. Early projects include rebuilding Bakhmut, emphasizing innovation and resilience in the face of immense challenges.

In this interview, we explore Seyfi's vision for Ukraine's reconstruction following the Toronto Rebuilding Ukraine conference, exploring his approach to global recovery and sustainable innovation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Seyfi, the Rebuilding Ukraine conference in Toronto highlighted immense challenges and opportunities. What is the most critical insight about reconstruction efforts in Ukraine that you want people to understand?

Seyfi Tomar: We have been involved since the beginning of the war. We have always wanted to help because we are a company that consistently extends a helping hand to refugees and displaced people. At the same time, we aim to facilitate using our new technology to create accommodation for those in need.

Jacobsen: Canada is geographically distant from Ukraine. How is the country overcoming logistical hurdles to play a significant role in reconstruction?

Tomar: Due to bureaucratic complexities, the Canadian government needs to make clear how it plans to fund these efforts. However, they are collaborating with us to establish facilities in Ukraine and register our companies to begin construction. Simultaneously, I have engaged with Export Development Canada and other capital firms that are heavily involved in financing reconstruction projects.

The process remains to be determined. We need to continue working on it and secure funding from institutions such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Export Development Canada, and the International Finance Corporation (IFC).

I have already communicated with these entities. As a Canadian company, we can also set up a manufacturing plant in Ukraine to produce prefabricated light-gauge steel panels. With over 50 years of experience in construction, during which we have built hospitals and other public buildings urgently needed in Ukraine, we are well-prepared to contribute to this effort.

We recently established a Construction Innovation Solutions Lab, which applied for funding for some projects with the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). The same team secured some funds from MITACS in the past. This lab enables us to adapt and implement advanced technologies developed in different countries in Canada. We have already integrated some of these innovations, and any future advancements will also be applied to reconstruction projects in Ukraine.

In Ukraine, there is an urgent need for non-combustible, affordable, and sustainable buildings, including schools and hospitals. Our three companies offer a comprehensive package of solutions tailored to these needs.

Jacobsen: Your firm has introduced groundbreaking construction techniques. Could you detail these innovations and their significance for rebuilding Ukraine?

Tomar: We are currently working on engineering building systems. We use galvanized steel, which is zero-waste, sustainable, and reusable. Unlike traditional methods, where thousands of trees are cut down to build houses, our approach uses recycled galvanized steel to construct houses with zero waste. This method is exactly what Ukraine needs right now. It is also essential that we build durable houses and buildings.

Jacobsen: Bakhmut has suffered devastating destruction. Could you describe your plans to reconstruct this city and the unique challenges involved?

Tomar: I have always followed Bakhmut's story. I have kept in touch with developments, watched a documentary, and learned its history. I met with the mayor and a few other Bakhmut individuals in Poland.

They have put together a project to build homes for 3,500 people in a manner that replicates Bakhmut's original architecture. We agreed in principle to undertake the project. However, I am still determining the exact location, though I remember it is in western Ukraine.

We will review the details when we visit in person next week, as the architectural drawings still need to be finalized. I have spoken to someone from Export Development Canada and will coordinate with the underwriters.

The early stage of the project involves securing funding to create the architectural plans and prepare for construction. Overall, the project is still in its initial stages, so there is little to say. However, our intention is clear: we aim to start building as soon as possible. Ideally, we will be on-site before Christmas and begin construction right after the new year. How quickly we can proceed will depend on the funding we secure from various sources.

Jacobsen: Funding is often a bottleneck for large-scale projects. How are you securing financing, and how do you ensure accurate cost estimation for these initiatives?

Tomar: The cost estimations are already in place. The budget has been determined collaboratively by the mayor's office of Bakhmut, which will be built in Hoshcha.

We have a ballpark figure for the required amount. Still, we must contact investors, including the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Finance Corporation, and Export Development Canada, to determine their contributions.

This process is time-consuming, but we are actively working on it. We have the facilities, workforce, skilled personnel, and knowledge to build. The only piece that needs to be added is funding, which we are addressing.

That is why we are going to Ukraine in person—to meet with key individuals and discuss further. I am already communicating with the three primary entities funding many reconstruction projects in Ukraine.

Jacobsen: Van Horne Construction, Engineered Building Systems, and the Construction Innovation Solutions Lab are key players in your efforts. How do these entities collaborate to drive economic and infrastructure growth in Ukraine?

Tomar: FIABCI-Canada, where I am the Secretary-General, allows me to network globally from 70 different countries, and then I explore innovative technologies and solutions worldwide to adopt under the Construction Innovation Solutions Lab. I identify these innovations in various countries and bring them to Ebs Global.

At Ebs Global, we assess feasibility and determine how to adapt these technologies to the Canadian climate and the specific construction needs in Ukraine. Finally, we implement and build these projects under Van Horne Construction.

These three entities work synergistically: one focuses on research, another on engineering, and Van Hoorde takes charge of the building process.

Jacobsen: Energy infrastructure is a crucial component of modernization. How are you integrating advanced energy solutions into your reconstruction projects?

Tomar: We have yet to gain experience in that area.

Jacobsen: During the Toronto conference, did you meet potential partners who could play a pivotal role in advancing these efforts?

Tomar: I spoke with AECON, Canada's largest civil construction company. They are pursuing a dam project and several other initiatives in Ukraine. We have reached a preliminary agreement to collaborate once they are on-site.

This is still in the early stages, but once we are there, we will meet again to explore how we can contribute to each other's projects. We aim to collaborate with AECON and all companies entering Ukraine to provide our services.

Jacobsen: Were there any specific panels or speeches during the conference that resonated with your work and inspired new directions?

Tomar: Yes, many people I met there came from Ukraine and others from Canada, including representatives of the Canada-Ukraine Chamber of Commerce, such as President Zenon and Vice President Yuri, and the consular staff. They collaborate closely, and we share a mutual belief in integrity and teamwork.

We plan to work together. Leah from Export Development Canada has also been instrumental in this. She helps us by connecting us with underwriters. The conference in Toronto was very fruitful.

We attended a similar gathering in Warsaw, Poland, a couple of weeks ago with many of the same individuals. Tomorrow, I will meet with Stephen Lecce, the Minister of Energy for Ontario, whom I previously met in Poland and Toronto.

I am working to accelerate our efforts by leveraging our networks at different levels of government to contribute to rebuilding Ukraine. However, everything is still in the early stages.

We are working hard. We have plans, programs, knowledge, and experience. Now, we must assemble all the necessary elements to move forward.

Jacobsen: Workforce availability is critical for large-scale projects. How are you ensuring you have enough skilled labor, especially considering the local challenges?

Tomar: The priority is to employ veterans, the relatives of veterans from Ukraine, and other local people. If a labour shortage persists after that and we have exhausted local options, we can hire workers from Turkey. This is feasible because we are ending all our operations in Turkey and relocating our companies to Ukraine.

Jacobsen: In your view, what is the most significant obstacle to realizing these ambitious reconstruction plans?

Tomar: The only significant challenge for a company at our level, with our knowledge and experience, is securing funding. Our knowledge, tools, experience, workforce, and skilled workers are already in place. We utilize innovative technology and build creatively. Everything is ready to go. Funding is the only hurdle—there are no other significant obstacles.

Once we establish our companies in Ukraine before Christmas, we will become a valuable asset to other developers and builders arriving from countries like Germany, Denmark, Finland, and Italy.

We can provide services and sub-trades to those companies because, when they come, they may face bigger challenges than we do. Our extensive experience in various war zones in Turkey and 53 years of experience in Canada make us more equipped than any other company to build in Ukraine.

Under Ebs Global, we can offer exceptional services to builders and developers from other European countries. This is why we are committed to being present in Ukraine.

Jacobsen: Hypothetically, if the war were to end tomorrow and funding became available, how quickly could construction begin, and what would a realistic timeline for rebuilding Bakhmut look like?

Tomar: Whether the war stops or continues, it does not matter; we want to rebuild Ukraine now. We do not intend to wait until the war ends—we are ready to start building immediately. We can construct faster, more customizable, and more durable houses than other developers. We are not waiting for the war to end; we are prepared to begin at any time.

Housing, schools, and hospitals are urgent needs, and we want to address them now. Waiting is not an option.

Jacobsen: Construction technology has advanced significantly, including robotics and automation that can operate 24/7. How do you see these innovations impacting your projects in Ukraine?

Tomar: Yes, that is precisely what we have adopted. Our fully computerized system allows us to produce in three shifts, 24/7.

We manufacture walls, slabs, and trusses with zero waste and precision, ensuring every element is perfectly sized and segmented for the project. When feasible, we also integrate VR and artificial intelligence technologies. Many innovative software solutions are available, but we avoid using them if a technology is not adaptable to a specific area or project.

Sometimes, we need to combine traditional methods with new, innovative approaches. That's why we can only apply a one-size-fits-all approach to some projects. It depends on each project's specific requirements.

We know and integrated many of the technologies you describe. We are aware of these advancements, including proptech and contech systems. I have worked with companies across the globe, from Indonesia to Nigeria, Germany to Spain, and many other countries. Through my networking platform, the United Nations-affiliated FIABCI Canada, I collaborate with people eager to assist Ukraine worldwide. My role is to facilitate these efforts.

Jacobsen: Eastern Europe has a distinct architectural identity. How are you incorporating the aesthetics of Ukrainian architecture into your designs while meeting modern needs?

Tomar: Ebs Global focuses on providing the structural skeleton of buildings. We adapt to the architectural preferences and climate-specific requirements of every country, province, or state we work in.

For instance, Bakhmut's architectural style differs from what we see in Toronto or Vancouver. When we work in Ukraine, we will adopt the local architectural style that suits their needs and culture.

The main component of any construction project is the structure, which we provide at a more affordable price. However, we do not impose North American architectural styles on Ukraine or Eastern Europe.

We build the structure and then integrate the local tastes, cultural preferences, and architectural styles to ensure the final product aligns with their unique identity.

Jacobsen: Large-scale global projects often face regulatory and logistical barriers. What country-specific challenges—such as economic conditions, regulations, or supply chain issues—have you encountered?

Tomar: We foresee no significant hurdles in this regard. Regarding Ukraine, we have a strong network of suppliers. We source materials like galvanized steel and other products from countries such as Turkey, Indonesia, Egypt, and Spain.

Additionally, we are adopting new technology in Germany to produce bricks and convert them into panels. With this extensive network, we do not anticipate issues with supply or collaboration.

Jacobsen: Durability is essential for the longevity of infrastructure. How vital are corrosion-resistant coatings and fire-resistant materials in achieving sustainable, long-lasting buildings?

Tomar: Our light-gauge steel products have longer lifespans than traditional materials. In North America, for example, houses typically last 50 to 70 years. With our materials, the lifespan extends up to 100 years.

Moreover, our products resist bugs and termites and do not rust. So, what more could you want? This approach represents a better way to build durable and sustainable structures.

Jacobsen: Yeah, that covers almost everything.

Tomar: Thank you very much.

Unpacking White Identity and Nationalism: A Conversation with Eric Kaufmann

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Eric Kaufmann (@**epkaufm**) is a distinguished scholar and thought leader whose work explores the intersection of politics, culture, and identity. He is currently a Professor of Politics at the University of Buckingham and directs the Centre for Heterodox Social Science.

Kaufmann graduated from the University of Western Ontario and earned his Master's and PhD at the London School of Economics. His academic journey includes positions as a Lecturer at the University of Southampton and Birkbeck, University of London. From 2008 to 2009, he was a stipendiary Fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Kaufmann is the author of numerous books, including *Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities*, *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America*, and *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* His forthcoming book is *Taboo: How Making Race Sacred Produced a Cultural Revolution*. He has also authored opinion pieces in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times of London*, *Newsweek*, *National Review*, *New Statesman*, *Financial Times*, and *UnHerd*.

Beyond academia, Kaufmann is affiliated with esteemed think tanks and institutions, including the Manhattan Institute, Policy Exchange, the Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, and the University of Austin. His research delves deeply into pressing issues such as immigration, ethnic change, and national identity, illuminating the cultural and psychological drivers behind populist movements. He offers nuanced perspectives on white identity, nationalism, and supremacy, advocating for open and balanced dialogue to mitigate polarization.

In his reflections, Kaufmann has tackled a broad spectrum of topics—from the challenges of modern journalism to the resilience of Ukraine and the pressures facing liberal democracy in an era of suppressed debates. His work underscores the importance of fostering resilient, inclusive discussions as society grapples with complex and often contentious issues.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What inspired you to write *Whiteshift* in 2018? What are the fundamental value conflicts in these conversations on majority-minority dynamics? Considering the taboos you address, where should such discussions begin?

Eric Kaufmann: The first thing to note is that I've studied the intersection of immigration, ethnic change, and national identity since my Master's degree in 1994. My PhD at the London School of Economics, my first book, examined immigration and ethnic change in the U.S. during its transformation from a predominantly WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) country to a majority-white nation that included Catholics and Jews. That's where it stands today. I was particularly interested in the decline of the WASP phenomenon. My work then covered developments up to around 2004, when Samuel Huntington published *Who Are We?* and Pat Buchanan gained attention for his political campaigns.

At the time, the big question was: How is it possible that there hasn't been an anti-immigrant nationalist-populist movement in the U.S.? This topic was of considerable interest in the mid-2000s. It wasn't until Donald Trump's campaign that such a movement emerged.

When it happened, many people following these developments said, "There it is." However, I had already studied and written about these topics for years. Then, of course, the populist moment arrived. In 2014, during the European Parliament elections, we saw the beginning of this shift.

That election marked the emergence of three parties gaining close to 30% of the vote: the Danish People's Party, the National Front in France, and the UK Independence Party. What started happening around 2014 was an increase in asylum seekers and immigration in Europe, peaking during the migrant crisis in late 2015. This crisis led to the rise of significant populist parties in unexpected places like Sweden and Germany. Later, we saw figures like Matteo Salvini in Italy and the rise of Vox in Spain, along with other movements in Europe. While Italy already had the Northern League, many of these movements were entirely new phenomena.

Meanwhile, Trump emerged as the only one among 17 primary Republican candidates willing to make immigration his signature issue—not just focusing on the border but making immigration central to his platform. That was particularly taboo, even within the Republican Party. Trump's rhetoric, including inflammatory comments about rapists crossing the border, broke with convention. Brexit followed shortly afterward, and then Trump's eventual election victory.

This past decade has been pivotal. Since then, we've seen the influence of events like COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, which have added new layers to populist and nationalist movements worldwide.

Those events led to a dip because attention shifted from migration to health and the economy. However, migration and related topics are now back and stronger than they have probably ever been. We've essentially had a decade of populist movements.

What's particularly interesting is that economic factors do not easily explain this phenomenon. While there are tens of thousands of academic papers and many books on the subject, my argument has always been that this is fundamentally psychological and cultural, not economic. If we want to explain these dynamics, pointing to financial crises or deindustrialization is inaccurate. These explanations fail to capture the sociological and psychological contrasts between how people perceive white identity versus white nationalism.

Jacobsen: Could you delve into the distinction between white identity and white nationalism? How are they similar, and where do they diverge?

Kaufmann: Absolutely. Let's clarify the terms because they're often conflated. Nationalism, broadly speaking, refers to territoriality. For example, the southern U.S. under slavery was not white nationalist because it deliberately maintained a multicultural society, albeit one based on inequality and exploitation. Plantation owners had no desire for the Black population to leave because their economic system depended on enslaved labour.

In contrast, the vision of the northern U.S. during that era leaned toward what could be described as white nationalism. Many in the North supported the idea of "free soil." Essentially, they argued that enslaved people should be emancipated and then repatriated to Africa. They argued that society could not function without slavery. Still, their vision often involved racial homogeneity rather than coexistence.

This distinction is important: white nationalism is about securing a white ethnostate characterized by homogeneity, whereas white supremacy typically operates within a multicultural society marked by systemic inequality. Multicultural inequality and white nationalism are fundamentally different societal structures.

Jacobsen: How do these distinctions manifest in public discourse across the political spectrum? Are there consistent patterns in how they are debated or misunderstood?

Kaufmann: There's a tendency, especially in public and political discussions, to lump white identity, white supremacy, and white nationalism together. Each of these concepts is distinct, yet they're often conflated.

On the cultural left, for instance, there's a valid critique that pursuing an ethnostate—a racially pure society—is inherently racist. History shows us that such pursuits lead to horrific consequences like ethnic cleansing. That's a fair and important point.

However, the problem arises when all expressions of white identity are lumped in with white nationalism or white supremacy. White supremacy, for example, is largely a feature of a multiethnic society, where one group dominates others within a system of inequality. This is distinct from white nationalism, which seeks to establish a homogenous ethnostate.

Meanwhile, white identity, at its core, is no different from other racial identities, such as Black identity or Hispanic identity. People identifying with their racial or cultural group isn't inherently problematic. Yet, it often gets conflated with extremist ideologies, which leads to unnecessary polarization.

Jacobsen: Where do you identify valid points and common misconceptions in these discussions? What nuances often get overlooked?

Kaufmann: A valid point from the cultural left is the recognition that racial purity as a goal is unacceptable and has historically led to atrocities. That's an important critique. However, on the cultural right, there's also a valid observation that recognizing white identity doesn't inherently equate to supporting **white nationalism** or white supremacy. This distinction often gets lost in broader public discourse, resulting in oversimplification and, in some cases, unjust labeling of individuals or groups.

When you examine the survey data, Ashley Jardina's book *White Identity Politics* highlights this dynamic. She found that 45% to 65% of white Americans consider their white identity to be meaningful to some degree. Evidence of this can also be seen in patterns of behaviour, such as whom people choose to marry and where they choose to live. There is clear sorting that takes place. For example, areas that were predominantly white in 2011, where whites make up a

significant majority of the population, tend to experience a net increase in their white population. Places like Boise, Idaho, and Portland, Oregon, are examples.

By contrast, areas where whites are a minority—such as Greater Los Angeles or San Francisco—tend to see a net decrease in their white population over time. These patterns hold at a large scale and at the neighbourhood level. The same dynamics are observable in other countries, such as Sweden, Britain, and Canada.

Intermarriage data reflects similar patterns. Take Canada, for instance, which does not share the same historical context as the U.S. In cities like Toronto or Vancouver, where roughly half the population is white—perhaps slightly less now—the rate of marriages crossing racial lines is around 8% to 10%. While this is significant, it's far below the 50% rate that would occur if people were paired randomly. This suggests that de facto white identity persists, though it's not inherently abnormal or something to be condemned outright.

Jacobsen: What drives the significance of white identity for some individuals? Is it rooted in cultural, historical, or psychological factors?

Kaufmann: The strongest predictor of the importance of white identity to someone is their attachment to ancestry. For example, suppose someone feels strongly connected to their Italian or Irish heritage. In that case, they are more likely to feel attached to being white than someone who doesn't feel a strong connection to their ancestry. It's like an outer layer of identity, similar to how attachment to being Mexican often correlates with attachment to being Hispanic.

Importantly, attachment to white identity is not necessarily associated with hostility toward other groups. Jardina's book and the psychology literature emphasize that attachment and hatred are separate dispositions. They only overlap in contexts of zero-sum conflict, whether violent or political.

For instance, the American National Election Study shows a clear zero-sum relationship between partisanship: the warmer Republicans feel toward their party, the colder they tend to think toward Democrats. However, regarding racial identity, the data tells a different story. White Americans who feel warmth toward whites on a 0–100 scale are, if anything, slightly warmer toward Black and Hispanic people than whites who feel colder toward their racial group. This isn't the same zero-sum relationship that we see with political partisanship.

Jacobsen: Why do discussions about white identity so often devolve into toxicity? What structural or cultural forces contribute to this?

Kaufmann: Part of the issue is the conflation of white identity with **white nationalism** and white supremacy. While there's some overlap, these are distinct concepts. White identity reflects a sense of connection to one's racial group, which is no different from the identity seen among Asians or Hispanics. White nationalism, by contrast, seeks to create an ethnostate, and white supremacy involves systemic domination within a multicultural society. These distinctions often get lost, leading to misunderstandings.

It's also worth noting that not everyone has a strong white identity. Just as not everyone feels deeply connected to their extended family, not all white people find their racial identity meaningful. However, it's not necessarily unhealthy or harmful for those who do.

Jacobsen: The tension between individual and group identity seems pivotal here. People experience varying levels of warmth or detachment toward their own group or others, and these feelings often depend on context and personality. While many discussions focus on group dynamics, individual experiences frequently deviate from collective narratives. In diverse, liberal societies, how do individuals typically reconcile the tensions between personal and collective identities?

Kaufmann: That's a fascinating question. There's a strong narrative around colour blindness, for example, but it has different interpretations. On the one hand, colour blindness can mean treating people equally, regardless of their skin colour, which aligns with the classical liberal ideal of equal treatment. On the other hand, if colour blindness means ignoring or discouraging identification with a racial or ethnic group, it becomes problematic. Some people will feel strongly connected to their group identity, while others won't, and neither should be stigmatized.

Of course, any of these ideas that are taken to an extreme can become harmful. When discussing individual identity, we need to clarify what we mean. Does it refer to personal achievements, character traits, or something else? One challenge with focusing solely on achievements is that not everyone has the same opportunities to succeed. There needs to be space for individuals who don't have conventional achievements, such as career success, educational attainment, or high income.

People with fewer "achieved" identities often gravitate toward "ascribed" identities—such as ethnicity, religion, or nationality. This is a well-documented phenomenon in social identity theory and is entirely legitimate. Not everyone can be defined by achievements, and that's okay.

Jacobsen: How does this dialogue intersect with broader philosophical perspectives on identity? Do you see a link to existential or ethical considerations?

Kaufmann: There's an interesting debate in political philosophy about what constitutes true individuality. Some argue that to truly be yourself, you need to strip away the attachments imposed on you at birth, such as ethnicity, religion, or cultural traditions, and find your authentic self through introspection. This is similar to certain Buddhist or Cartesian ideals of enlightenment.

In contrast, thinkers like Charles Taylor emphasize the importance of community. He argues that groups—whether chosen or inherited—play a crucial role in shaping who we are. Engaging with intergenerational communities, such as those based on religion, nationality, or ethnicity, can enrich our sense of identity. Taylor's communitarian perspective suggests that breaking entirely from these connections can lead to a poorer existence, while engaging with them adds depth and meaning to our lives.

Of course, there's a balance to be struck. Being completely subsumed by group identity can stifle individuality, but engaging with chosen or inherited communities can enhance it.

Communitarians would argue that group affiliations contribute to, rather than detract from, individuality.

Jacobsen: This theme aligns closely with humanist principles, as outlined in the Amsterdam Declarations of 1972, 2002, and 2022. These declarations emphasize respect for the individual's right to self-determination while acknowledging the necessity of social responsibility. How does this perspective inform your thinking?

Kaufmann: Individual and collective identity interact; we can't escape that dynamic. Humans naturally seek rooted, multi-generational identities through religion, nationality, or other affiliations. Denying this aspect of human nature doesn't align with the way many people experience life.

Jacobsen: Humanist philosophy celebrates the balance between individual autonomy and communal connection, suggesting that both are vital for a meaningful existence. How do you see this duality influencing contemporary identity debates?

Kaufmann: We must recognize that there are trade-offs. Striking the right balance between individuality and collective identity involves costs, and different people and societies navigate this balance differently.

The more you move toward collective identity, the more there may be costs in terms of individuality, and people will navigate that balance differently. I think one key issue is that while it's respected for minority groups to have collective identities and attachments, there has been a tendency to stigmatize majority group attachments. I wouldn't call it outright censorship, but expressing a majority attachment is more politically incorrect. That creates a problem because there's social pressure against majority identities. This pressure either drives those identities underground or stokes resentment among individuals who strongly connect to their majority identity.

This is not a significant issue for people with a low level of attachment to their group identity. But for those with a strong sense of group identity, this can lead to frustration. This is not primarily about metropolitan versus rural divides, as David Goodhart explores in his book *The Road to Somewhere*. Nor is it simply about wealth or class divides.

When you look at the data, these external factors, such as wealth or whether someone lives in a rural or urban area, only explain a small proportion of whether they identify with their ethnic group or align with progressive politics. For example, white working-class individuals living in London were just as likely to vote for Brexit as their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. The perception that London is a pro-European Union oasis is more about its demographic composition—being younger, highly educated, and more ethnically diverse—than the city itself. When you compare similar groups, the differences diminish significantly.

There's also been an overemphasis on the sociological context of these issues. The core drivers are psychological and individual. Research suggests that dispositions toward identity are one-third to one-half heritable. This means that sociological factors, while important, are often exaggerated in discussions about group identity and political behaviour. Yes, education and the rural-urban divide correlate with populist voting. Still, the differences are not as stark as some

narratives suggest. For example, London might see nearly 40% voting to leave the EU, while rural Northern Britain might approach 60%. This is a difference, but it's not the absolute divide of 0% versus 100% that some might imagine.

Jacobsen: Do you believe conversations about ethnicity, white identity, and minority identity risk fueling racialist politics? How can we address the toxicity of political culture, particularly when social media amplifies these issues?

Kaufmann: Those are critical questions. First, discussing these identities does carry a risk of playing into racialist politics. However, the real question is whether allowing people to discuss these topics openly is more likely to lead to such politics than trying to suppress the conversation. Suppression can often backfire, driving these sentiments underground and creating a sense of grievance among those who feel their perspectives are being silenced.

Second, addressing the toxic elements of political culture requires consistency. If we are to accept group identity politics for some, it should apply equally to everyone. People who feel the need to attach themselves to their group identity—whether a minority or majority group—should be able to do so without fear of stigmatization.

The question ultimately becomes one of balance: Does creating space for these discussions reduce polarization and resentment, or does it risk exacerbating racialist tendencies? It's better to create a space where people can discuss identity openly and thoughtfully rather than attempting to shut down the conversation entirely. These issues are complex and subtle, requiring nuanced approaches, particularly in an era where social media often amplifies divisive rhetoric.

I don't think the people who immediately reach for suppression—whether normative or legal—have the evidence to justify an anti-speech position. For example, I'm not convinced that restricting speech is effective. Allowing freer expression and open debate within mainstream institutions could remove much of the toxicity.

Consider, for instance, the fact that in Germany, it is illegal to question whether the Holocaust happened. In contrast, in the U.S., it is not. Is antisemitism significantly worse in the U.S. than in Germany? I don't think there's any evidence to support that claim. Many European countries have similar speech restrictions, but if anything, these measures may promote radicalism.

For example, research by Jacob Aasland Ravndal suggests that when populist right-wing parties perform well electorally, street-level attacks on minorities decrease. For a long time, there was no populist right in Germany. Yet the country routinely experienced attacks on asylum hostels, including attempts to burn them down. This raises the question of whether these movements act as a safety valve. Expression, rather than suppression, may mitigate these issues.

Take Sweden as an example. If mainstream parties had been willing to converse about immigration levels—saying to voters, "Do you want less or more immigration? Here's why we think more (or less) is a good idea"—there would likely have been no electoral space for the Sweden Democrats. However, because the mainstream parties avoided the topic, the Sweden Democrats became the only ones willing to discuss it, allowing them to rise in prominence. This pattern has played out across Europe, with populist parties emerging as significant players in their political systems.

Jacobsen: Do you think the suppression of open debate on identity-related topics has contributed to the rise of polarizing figures like Donald Trump?

Kaufmann: Absolutely. Suppose other Republican candidates had been willing to address border and immigration issues openly and respectfully. In that case, Trump might not have gained the traction he did. However, because they avoided these topics, Trump—unrestrained by norms—filled the vacuum. This lack of restraint meant he could make inflammatory statements, such as insinuating that Mexicans are rapists, which took the conversation in a toxic direction.

When populists emerge, they often act as loose cannons, disregarding established norms and escalating tensions. Addressing these issues early and within a normative framework could prevent such figures from dominating the discourse.

Jacobsen: What question do you feel is missing from these conversations? What remains an unresolved issue in the discourse?

Kaufmann: The underlying cause of populism's rise is the West's ethnic diversification. Immigration serves as the lightning rod for these parties, but the deeper driver is cultural and psychological rather than economic. The widely accepted narrative attributes concerns about immigration to pressures on public services and jobs, but that's not the primary factor.

The actual driver is that some people feel discomfort with rapid ethnic change. They see the familiar slipping away, perceive differences as disorderly, and perceive changes as a form of loss. If we cannot have open conversations about these underlying drivers, we will continue to miss the root causes and allow these tensions to fester.

That's a perfectly respectable viewpoint. We want to move toward a position where we don't frame the issue as "either you're an open person or a closed person." If someone wants to restrict immigration, they're not automatically a closed person or a bigot. Similarly, being open doesn't necessarily mean supporting escalating levels of migration.

Instead, it would be more productive to acknowledge that there are faster and slower-paced individuals. If the slower-paced viewpoint wins in an election, reducing immigration is legitimate. Conversely, if those arguing for higher immigration—perhaps citing economic benefits—win the argument, then the numbers can increase. The key is ensuring that the chosen policy is seen as legitimate.

As long as the discussion avoids vilifying specific outgroups or labeling them as inferior or threatening, it should be considered a valid debate. Taboos around those harmful attitudes are understandable, but it's not reasonable to impose taboos on the pace of change or the desire for familiarity. Attachment to an ingroup or preserving the current ethnic composition of a country at a slower pace is fundamentally different from outright racism.

Racism, in my view, involves either advocating for an ethnostate with no minorities or portraying outgroups as evil, inferior, or threatening. These are problematic positions. However, wanting to slow the pace of change isn't racism. The longer we try to ignore this distinction, the more pressure builds up.

Jacobsen: Lastly, how do you see the pressures of demographic and cultural change manifesting in society? Are there specific examples that highlight these dynamics?

Kaufmann: When these views are suppressed, it leads to a sublimation effect. Populists then emerge as the voice for these repressed and sublimated opinions. Unfortunately, populists are often less likely to adhere to liberal norms and more likely to veer off into irrational tangents—whether it's conspiracy theories about vaccines, extreme environmental skepticism, or inflammatory rhetoric about certain groups being rapists or criminals. This undermines the sound functioning of liberal democracy.

The real issue is that elite institutions and the establishment are constrained by an overly narrow set of taboos on these discussions. The key question is whether these institutions can reform themselves to allow for more open and balanced debates. Can they expand the parameters of acceptable discourse, or will they double down on suppressing these topics?

Unfortunately, populists like Trump sometimes make outrageous statements, reinforcing the belief among elites that they're justified in maintaining these taboos. However, this only exacerbates the polarization dynamic, driving people further into opposing camps.

Jacobsen: Eric, thank you very much for taking the time to speak today. I appreciate it.

Kaufmann: Thanks a lot, and good luck with everything.

Living on the Edge: A War Correspondent's View from Ukraine's Front Lines

2025/01/23

Remus Cernea is a Romanian activist, politician, and steadfast advocate for secularism and human rights. Born in 1974 in Bucharest, Cernea has played a significant role in promoting progressive values in a country deeply influenced by tradition and religion. He is the founder of the Solidarity for Freedom of Conscience Association, an organization dedicated to combating church-state collusion and religious discrimination. Over the years, Cernea has championed causes that challenge entrenched norms, making him a polarizing yet vital figure in Romanian politics and activism.

A former president of Romania's Green Party, Cernea entered the national political stage with a bid for the presidency in 2009, where he garnered 0.62% of the vote. While his presidential run was not a resounding success, it marked the beginning of his career as a reformist voice in Romanian politics. From 2012 to 2016, he served as a member of Parliament, using his platform to introduce bold legislative proposals, including reforms to church financing and the legalization of same-sex civil unions. His initiatives, though often met with fierce opposition, underscored his commitment to human rights and secular governance.

Cernea's activism extends beyond legislation. He has campaigned vigorously against the presence of religious icons in public schools, arguing for a more secular approach to education. He has also been a vocal proponent of science education, advocating for the inclusion of Darwinian evolution in school curricula. His efforts reflect a broader mission to modernize and secularize Romanian society, often putting him at odds with powerful religious and political institutions.

Recently, Cernea shared harrowing insights from his work as a war correspondent in Ukraine. In Kharkiv, he witnessed the devastation wrought by the conflict, describing towns like Kupyansk, where the majority of buildings have been reduced to rubble. He highlighted the growing threat posed by FPV drones, which have increasingly targeted civilians and military assets alike, heightening risks even far from the front lines. Cernea painted a grim picture of the evolving arms race between Russia and Ukraine, noting how new weaponry and tactics continue to escalate the brutality of the war. During his time in Kyiv, he documented drone strikes, capturing footage that underscores the importance of bearing witness to these atrocities.

Cernea's work—whether in activism, politics, or journalism—reflects an unwavering commitment to challenging extremism and advocating for a more just and rational world. His journey is a testament to the power of persistence and the necessity of dissent in the face of entrenched power structures.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, I'm speaking with Remus Cernea, a former Romanian MP, past president of the Green Party in Romania, and a founding figure in the Humanist Movement in the country, among numerous other roles. Your work has often focused on resisting the intrusion of religious institutions into public life, including opposition to projects like the proposed

cathedral. You've recently turned your attention to war correspondence, working with Newsweek Romania. Currently, you're in Kharkiv. Could you tell us how many trips you have made to this region and what motivated your return to Kharkiv on this occasion?

Remus Cernea: I've spent nearly 300 days in war zones over the past three years, mainly in Ukraine, although I also spent two weeks covering the conflict between Israel and Hamas. I am in Kharkiv now because I can easily travel to the front lines from here. The front lines are close: the Vovchansk front lines are approximately 30 kilometers away, and the Kupyansk front lines are about 100 kilometers from Kharkiv. Here in Kharkiv, there are frequent events and disruptions.

Unfortunately, there are daily air-raid alarms—often 10, 12, or even 15 a day—and many explosions. Of course, the intensity and drama are far greater near the front lines, particularly in Kupyansk.

I usually come to Ukraine for two, three, or four weeks at a time. This is my sixth trip to Ukraine in the past year. I've also been to Kyiv for a while before coming to Kharkiv. Afterward, I'll return to Kyiv and visit other cities to film and record stories about this tragic war.

Jacobsen: What are your observations about morale in Ukraine's eastern regions? Recently, I attended a conference in Toronto, Canada, focused on rebuilding Ukraine, and I also participated in a separate event where attendees shared firsthand accounts, including from those directly affected by the war. Among the participants in Canada, morale appeared strikingly high. However, given the complexities of the global political landscape, how would you assess morale within Ukraine, particularly in an oblast so close to the Russian border?

Cernea: Morale is high. Earlier today, I spoke with soldiers from the 57th Brigade, which has been defending Kharkiv for a significant period. I had previously met with the brigade's artillery troops. Today, I met with members of the mechanized infantry and even went inside one of their infantry vehicles. The morale among these soldiers is steadfast. They are determined to defeat the Russians and are steadily achieving this goal.

Every day, there are dozens of Russian attacks, but nearly all of them—almost 100%—are repelled, often with heavy losses inflicted on the Russian side. While Ukrainian forces also suffer casualties, they continue to prevail in the Kharkiv region. Ukrainian forces consistently win numerous battles and skirmishes daily.

Although these engagements are not large-scale battles, they are fierce. The Russians persist in attempting advances, but Ukrainian defenders repel them remarkably. Occasionally, the Russians gain some territory, but it is minimal. Each square kilometer they capture comes at a tremendous cost. For every kilometer gained, the Russians lost a significant number of soldiers, tanks, and other military equipment.

The Ukrainians are highly skilled, resourceful, and determined to resist. They successfully repel attack after attack, demonstrating extraordinary resilience and strength in the face of this ongoing aggression.

Jacobsen: You also visited Kupyansk, where you reported that 80% to 90% of the buildings had been destroyed. Can you share what you witnessed and the implications of such widespread devastation?

Cernea: Yes, I was there on Friday, three days ago, with a mission to evacuate people. Despite the devastation, individuals still live in these ruins and destroyed buildings. We evacuated two families, along with their cats. Almost all of the buildings on their streets were already destroyed. Somehow, their homes had not yet been destroyed. Still, the houses nearby had been obliterated by shelling, artillery, missiles, and drones.

The drones, in particular, are extremely dangerous now. Let me show you this part. This fragment of a drone hit about 30 meters away from me on Thursday, January 16, 2025. First, we heard the sound of the drone, and then we heard Ukrainian soldiers firing at it. The drone was hit, fell, and exploded about 30 meters from where we were standing. I was with three other Ukrainian journalists at the time.

The primary danger near the front lines now comes from drones. I will explain why drones are the most dangerous threat on the battlefield. Unlike artillery or missiles, drones can actively pursue individuals targeting specific areas. With artillery, for instance, there is a target, and if you happen to be near it, there is a chance you might be wounded or killed. However, you often have seconds to move or run before the shell hits.

Drones, especially FPV (first-person view) equipped with cameras, are operated by Russian soldiers who can see and actively follow their targets. Even if you try to leave, move away, or run—whether on foot or in a vehicle—the drone can follow you and is likely to harm, wound, or kill you. That is why drones are now the greatest threat near the front lines.

Typically, drones range from 5 to 10 kilometers, sometimes up to 20 kilometers. Anything within that range can be targeted, making it extremely difficult to escape.

In the last few months, or perhaps the last year, Ukrainians have developed anti-drone devices that attempt to scramble the signal to prevent drones from reaching their targets. While these devices are helpful, they are not 100% effective. Sometimes, they work, and other times, they do not.

Meanwhile, the Russians are targeting many civilians. For example, in Kherson, they conduct what can only be described as "human safari." They deploy FPV drones and intentionally target people they see on the streets, killing them.

Jacobsen: Why do you think they are doing this?

Cernea: The answer is clear—they have no morals. This is beyond question. They are targeting civilians deliberately, with no regard for human life.

Jacobsen: You've spoken about the use of drones targeting civilians. Could you delve deeper into the strategic logic or motivations behind this approach? What does it reveal about the broader dynamics of the conflict?

Cernea: Yes, there's a profoundly cynical rationale behind it. Imagine a drone operator. His primary task is to locate and target military assets. However, there are times when he cannot find any military targets. In such cases, if the operator sees movement—a citizen walking on the street, an ordinary person, a car, or even rescue teams evacuating people—he will often choose to strike. The drone would be considered a wasted resource if he didn't strike.

Even after hitting civilians, they report to their superiors that they've "eliminated Nazis." Russian propaganda consistently labels Ukrainians as Nazis, so there's an incentive for drone operators to justify their actions. This leads to what can only be described as a "human safari," where civilians in cities near the front lines, such as Kherson and Kupyansk, are deliberately targeted by FPV drones. These drones, with 5 to 20 kilometers ranges, create constant danger in their operational zones.

Jacobsen: According to recent reports, such as those from the Kyiv Independent, casualties have risen significantly. What insights can you offer regarding this trend, and what does it suggest about the current state of the conflict?

Cernea: Yes, the number of casualties has increased significantly. During our first trip to Ukraine in November and December 2023, the death toll per day was likely around 850 to 950. By our second trip in August and September 2024, the numbers had risen to approximately 1,000 per day. Now, in early 2025, the numbers range between 1,500 and 2,000 deaths per day on the Russian side alone, and that doesn't include Ukrainian losses.

This escalation reflects the growing volatility of the war. The Russians are becoming increasingly desperate and ferocious. Their tactics have intensified, and their use of weaponry has evolved. For example, they are now bombing Ukrainian cities more frequently and targeting residential areas with ballistic missiles and glide bombs.

Jacobsen: From your perspective, how has the ongoing escalation of violence impacted the lives and infrastructure of Ukrainian cities? Are there specific patterns or stories that have mainly stood out to you?

Cernea: The destruction is immense. In Kharkiv, for instance, I've seen entire residential blocks obliterated by glide bombs. One block of flats, with 10 floors, was destroyed. The Russians are deliberately targeting civilians and residential areas more aggressively than before.

On New Year's Eve and January 1, I was in Kyiv. For the first time, the Russians launched four drones that directly struck the city center, an unprecedented event. Two of these drones hit within 100 meters of the presidential administration building. I was there and captured footage of the aftermath.

Jacobsen: What kind of reactions have you received for your documentation?

Cernea: Other journalists were astonished by the footage I managed to capture. They asked how I recorded these explosions, and I explained that this is what I do. Whenever I hear an air raid alarm, I set up my camera near a window and start recording. On January 1, I listened to the drones, placed my camera by the window, and captured dramatic footage of four drones striking the center of Kyiv. This kind of work is critical for documenting the brutal reality of this war.

Jacobsen: You've referenced the drone attacks on Kyiv that occurred on January 1, suggesting that they were intended as a symbolic message from Russia. Could you elaborate on that interpretation and the broader implications of such acts of aggression?

Cernea: It was a clear message from Russia to President Zelensky and Ukraine, signaling that Russia intends to remain ferocious in its attacks. From what I understood, those four drones contained some Chinese components. These components allowed the drones to bypass Kyiv's air defense entirely—no defense was in place.

Imagine that: no defense. I was shocked but deeply concerned, wondering where the air defense was. It's one thing for a single drone to evade detection, but four drones striking the center of Kyiv is alarming. A few days later, an official statement confirmed that these drones were a new variant based on the Shahed-136 model. Adding new Chinese components made them capable of evading existing air defense systems.

Jacobsen: It sounds like an arms race is unfolding.

Cernea: It's a new arms race. Both sides are constantly trying to outpace each other. One side develops new weapons to strike harder, and the other scrambles to create defenses while working on its advanced weaponry. It's a cycle of escalation, and it's relentless.

Even now, I've paused because I heard noises that might be drones. You're always on edge in an area like this, listening for potential threats. If drones appear, I'll film them.

Jacobsen: Stay safe, Remus. Don't take any unnecessary risks.

Cernea: Thank you. But as you know, there's always a risk. You experienced this yourself during your time in Ukraine. You never know where the next missile or drone will strike. If you're near the front lines, the risk is even higher.

Now, with these FPV drones, it's a nightmare. When a missile or a shell hits you, it feels like traditional warfare. But these drones can follow you, making them much more dangerous and unpredictable. It's an entirely new level of threat.

Tracing the Far-Right's Digital Revolution: A Conversation with Matthew Feldman

2025/01/24

Matthew Feldman stands as one of the foremost authorities on fascist ideology and the modern far-right in Europe and the United States. A prolific scholar, Feldman has explored the intersections of politics, faith, and extremism in the contemporary world, sharing his insights with students and scholars alike for more than a decade. Currently, a Professor of Contemporary History at Teesside University and a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bergen, Norway, Feldman's academic pedigree includes fellowships at Oxford, Birmingham, and Northampton, where he led the School of Social Sciences' Radicalism and New Media Research Group.

In this conversation, Feldman traces the global evolution of **far-right movements**, delving into how digital technology amplifies their reach, fosters anonymity, and creates enduring networks. He charts the erosion of the historical "antifascist consensus" and examines how societal polarization, identity politics, and fragile masculinity have created fertile ground for extremism —particularly among Generation Z. Rejecting simplistic labels, Feldman critiques the tendency to brand figures like Donald Trump as outright fascists, instead framing their actions within broader trends of conservative authoritarianism that serve as pathways to extremism. Through long-form dialogue, he champions critical reflection and historical literacy as tools to confront the modern challenges posed by authoritarianism and extremism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: We've witnessed a significant rise in domestic terrorist activity within the United States, much of which is rooted in white identity and nationalist ideologies— commonly grouped under the banner of "white nationalism." Why do you think this trend has escalated in recent years, and how is it shaping our current political and social landscape?

Matthew Feldman: It's a pleasure to talk about these issues, even though they are deeply troubling. No doubt some of the territory we'll cover will be difficult—addressing racism, violence, and extremism. But it's important to remember that what we call the far-right, or right-wing extremism, has existed for more than a century. This is not a new phenomenon. However, its context and geography have evolved. Today, we'll focus primarily on North America.

One crucial point is that the far-right—and, in particular, fascism, which is the revolutionary form of the far-right—has always been very skilled at leveraging technology. In the 1930s, they used radio and the press to spread propaganda. In the 1980s, they were early adopters of bulletin board systems. More recently, they have turned to the Internet and social media, leveraging these platforms to amplify their messaging in ways that provide three key advantages, particularly since the post-war period. First, the anonymity of online posting shields extremists from accountability. Second, far-right content, including terrorist manifestos, often remains online indefinitely, making it notoriously difficult to remove completely. Finally, online spaces enable far-right actors to connect with like-minded individuals locally or globally.

These elements were largely unavailable during the far-right's 'dark days' during the Cold War when a colleague of mine coined the term *antifascist consensus*. Back then, expressing far-right ideas could result in imprisonment in Eastern Europe. In Western Europe and North America, there was a strong cultural and social taboo against far-right ideologies, making it difficult for them to gain traction. However, we have seen this change dramatically in recent years.

Jacobsen: To what extent do online platforms play a central role in amplifying these ideologies and their visibility?

Feldman: The importance of online spaces in this context cannot be overstated. This is not to say that social media platforms themselves are far-right. Still, they provide the three elements I mentioned: anonymity, permanence, and global reach. These are incredibly significant.

Social media has made far-right messaging much more visible. I'm not convinced that there are necessarily more far-right extremists in the world or the United States today than there were, say, 50 years ago. But they are far more visible and emboldened in some respects. That brings us to the Trump administration, which seems emboldened to promote far-right themes, such as nativism and immigration.

Jacobsen: If much of this extremist content exists online in a permanent or semi-permanent state, could that fact serve as an unintended advantage? Might it enable us to more effectively catalogue, analyze, and counteract such ideologies, eventually relegating these groups to the periphery—similar to organizations like the Church of Scientology, which remain intimidating and politically active but ultimately limited in broader influence?

Feldman: In other words, could these movements be pushed back to the fringes of society? Yes, but I would push back slightly, Scott, and suggest that the question depends on who we mean by 'we.' I'm based in the UK, and some of your viewers or listeners might be based in Europe, where the approach to content moderation differs significantly. In the United States, the trend is moving toward even less protection than Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act provided. Even that might be rolled back.

So, 'we'—if we're talking about how the online world appears—see it differently depending on geography. For example, how the far-right operates online in Germany differs from that in the United States.

Jacobsen: Does combating these groups require a universal approach, or should tailored tools and strategies be developed to address different ideological or regional contexts?

Feldman: I tend to lean toward the latter, especially in the context of the American First Amendment. In the U.S., there's a much broader understanding of free speech and a much narrower understanding of what constitutes hate speech or incitement.

But let's consider the bigger picture. It seems inconceivable to me that, if the world is still around in 50 years, we won't have some form of a global Supreme Court of the Internet. The Internet does not respect national borders. People can use VPNs to bypass restrictions. Even those who aren't particularly tech-savvy can recognize that while countries like China might build firewalls around social media, the Internet is not the same as a physical border crossing.

The Internet is truly global, and it has changed not just how we date or shop but also how the far-right represents itself and its role in the world. It has fundamentally reshaped their ability to operate and influence others.

Jacobsen: When discussing far-right radicalism or ethnic-based extremism, the focus often lies on its harmful, one-directional impact on society—politically, socially, and culturally. However, could there be a case for viewing this as a two-way dynamic? For instance, does the cosmopolitan and interconnected nature of the Internet have the potential to influence these groups, making them extreme but perhaps less so than they might have been in earlier, more isolated eras?

Feldman: It's not just a one-way street; that dynamic is unlikely to change. The far-right has adapted its strategies over the past few decades, using a tactic that some scholars have described as 'front stage' and 'backstage.' The 'backstage' refers to the hardcore supporters and their messaging, which is often too extreme for public consumption. On the 'front stage,' the messaging is toned down—more cosmopolitan, as you put it—to appeal to broader audiences.

This approach has been around for a long time. For example, if we go back a century to the most radical form of the far-right—fascism—Adolf Hitler demonstrated this strategy. When he gave a speech to the so-called Düsseldorf Club in January 1932, an audience of business people during Germany's Great Depression, he didn't mention Jews or antisemitism even once. He tailored his speech to appear as a 'reasonable' far-right extremist rather than the genocidal fascist he truly was. He knew his audience and adjusted his rhetoric accordingly.

Jacobsen: Are you noticing a dual strategy among these groups? One that involves outward-facing rhetoric designed for public appeal paired with more covert, strategic operations behind the scenes.

Feldman: I see it all the time. Ten years ago, I published *Doublespeak: The Rhetoric of the Far Right Since 1945*. There are numerous case studies in that book, but let me share one from a group in the UK called the British National Party (BNP), which had dozens of councillors in 2009. We're only 15 years on from that, Scott.

At the time, they had two members of the European Parliament. During the European parliamentary elections, the party leadership distributed a 'Language and Concepts Discipline Guide' for their members and activists, who numbered in the thousands. Rule number one: "We are not a racist party." Now, if you need to tell your hardcore activists, "We are not a racist party," you're admitting quite a lot there, aren't you?

They were trying to present themselves as the 'common-sense' choice, wrapping their messaging in historic British and patriotic themes while masking their more extreme, radical agenda. This is not new territory. The strategy of appearing reasonable in public while pursuing a more extreme agenda behind the scenes is as old as the far-right itself.

Jacobsen: As the saying goes, "Hate makes strange bedfellows." Who are the current unlikely alliances forming in these extremist spaces?

Feldman: That's a good question. It isn't easy to pin down. Some of my colleagues have pointed to connections between Islamists and the far-right—limited but real—largely revolving around antisemitism. You also see some strange bedfellows aligned on the issue of anti-Muslim prejudice, which has become a kind of lowest common denominator among various far-right groups. For example, you might find some level of proximity between a far-right group in India, like the RSS, and a far-right group in the United States, both sharing that anti-Muslim sentiment.

So, yes, hate does create strange bedfellows. But by and large—and forgive me if this sounds like a platitude—I believe people tend to know their own. Socialists recognize other socialists. Anarchists know other anarchists. And indeed, fascists and far-right extremists recognize and align with others like themselves.

Jacobsen: How prevalent are these ideologies outside Western Europe and North America? Do we see similar patterns emerging in regions such as Africa, Latin America, East Asia, or South Asia? If so, are they adapted for local political and social contexts, or do they retain their Western origins?

Feldman: The first question I would suggest is methodological: What glasses are we wearing? If we're wearing the glasses of fascism—which I regard as a revolutionary ideology from the right —then we must acknowledge its Eurocentric origins. Ever since Nazi Germany emerged as the dominant force in fascist ideology, eclipsing Italian fascism by the mid-1930s, fascism has largely been synonymous with white supremacism.

That said, it is not to say there are no non-white fascists, but fascism remains a Eurocentric ideology. However, the far-right is more of an umbrella term. It certainly includes fascism, but it also encompasses other shades of extremism that can be applied to different parts of the world. For example, far-right ideologies emphasize race and nation adapted to other regions.

In Turkey, we have the Grey Wolves. In India, the BJP and particularly the RSS exemplify these tendencies. In Brazil, we saw this with Jair Bolsonaro. These movements may differ in some respects, but they share core elements of far-right ideology adapted to local contexts.

Now, these are not fascist revolutionary regimes, in my view, but they are far-right, and they underscore the global connectivity of far-right movements. This, in itself, is a strange irony. When we think of fascism and the far-right, most people's first synonym would probably be nationalism. Yet, I'm writing a book on the history of fascism—almost a biography of the ideology, if you will—and one of the more unusual findings is that, from its inception in the 1920s, fascism has always been a globalist creed.

Even when we're talking about federal attachments or German hegemony, there was a sense of evangelical, missionary work aimed at converting people to this ideology—literally around the world.

Jacobsen: In your view, what is the most pressing institutionalized far-right threat in the United States today? This doesn't necessarily have to be the largest group, but the one that poses the most serious risk regarding ideology and organization.

Feldman: Regarding the far-right, one could argue that Donald Trump's administration falls under that umbrella. We could discuss where and how it may or may not be considered far-right, but it is part of the broader landscape.

Within that umbrella, there are numerous fascist revolutionary groups. Most of them are small, typically numbering in the hundreds, but they have significant potential for growth. The title of the book I'm working on is *A History of Fascism from 1919 to the Present*. The title reflects my belief that fascism has essentially returned to what it was 105 years ago: small, intensely violent, often terroristic, media-savvy, and primed for explosive growth.

We're also observing a growing gender divide among Generation Z. While I recognize the semi-arbitrary nature of labels like 'Boomer,' 'Gen X,' 'Gen Y,' and so on, these generational categories can help demographers catalogue trends. Within Gen Z, we see a significant political and social divergence by gender. Women in this cohort continue to become more progressive and oriented toward gender parity, likely reflecting broader psychosocial leanings.

However, men in Gen Z appear to be breaking from that several-generation trend, becoming more conservative. Essentially, we're witnessing a literal fork in the road between men and women within this younger generation.

Jacobsen: Younger men often seem particularly susceptible to far-right propaganda. Do you believe this stems from genuine grievances, or are these issues largely fabricated to manipulate this demographic?

Feldman: No group is inherently insulated from the seductions, lies, and deceptions of far-right extremism. That said, certain groups may have particular vulnerabilities. For example, we've been conducting research on mental health and neurodiversity, particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), where it seems there may be specific vulnerabilities. These individuals, already facing stigma, might be more susceptible to certain narratives.

It's important to note, though, that the vast majority of people with mental health challenges do not turn to political violence. For example, in the UK, we see something like 1 in 20,000,000 people with mental health conditions committing political violence. But when we reverse the perspective, we find that people convicted of far-right terrorist offences in the UK are overrepresented in terms of neurodiversity—something like four times more than the general population. These susceptibilities are worth exploring.

Another significant factor we see in far-right terrorism is a history of prior violent behaviour. This might include domestic abuse, animal abuse, stalking, or harassment. These behaviours often signal susceptibility to being drawn into far-right extremism.

And it may well be that what we want to call a sense of fragile masculinity—or masculinity under threat—can be another one of these susceptibilities. There is no question that the far-right image of masculinity, femininity, and family life is deeply reactionary. One could call it chauvinist or traditionalist—take your pick—but it valorizes sameness.

The far-right has always valorized sameness and opposed what it perceives as difference: people who look different, sound different, or are differently abled. The far-right has always targeted

these groups, just as sameness and homogeneity have been its ideals. I don't expect that to change anytime soon.

Jacobsen: Are there any books you recommend that are particularly insightful in addressing the generational challenges we're seeing in this context?

Feldman: There are certainly books that address the growth of the Internet and social media use, which is a critical aspect of this discussion. Let me share a statistic that still makes me sit up and take notice: two out of three human beings on the planet spend an average of 120 minutes a day scrolling social media. To put that another way, 5.07 billion people on this planet spend an eighth of their waking life on social media. That is a fundamentally new phenomenon in human experience.

We're still trying to understand what this does to us. It may still be too early to tell, but we are, in effect, engaged in a massive social experiment. What does an infinite amount of content—or, to be diplomatic, let's call it 'information'—do to our brains? Internet usage varies by region, but the percentages are even higher in places like Canada and the U.S..

However, one thing that seems consistent is that it reduces opportunities for quiet reflection. If you arrive 10 minutes early to meet a friend for a film, you're far more likely to scroll through your phone than to sit quietly and think about your day or consider spiritual or material matters. These are fundamental changes.

Regarding the politics of the matter, I strongly recommend Kurt Weyland's *The Assault on Democracy*. Weyland argues quite compellingly that people who call Donald Trump a fascist are making an error. He suggests that what proliferated during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe was not totalitarian fascism but conservative authoritarianism.

Jacobsen: Could you expand on Weyland's analysis and relevance to contemporary far-right movements?

Feldman: Certainly, in *The Assault on Democracy*, Weyland emphasizes that what proliferated during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe—what we might call the interwar crisis—was not fascism as a totalitarian force but conservative authoritarianism. This distinction is crucial because conservative authoritarianism, as Weyland describes it, served as the 'gateway drug' to fascism.

In Germany, figures like Franz von Papen and other authoritarians held power in the early 1930s before Hitler's rise. Similarly, this critique extends to Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Romania—countries that eventually had fascist regimes but were first governed by conservative authoritarian or far-right regimes.

The guiding question is whether history repeats itself—or at least we can learn lessons from it. Assuming there are parallels between our time and the interwar crisis, it's essential to recognize that conservative authoritarianism was often the precursor to fascism. This isn't just about Germany; it's a pattern we see across multiple countries in that era.

And that is a hugely important point. In history, the only instance of fascism seemingly coming out of nowhere is fascist Italy. Unlike most examples, Italy wasn't 'softened up' by conservative authoritarianism before fascism took hold. What we're seeing now, rather than asking if Trump is

a fascist, is whether the conservative authoritarianism of the Trump administration is softening the ground or proliferating conditions that could make fascism possible. That is the core of my critique.

This situation might be uncomfortable now, but it's important to remember that dying under a far-right regime, such as those under Pinochet or the Greek colonels, isn't necessarily 'better' or 'worse' than under a fascist regime. Fascism, however, is revolutionary and sits at the end of far-right politics. What we're observing is the potential for those who come after Trump to be the revolutionary fascists. That is the historical parallel I'm keen to point out.

Conservative authoritarianism doesn't necessarily have to include a specific religious ideology or a rigid view of ethnic identity. It can be a political ideology incorporating various elements without requiring a complete *a la carte* set of beliefs.

Jacobsen: That's a fascinating distinction. Could you explain how Nazi Germany, in particular, complicates or challenges this comparison?

Feldman: Certainly, Nazi Germany complicates this narrative somewhat. For example, in fascist Italy between 1922 and 1938—before the regime introduced Nazi-style race laws targeting Jewish people—it wasn't necessarily more racist than other societies of the time. If you compare it to France, Britain, Eastern Europe, or even the United States, it wasn't exceptional in its racism.

Of course, Italy was xenophobic and nationalistic. Still, it wasn't until the mid-1930s—when Nazism became the dominant model of fascism—that white supremacism and extreme antisemitism became central. Since then, it has been difficult to disentangle fascism from antisemitism or ethnic supremacism, but they are not definitive or exclusive criteria for what constitutes fascism.

Jacobsen: Shifting gears slightly, I'd like to reference an interview **I conducted with Eric Kaufmann**. Kaufmann made an intriguing point about cultural and group identity. He noted that identities tied to national traditions—like those of the Dutch, French, or English—often incorporate elements such as language, dress, or behaviors that foster a kind of cultural distinctiveness. While these "white identities" can manifest as benign forms of cultural pride in specific contexts, extremist nationalist or religious ideologies are an entirely different phenomenon. Kaufmann argued that engaging with cultural pride in a constructive way could potentially deter individuals from radicalizing, yet this topic often remains taboo. What's your take on this distinction, and do you see merit in his argument?

Feldman: It's an important and nuanced point and a sensitive one. This taps into the broader issue of identitarianism—people's identities based on ability, gender, national origin, faith, and so on. You're right that there is a historical precedent here. In white-majority countries, such as those in North America and Europe, we know from history that marginalized groups—such as people of colour and Jewish people—have been mistreated.

Acknowledging cultural pride can be positive and help build community. Still, the challenge is to draw the line where pride morphs into exclusion or extremism. That contact point, where healthy

pride can prevent radicalization, is worth exploring. It could be a preventative measure, but navigating it without reinforcing harmful ideologies is a delicate balance.

Oftentimes, through things like Jim Crow laws, people of colour were legally segregated and treated as second-class citizens. That history is undeniable. However, we can contrast that history of identitarianism with the vision of one of my heroes, Martin Luther King Jr., who advocated for universalism and a colorblind society.

As we know, particularly on the left, some argue that this ideal doesn't work in practice because significant gaps and ongoing discrimination persist. Most people, upon reflection, would agree that such inequalities persist. However, if we continue to emphasize individual identity, it becomes challenging to create a universalist outlook. Certain outgroups—whether Jewish people, Asian Americans in North America, or even white people—may reasonably ask, "What about us? What about our identity?"

This brings us back to the legacy of white supremacism that dominated previous centuries. As I see it, the risk here is that if everyone focuses on their identity and prioritizes smaller, cohesive group identities, we may find ourselves picking at the scabs of some ugly past areas.

Jacobsen: Finally, as we wrap up, do you have any reflections or parting thoughts on this conversation or the broader issues we've discussed today?

Feldman: I want to end with something that happened a few days ago, as it encapsulates some of our discussion. I'm not going to suggest there's a definitive answer to this. Still, many of your readers will have their own opinions on the controversy surrounding Elon Musk's alleged fascist or Nazi salute during the inauguration.

Some, including the ADL, have urged people not to read too much into it. Others, including certain historians of fascism, are convinced it was a deliberate Nazi salute. I think this sort of all-or-nothing, zero-sum thinking is mistaken. It's not necessarily either one or the other. If anything, Elon Musk seems to be engaging in a tradition of what's often referred to as online 'shitposting' or trolling—using irony or provocation to stir reactions.

Let's not forget that much of the mass media was labeling Trump and his movement as fascist in the lead-up to the election in November and even afterward. This points to a broader issue: how we interpret such gestures and symbols often depends on our biases and cultural lenses.

And to some extent, Elon Musk may have been responding to that, essentially saying, "Here's another taboo broken." Let's not forget that Musk did visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, so he does have an understanding of the past and the annihilation of entire ethnic groups who were viewed as subhuman under Nazi Germany. However, this act—and the broader combination of Internet culture, social media, politics, and the tendency for everyone to be so certain in their interpretations—is part of the conundrum we face today.

This isn't just about the Trump administration. It's about a rising conservative authoritarianism that, if we're not careful and don't learn the right lessons from history, could lead us into some very dark places.

Jacobsen: Thank you so much for your time and insight.

Feldman: Credit you, Scott, for persevering through a less-than-happy subject with me today.

Navigating War and Hope: Oleksandra Romantsova on Ukraine's Struggle for Survival

2025/01/25

Oleksandra Romantsova has been at the forefront of documenting war crimes and championing human rights in Ukraine. As the Executive Director of the **Center for Civil Liberties** since 2018, she played a pivotal role in the organization's efforts, culminating in her organization winning the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Ales Bialiatski and the Russian organization Memorial, in 2022. Joining me live from Kyiv, Ukraine, Romantsova brings an unparalleled perspective on human rights in the midst of an ongoing war.

In this conversation, she delves into Ukraine's role within the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) annual presidency, serving as one of six Ukrainian representatives. With approximately 3.5 million people living in Russian-occupied territories, Romantsova confronts the grim realities of war crimes and displacement, emphasizing the critical need for sustained international support, humanitarian aid, and robust reconstruction efforts.

The discussion also explores broader geopolitical uncertainties, including Donald Trump's return to the U.S. presidency and the implications such shifts could have for Ukraine's fight for sovereignty. Romantsova challenges the alarmist narratives often found in Western media, advocating instead for measured, actionable strategies over fear-driven catastrophism.

Romantsova's reflections shine a light on the resilience of the Ukrainian people, who, even amidst profound suffering, use humor as a defiant act of survival. As she poignantly underscores, ending the war demands more than hope—it requires a united global effort, stringent oversight, and an unwavering commitment to justice and security for the millions affected by this conflict.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) operates under an annual rotating presidency. Each year, the president must navigate the complex mandate outlined by the Council of Foreign Ministers, which consists of representatives from 57 member states—predominantly foreign ministers. How does Ukraine's current involvement reflect its priorities and challenges within this framework?

Oleksandra Romantsova: It is crucial to have influential players within the OSCE. I am one of six representatives from Ukraine, and we discuss various critical issues. Together with our partners from Russia and Belarus, we address war crimes and other urgent matters. It is clear that our first question to the council is: "What can be done?"

There are 57 member states, and each can contribute. They mentioned they could initiate and fund programs already underway, such as humanitarian aid and reconstruction projects. Significant financial support has been pledged, and discussions about sustaining assistance will continue next month. We emphasized the importance of communication. If negotiations arise, we must not overlook the reality of occupation—it cannot simply be undone overnight.

If the current frontline remains frozen, it means that approximately 3.5 million people will remain in Russian-occupied territories. While the exact number is unclear due to limited access

and documentation, this estimate highlights the scale of the crisis. People in these regions face daily dangers, including torture, killings, and other human rights abuses perpetrated by occupying forces. These atrocities have been ongoing since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Our primary concern is how the international community can support justice and security for these individuals while ensuring they are treated as citizens deserving of protection and dignity. This issue dominated our discussions. We also discussed the importance of international justice and its geopolitical implications for regions like Central Asia, which face their own challenges. Representatives from these areas and from Russia offered insights into their perspectives.

Jacobsen: Considering the return of Donald Trump to the White House, there's significant speculation about how his leadership could shape global dynamics. Trump's unpredictability has often been described as a double-edged sword: it can introduce flexibility in negotiations but also breeds substantial uncertainty. How do you foresee a possible Trump presidency influencing Ukraine's efforts toward conflict resolution?

The situation on the ground in Ukraine remains dire. Recent missile strikes by Russian forces have targeted not only military infrastructure but also civilian sites, including hospitals, cancer treatment centers, and residential buildings. These attacks often occur in urban areas devoid of military presence, constituting undeniable violations of international law. In your view, what measures are most urgently needed to stop these crimes and protect civilians from further harm?

Romantsova: I hope we can hold onto the current situation—maintain the existing groundwork —rather than dream about some unrealistic transformation. This is not about envisioning a perfect future but managing the present effectively. Ukraine needs a foreign policy that prioritizes its survival and sovereignty, not shifting focus to internal U.S. issues. This conflict must end, but stopping the war is not straightforward.

The only people who can stop this war are the people themselves. Ultimately, it is up to the collective will. Negotiations and agreements alone are not enough. They require stringent oversight and enforcement to ensure compliance. We have learned from past experiences, such as Russia's aggression over the past decade, that unchecked actions lead to escalation. Therefore, the international community must remain vigilant and committed to addressing Russian aggression in a structured and consistent manner.

It will not be easy, and it will not happen overnight. For instance, when Trump claimed he could resolve the conflict in 24 hours, Ukrainians found it laughable. Soldiers and civilians alike reacted with humour to such oversimplifications. One day to resolve this? That is far from reality.

Jacobsen: North American media frequently veers toward catastrophism, with narratives that often mirror political leanings. For instance, liberal-leaning outlets may frame opposing developments as apocalyptic, while conservative media often employs similarly extreme rhetoric when figures like Donald Trump gain traction. Both sides fuel a sense of impending collapse, whether predicting the erosion of rights or the loss of sovereignty for Ukraine. How does this polarized media landscape influence international perceptions of Ukraine's fight for survival?

This tendency toward alarmism was evident during the last U.S. election cycle, where both sides framed the stakes as nothing less than the end of American democracy. If Kamala Harris had won, some claimed it would signify democratic collapse for specific reasons. The same rhetoric was applied to Donald Trump's potential re-election, albeit for entirely different reasons. How can we encourage more balanced, solutions-driven discourse when discussing global crises like the war in Ukraine?

Romantsova: This rhetoric assumes that the entire world hinges on one moment or election, a flawed perspective. Life continues. The world does not stop. Neither America nor Ukraine will cease to exist. Seven billion people worldwide will still progress, even if the outcomes are not as ideal as imagined.

That said, we must remain grounded in reality. There is no quick fix or simplistic solution. Managing this conflict requires sustained effort, collaboration, and realism, not empty promises or exaggerated fears. Decisions must address real problems with practical solutions rather than perpetuate endless cycles of alarmism.

Jacobsen: Another challenge is the public's skewed perception of global crises. Many people in the West don't realize that half of the world's population lives in Southeast Asia, which profoundly impacts population density, resources, and geopolitical focus. Perspective matters greatly in shaping global narratives. How can we bring this kind of nuance to discussions about Ukraine's plight, particularly in the media?

It's also worth noting the resilience of Ukrainian culture, even amid profound hardship. Humor, as you've mentioned, plays a critical role in coping with the trauma of war. Ukrainians often find ways to joke about even the darkest situations—sometimes within hours of a missile strike destroying a friend's apartment complex. Could you elaborate on how this unique sense of humor serves as a survival mechanism in such devastating circumstances?

Romantsova: Oh, it's a term that came up after a press conference Putin held. He was trying to justify the invasion, saying something like, "It's just the beginning of the party," referring to the invasion of Ukraine. President Zelensky responded with humour and called Putin a "dumbass" during a public statement. It became a viral moment.

Jacobsen: You referenced a particularly striking anecdote: Zelensky calling Putin a "dumbass." Could you explain the context and significance of that moment? How does this type of rhetoric impact morale, both domestically and internationally?

Romantsova: Yes, it's an example of the sharp wit Ukrainians use, even in dire situations. The context makes it even more impactful. Shortly after, there was news that a Russian general responsible for the chemical division of the Russian military was reportedly killed in Moscow. Ukrainian intelligence allegedly used a jet-powered scooter to deliver explosives to his car.

Imagine that—a general managing Russia's chemical warfare operations taken out in such a creative way. In Kyiv, you see these small scooters everywhere, just lying around. The story reflects both ingenuity and the strange reality of the conflict. I don't think the U.S. media covered it in much detail, but it highlights modern warfare's dynamic and unpredictable nature.

Jacobsen: Regarding morale, what's Kyiv's current sentiment? Despite the relentless violence, how are people finding the strength to persevere, and what role does international support play in sustaining that resilience?

Romantsova: Ukrainians are exhausted but trying to focus on family. We just celebrated Christmas. Christmas traditionally brings people together. In Ukraine, we don't celebrate Christmas like some other countries do, and we have an extended season of festivities. It's more concentrated on the 24th and 25th, similar to Spain. Despite everything, people are trying to maintain some sense of normalcy and hope.

Jacobsen: That's a powerful reminder of resilience. Thank you for sharing this perspective.

Romantsova: This evening feels like my main moment to focus. Many people are trying to integrate their thoughts and keep their minds steady because it's horrible. Running a business, studying, or managing daily life while dealing with the war is difficult. Every week, life involves some form of support—helping a relative on the frontline, assisting someone teaching in a hospital, or caring for children studying in a basement due to the constant threat of missile strikes.

Your life starts to revolve around the war, and your behaviour adapts. Everything becomes intertwined with survival and the challenges of deadlines, trauma from COVID-19, and now the war. Many people struggle with the pressure to always perform at their best. Still, the reality of war introduces new challenges—like worrying about whether your home or even your road will survive another attack. Mentally, it's exhausting to try and maintain a sense of normalcy or excellence when the circumstances are so overwhelming.

Negotiations might arise, but no one expects an easy resolution or an ideal outcome for Ukraine. People feel that if negotiations happen, they'll still need to fight for Ukraine's interests during and after those discussions. It's just the reality of our situation.

Irina Tsukerman on the International Community's Failures in Ethiopia

2025/01/27

Irina Tsukerman is a New York-based attorney specializing in human rights, national security, and international law. As the editor-in-chief of The Washington Outsider, she offers incisive analysis on global affairs and champions human rights. Her expertise spans the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

Tsukerman has been outspoken in her criticism of the international community's inability to uphold the laws of war, enforce the Geneva Conventions, or impose meaningful sanctions on human rights violators. She argues that the complexities of modern conflicts—exacerbated by disinformation and waning media coverage—undermine accountability. Drawing attention to Ethiopia's marginalized status on the world stage, Tsukerman has also shed light on the influence of external actors such as Iran, Turkey, China, and Russia. She warns that the war's ripple effects in the Horn of Africa set a dangerous precedent, emboldening impunity and shaping the trajectory of conflicts like Sudan's civil war.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I'm joined today by Irina Tsukerman, a New York-based attorney specializing in human rights, national security, and the dynamics of information warfare. With a JD from Fordham University School of Law, she serves as president of **Scarab Rising, Inc.**, a boutique security analysis firm. Her expertise spans the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. As the editor-in-chief of The Washington Outsider, she provides sharp insights into global affairs and advocates for human rights and security worldwide.

Our discussion will focus on human rights in **Ethiopia**, particularly with the Tigray War. To begin, which international legal frameworks could address the Tigray War, and which of these, if any, have failed to be implemented effectively?

Irina Tsukerman: International institutions have not performed particularly well in applying international frameworks. There was some commentary and pressure regarding reported human rights violations, but it is very difficult to apply frameworks without accurate information about each side's actions in the conflict.

This is particularly challenging when identifying which participant in the conflict—more than two sides—committed specific violations. The general understanding is that all parties were involved in some form of human rights and humanitarian violations, but none of these violations were effectively addressed.

Various laws of war were violated. Anything related to the application of the Geneva Conventions was blatantly ignored, particularly regarding prisoners of war. They were not treated as such. Even though the various parties to the conflict were considered enemy combatants, they were not treated within the framework of the Geneva Conventions. They were not formally recognized as prisoners of war.

Instead, they were treated more like hostages, taken for trade at various points in time in a highly informal manner. There was significant cover-up and disinformation from all sides, particularly from the Ethiopian government, about what was happening.

This made enforcing any formal, structured international legal agreement extremely difficult. What is even more concerning is that there was no serious attempt to impose sanctions or implement foreign policy mechanisms that could have curtailed these massive human rights violations.

External parties outside **Ethiopia** were also involved, including Eritrea, as well as countries supplying weapons, primarily to the Ethiopian government, or smuggling weapons to other sides of the conflict. None of these parties were held accountable through any international or domestic mechanisms.

Attempts were made at internal peace talks and agreements mediated by elders from various communities. Although an attempt to settle the conflict internally was made, it was a profoundly imperfect solution. Ultimately, the Ethiopian government remained in power despite its responsibility for widespread human rights violations.

No one was brought to justice for these violations, and many individuals disappeared into prisons. There is no clear evidence that any judicial framework was applied domestically to resolve the conflict. Even after the formal conclusion of the war, the situation remains unresolved. There continue to be reports of random massacres, clashes, and other violent incidents.

Jacobsen: How does the principle of the Responsibility to Protect factor into this situation? Has it been seriously considered at any stage of this conflict?

Tsukerman: It certainly was part of the discussions, but the reporting on the issue was subpar to the point of being criminal and negligent. After the first few months of the war, the international media's reporting dwindled to almost nothing.

There were some reports by international human rights organizations, but there was never a significant campaign to push the international community into action.

Even peacekeeping forces were not seriously considered, in part due to the complexity of the conflict, which spanned the entire country and involved multiple ethnic communities, political entities, and international forces, including those from Eritrea and mercenaries from other countries.

The conflict also implicated other zones and had the potential to spill over into broader issues, **including the ongoing trilateral tensions** between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over water-related concerns. As a result, there was no significant push to send UN peacekeeping forces or to implement any effective actions, and there was never a major international discussion to address this seriously.

We must also remember that the war began during the pandemic. Part of the international community's lack of action was its preoccupation with COVID-19. The logistical challenges posed by lockdowns and closed borders made sending any international contingent impractical.

Jacobsen: Could this conflict have broader legal ramifications in the Horn of Africa? For example, could groups with malicious intent toward other ethnic communities use the international community's failures during the Tigray War as a pretext to act with impunity?

Tsukerman: Absolutely, and it has already happened since then. The number one issue is that **Ethiopians** of all backgrounds, regardless of ethnic group, felt forgotten—especially in light of other conflicts that broke out later. They believed their conflict was neglected because it occurred in Africa and did not attract significant international interest.

Frankly, there were a lot of racist undertones to these concerns. For example, many believed that racial biases influenced the lack of serious international attention despite the massive casualties and deliberate violations of human rights. These were intentional massacres, not merely exchanges of fire or collateral damage. That perception of neglect and bias remains a significant concern.

Another concern was that Western countries did not have a particularly good political or strategic approach to Africa. Even when they had good intentions, they could not properly apply them. A lack of institutional knowledge regarding African conflicts and political matters complicated the issue.

There was also apathy and the perception that this conflict was not geopolitically important or impactful on broader international considerations. It was seen as less significant than conflicts involving global hegemons, such as Russia, or potential conflicts between China and Taiwan— conflicts involving major powers with global reach. Because **Ethiopia** is not one of those powers, and the conflict was largely domestic, the international community treated it as less relevant.

This neglect allowed perpetrators of human rights violations to get away with literal murder, remain in power, and maintain antagonistic relations with external powers, which could potentially spark future conflicts. It also set a dangerous precedent for others in the region. This was evident in the Sudanese Civil War, where parties observed how the international community mishandled—or ignored—the Ethiopian conflict. They concluded that resolving their power struggles through violent clashes would not face significant international pushback.

The international community often gained from such conflicts by providing weapons, consulting services, or even mediators without any substantial push to end them or the necessary tools.

Another factor was the involvement of international powers. Western powers took a backseat, while countries like Iran and Turkey became significantly involved. Iran and Turkey, for instance, supplied weapons, including drones, which became a critical military dimension of the conflict. These drones enabled the Ethiopian government to commit further human rights violations. Additionally, China and Russia were active on the ground, and tensions with Egypt over water-related disputes added another layer of complexity.

Some countries even backed particular ethnic groups for their strategic interests, further complicating the process. Border and sectarian issues added another dimension. Tribes from neighbouring countries became involved, pursuing their local interests unrelated to the larger political dynamics of the conflict.

All these factors made the conflict multidimensional, complicated, and challenging to resolve. It was also difficult to communicate the nature of the conflict in simple terms to the rest of the

international community, which contributed to its neglect. The complexity and sectarian tensions in various African regions made this conflict an easy model to imitate elsewhere.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time today. We should also have another session discussing the broader role of weapons and the **tensions with Egypt**.

Tsukerman: Absolutely. Let me know when you can do the follow-up, and I'll make it happen.

Chie Sunada on SGI's Pursuit of a Nuclear-Free World

2025/01/28

Chie Sunada is the Director of Disarmament and Human Rights at **Soka Gakkai International** (SGI), a global Buddhist organization committed to peace, culture, and education. In this role, she has actively participated in various initiatives promoting **nuclear disarmament** and human rights.

During the segment on Article 12, the second Meeting of States Parties to the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, she delivered a statement highlighting the role of education in advancing the treaty's universalization. Soka Gakkai International (SGI) aligns its commitment to nuclear abolition with sponsoring the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize Forum. Rooted in Josei Toda's 1957 anti-nuclear declaration, SGI advances peace through education, advocacy, and partnerships, including with the Nobel Institute.

The forum highlighted hibakusha testimonies from Dr. Masao Tomonaga and Keiko Ogura, inspiring action against nuclear threats. Key objectives include No First Use (NFU) dialogues and exploring disarmament pathways. SGI's resources, such as educational tools and global hibakusha stories, amplify awareness. Collaborative efforts with the Norwegian Nobel Institute promote global engagement in non-proliferation and disarmament initiatives.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How does Soka Gakkai International's support for the Nobel Peace Prize Forum align with their long-standing commitment to nuclear abolition?

Chie Sunada: SGI's peace movement can be traced back to the famous 1957 declaration calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons made by the second president of Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, at a youth gathering. Based on the Buddhist principle of the utmost respect for life's inherent dignity and humanity's right to existence, SGI has consistently worked towards the abolition of nuclear weapons. Its activities range from grassroots education and awareness-raising to signature campaigns and advocacy at the United Nations.

For decades, the SGI has recorded and collected the stories of the Hibakusha and participated in debates on and in support of Nobel Peace Prize laureates, especially in the nuclear field. In response to the heightened risk of nuclear weapons use following the Ukraine crisis, the late SGI President Daisaku Ikeda (1928-2023) issued three statements, calling on nuclear-weapon states and nuclear-dependent states to pledge No First use of nuclear weapons.

The Nobel Peace Prize Forum 2024 theme was addressing the growing nuclear threat, which aligns closely with SGI's recent concerns. Therefore, in July 2024, the Nobel Institute invited us to sponsor the forum, and we responded positively.

Coincidentally, the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations (Nihon Hidankyo). Please allow me to extend our sincere congratulations to the members of Hidankyo. We are honored to have participated in the Nobel Peace Prize Forum, which was held amid growing momentum for nuclear abolition.

The Soka Gakkai is a global, community-based Buddhist organization with over 12 million members worldwide. It promotes peace, culture, and education centered on respect for the dignity of life. As a non-governmental organization, Soka Gakkai International (SGI) has been in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) since 1983.

Jacobsen: How do including hibakusha testimonies, such as those of Masao Tomonaga and Keiko Ogura, contribute to the goals of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum and Youth Dialogue?

Sunada: Initially, the forum was planned to feature only a panel of experts. However, recognizing the importance of sharing the reality of atomic bomb survivors, the SGI proposed to invite the two speakers from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to join us.

Dr. Masao Tomonaga is a hibakusha (atomic bomb survivor) who, as a hematologist, has been conducting research on leukemia and providing medical care to hibakusha. Ms. Keiko Ogura is the founder of Hiroshima Interpreters for Peace, and she has shared her experiences as a hibakusha with around 2,000 people every year. In 2023, she shared her experiences with world leaders at the G7 Hiroshima Summit. At the beginning of the forum, when both speakers shared their personal experiences of the atomic bombing and called for everyone to take action and work together to achieve a nuclear-free world, the audience responded with thunderous applause.

In his keynote speech, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi shared how meeting a hibakusha almost 40 years ago inspired his current career path. I hope Ms. Ogura and Dr. Tomonaga's stories at the forum will motivate others to participate and take action for nuclear abolition.

Jacobsen: What are the key objectives of "Avoiding Nuclear War: The Case for No First Use"?

Sunada: Experts on nuclear issues and security from various regions were invited to the high-level panel that followed the forum.

Discuss measures to strengthen cooperation and enhance consultation, coordination, and institutional measures, including the possibility of NFU. Methods of regular consultation, making better information available on NFU for practical and educational purposes.

Discussion of opportunities/ideas for a potential NFU regime, including a presentation of potential unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral pathways.

Exploration of interconnected global challenges and how to strengthen complementarity between NFU and the treaties and agreements, norms, and practices that make up the international disarmament and non-proliferation regime.

Dialogue on how to strengthen security assurances for states that are perceived to benefit from nuclear deterrence through accelerated ratification/implementation of relevant protocols by nuclear powers and the reservations made to those protocols.

To expedite discussions on nuclear disarmament leading up to the 80th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki of the atomic bombing. The discussion held at the High-level panel is ongoing.

Jacobsen: How does the Youth Dialogue with hibakusha in Oslo aim to engage younger generations in the abolishment of nuclear weapons?

Sunada: In his Nobel Speech, the leader of the Norwegian Nobel Committee stated, "Their personal stories humanize history, lifting the veil of forgetfulness and drawing us out of our daily routines. They bridge the gap between "those who were there" and we others untouched by the violence of the past. They are living reminders of what is at stake." The Youth Dialogue with Hibakusha brought together local Oslo junior and senior high school students, University of Oslo students, and members of SGI Norway. For many participants, it was their first hearing directly from a hibakusha.

The hibakusha shared their experiences of the atomic bombing, showing the immense strength it took to survive and continue fighting for a nuclear-free world for 80 years.

It reminded us of the significance of providing opportunities for young people to engage with testimonies of hibakusha, even through video, thereby learning directly about the devastating realities and humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons. It can be hard to imagine what terrible destruction is caused by a nuclear weapon. However, after listening to the hibakusha, many participants realized they couldn't ignore the issue.

Jacobsen: How do these testimonies help further a culture of peace?

Sunada: Ambassador Anwarul K. Chowdhury, former Under-Secretary-General and High Representative of the UN and Founder of the Global Movement for the Culture of Peace, said, "It is essential to remember that the Culture of Peace requires a change of our hearts and mindset. The Culture of Peace can be achieved through simple living, changing your behavior, and changing how you relate to each other. By immersing ourselves in a culture that supports and promotes peace, individual efforts will – over time– combine and unite, and peace, security, and sustainability will emerge. This is the only way we shall achieve a just and sustainable peace in the world."

The hibakusha share their stories because of their deep desire that no one else would have to suffer what they went through. And when we receive the gift of their testimonies, we also develop the same determination.

Listening to the testimonies of hibakusha over and over again, many of us have become determined to work towards a world without nuclear weapons. I am one of them. I believe their words have the power to resonate with our longing for peace.

Jacobsen: How does the forum's topic, "Nukes: How to Counter the Threat," address current global challenges?

Sunada: In the forum, the moderator Professor Andrew Futter, University of Leicester, gave a very clear and precise analysis of the current challenges we face.

The emergence of rapid technological advancements, particularly in areas like AI, cyber, and advanced conventional weapons, poses significant new challenges to nuclear security beyond traditional nuclear modernization.

A growing divide exists among states regarding the role and value of nuclear weapons. This includes "nuclear traditionalists" who emphasize their importance, those seeking conventional solutions to nuclear challenges, and a rising wave of "activists" pushing for nuclear disarmament.

The rise of multipolarity, with the increasing influence of the Global South and other middle powers, complicates the traditional nuclear security landscape dominated by the US and other major powers.

The decline of existing arms control agreements, such as the INF Treaty, and uncertainty surrounding the future of the New START treaty point to a weakening of the international framework for nuclear security.

Nuclear security challenges cannot be considered in isolation. They must be analyzed in the broader context of increasingly interconnected global threats like climate change and sustainable development.

Jacobsen: What resources does SGI provide to promote the message of nuclear abolition?

Sunada: We have created various tools for disarmament education and awareness-raising, such as exhibitions and hibakusha testimonies in video and book form.

One of the most recent videos is "**I Want To Live On: The Untold Stories of the Polygon**," a documentary film about the Semipalatinsk Test Site in Kazakhstan. The aim of this is to promote global recognition of global hibakusha, those who have been affected by nuclear testing, uranium mines, and the production of nuclear weapons around the world.

Jacobsen: How might the partnership between SGI, the Norwegian Nobel Institute, and other cosponsors help broader global collaboration on non-proliferation and disarmament?

Sunada: Having had the opportunity to participate as a sponsor and a co-organizer for the Nobel Peace Prize Forum and other related events, we exchanged views on nuclear weapons issues with experts from the Nobel Institute and other organizations. This provided us with valuable insights for our activities. To achieve nuclear disarmament, we constantly need new perspectives and approaches. In this sense, I believe that working together with various organizations is meaningful.

I understand that the Nobel Peace Prize Forum was attended by and viewed online by people who may not typically follow nuclear weapons issues closely. This provided a unique opportunity to engage and foster their interest in the topic.

The Norwegian Nobel Committee and the Nobel Institute are exploring ways to amplify the impact of the Nobel Peace Prize by supporting the work of the Peace Prize laureates. In this regard, ongoing partnerships with SGI and other groups may be possible.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Chie.

Ukraine's Challenges and Opportunities: Irina Tsukerman Talks Policy and Peace

2025/01/30

Irina Tsukerman, a New York-based human rights and national security attorney, brings a global perspective shaped by her expertise in international law, media strategy, and information warfare. As the editor-in-chief of The Washington Outsider, Tsukerman provides sharp analysis of geopolitical affairs while championing human rights advocacy. Her work has spanned critical regions, including the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

In this interview, Tsukerman criticizes the international community's chronic failure to uphold the laws of war, enforce the Geneva Conventions, or impose meaningful sanctions on human rights offenders. Layers of conflict complexity, rampant disinformation, and inadequate media coverage have all obstructed accountability efforts.

She draws particular attention to the harrowing abuses in Ukraine, marked by mass abductions and forced labor. Tsukerman juxtaposes these atrocities with Russia's limited internal societal shifts, probing deeper issues like gender parity, demographic pressures, and the psychological state of authoritarian leaders.

The conversation delves into sanctions as a geopolitical tool and a stress test for global alliances, analyzing how BRICS nations navigate around such measures. Tsukerman also highlights the sociopolitical undercurrents—paranoia, regime health, and the erosion of democratic values— that shape the durability of autocratic and democratic systems. Above all, she underscores that long-term stability hinges on a commitment to equality and sustained civic engagement.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Irina Tsukerman is a New York-based attorney specializing in national security and human rights. She heads Rising Incorporated, a strategic advisory firm, and has been an active member of the bar since 2010 when she earned her Juris Doctor from Fordham University School of Law. Her work focuses on foreign affairs, Middle East policy, and international security.

Her insights have appeared in The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Kyiv Post, and Trends Research & Advisory. The Jewish Week recognized Irina for her leadership as a "36 Under 36" honoree. She is multilingual and frequently pursues speaking, publishing, and collaboration opportunities.

Today, we'll explore the situation in Ukraine. From an international law and human rights standpoint, how would you assess the scale of abuses since the start of the full-scale invasion and the adoption of United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1?

Irina Tsukerman: The situation regarding events unfolding in Ukraine has been extremely bleak, if not catastrophic. Reports estimate that over 90,000 Ukrainian casualties have occurred, although breaking these figures down is complex. These numbers are approximate and have been verified to an extent. Still, there are also unverified figures that could be significantly higher.

One of the most pressing yet underreported issues, beyond the sheer number of those killed or wounded, is the mass abduction of individuals to Russia. While some attention has been given to the forced abduction of children, with several thousand cases documented, reports suggest that over 400,000 individuals, including adults, have been forcibly relocated to Russia. Many are believed to have been sent to Siberia or other remote regions, potentially in work camp-like conditions.

There is also evidence indicating that some of these individuals may have been victims of human trafficking. Additionally, there are unsubstantiated but persistent allegations of illegal organ harvesting and extrajudicial killings. It has been extraordinarily difficult to confirm these claims due to the lack of access and transparency, but what is known is that large-scale forced displacement and ethnic cleansing have taken place.

While there have been limited mediation efforts resulting in the liberation of some abducted children, there has been no comparable progress for the disappeared adults. Their fate remains unknown, with little information available. The Ukrainian government has been preoccupied with immediate and critical needs—primarily military operations and basic humanitarian aid—leaving limited resources for addressing the issue of missing individuals.

Jacobsen: Are there reports from individuals who escaped these conditions and shared their experiences? Do we have better insights into where these abducted civilians might have been taken? Are there overlooked stories or regions that independent researchers should investigate?

Tsukerman: Some of the abducted children have returned and provided testimony about their experiences. However, regarding the adults, the lack of focus and resources on this issue means their stories, if any exist, remain largely untold. I haven't heard of any clear accounts.

Many of them are believed to have been taken to Siberia and may still be there—at least those who survived the journey. That's why I'm emphasizing this as one of the lesser-discussed stories. Moving people across such vast territories, under heavy guard, and to remote regions of the country makes it incredibly difficult for them to escape. Unless there is a formal exchange, getting back is nearly impossible.

These civilians, not formal prisoners of war, might be exchanged through official mediation channels. The abducted civilians are being treated entirely outside the protections of international law.

There have been well-documented massacres and accounts of torture. Still, the challenge lies in documenting who was involved, how it was carried out, and who is ultimately responsible. The chaotic conditions on the ground make it extremely difficult to gather clear evidence. Any proper investigation of such crimes requires direct access to the crime scene, the perpetrators, and witnesses—none of which has been easily accessible.

This war has created a uniquely fluid and dynamic environment where events unfold rapidly, making it hard to trace exactly what happens in each case. What's clear is that their soldiers have been indoctrinated. Many of them have been actively encouraged to participate in atrocities, fostering a different mindset compared to the 2014 invasion, which was more of a conventional military takeover.

The level of brutality and butchery we're seeing now signifies a far greater degree of dehumanization. Over the last decade, this has escalated significantly, creating conditions where such atrocities are far more likely to occur.

Jacobsen: What evidence exists regarding human rights abuses in Ukraine's territories currently occupied by Russian forces?

Tsukerman: Yes. In the occupied territories, civilians have been increasingly lied to and misled. They were promised that their humanitarian needs would be met. Still, their resources have been systematically confiscated over time, leaving them in dire conditions.

These civilians are essentially stuck in dehumanizing circumstances. They've become more like indentured servants than citizens. They are treated worse than the average Russian Federation citizen, who is already subjected to significant rights limitations. People in the occupied territories are treated as second or even third-class individuals.

Their property has been confiscated for war purposes, and their civil and economic rights are increasingly disregarded. As a result, many are facing severe financial losses and economic destitution. They've also been exploited for propaganda purposes. Now, with the mounting hardships of war, these individuals are seen as disposable by the occupying forces.

Jacobsen: I've spoken with displaced residents of Kharkiv, and it remains the most remarkable city I've visited in Ukraine. I recall telling my colleague, Remus Cernea—a former leader of Romania's Green Party and now, unexpectedly, a freelance war correspondent for Newsweek Romania—that it would be tragic if Kharkiv or its oblast were to be destroyed. The city's architecture is uniquely Eastern European, embodying a cultural depth transcending political or historical divides. Losing that heritage would be deeply painful.

Shifting focus, what is the state of internal human rights within Russia under Putin's administration? How are violations being addressed, particularly concerning soldiers who desert or citizens who openly protest the regime?

Tsukerman: Incidentally, that's where I was born. Those situations are incredibly dangerous. Deserting soldiers or protesters face immediate and severe consequences. In Russia, during wartime, it's not uncommon for deserters to be shot on sight. Many Russian soldiers who try to desert often aim to defect instead, knowing that if they are caught fleeing, they can be executed. By defecting to Ukrainian forces, they might secure basic POW protections or even the chance to fight for Ukraine, which is far preferable to being killed.

There are also reports of systematic physical abuse against soldiers who disobey orders or make mistakes. Their superiors have beaten some, and there are even stories of soldiers retaliating by killing their commanders after being forced to commit brutal acts or thrown into hopeless situations. These soldiers have been lied to, manipulated, and sent into battle with little to no equipment. They're essentially being used as cannon fodder in wave attacks against Ukraine. While these attacks sometimes advance the offensive, they result in massive casualties among poorly equipped and poorly trained troops.

There is a clear and troubling pattern. Many recruits come from ethnic minority regions in the peripheral territories of Russia rather than Moscow or Saint Petersburg. These areas are already subject to systemic discrimination, and the people there are viewed as expendable. There's a stark imbalance in the number of ethnic minorities being sent to fight compared to ethnic Russians from major urban centers.

In the past, the Russian government tried to compensate the families of soldiers killed in action. Still, these payments have decreased or ceased as the economy deteriorates. Authorities have also been reported to have confiscated money from private bank accounts above certain limits, which leaves people with no incentive to save. Instead, they are forced to hide their money or invest it elsewhere to avoid being seized for war efforts.

Jacobsen: The global response was swift during the first ten days of the full-scale invasion. The United Nations General Assembly's 11th Emergency Special Session condemned Russia's aggression with a 141-to-5 vote, calling for troop withdrawal and the return of annexed territory. Since then, how has the international community maintained pressure? Are these continued appeals effective when confronting a nation as prominent as Russia?

Tsukerman: No. They have not been effective, mainly because one of the permanent, veto-carrying members of the UN Security Council is China, which has essentially backed Russia every step of the way. The other veto-holding country is Russia, which, of course, will not vote against its actions.

Both countries have been actively lobbying other nations, particularly those in the Global South, former Soviet bloc states, and former colonies, to secure political support. They've also focused on cultivating practical cooperation through mechanisms such as sanctions evasion, trade agreements, and political arrangements.

For instance, many countries have outright disregarded the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin. Countries such as Mongolia and Afghanistan, among others, have indicated that they would not comply with such an order. Meanwhile, Russia and Iran have strengthened their bilateral ties, creating financial structures and mechanisms to bypass international sanctions. The BRICS bloc has also been a critical resource for sanctions-busting efforts.

Its primary effectiveness has been facilitating sanctions evasion and providing a platform for technology sharing and transfer within its member states. Beyond that, it hasn't achieved much on other fronts. However, it has allowed Russia to exploit export-import controls and trade agreement loopholes. Initially, Russia relied heavily on discounted oil sales to countries like India, which helped sustain its economy. However, as caps on Russian oil imports were imposed and pressure from other countries increased, India began shifting its focus to Gulf states for oil supplies.

As a result, Russia's value as a supplier has diminished. Now, Russia is circumventing energy sanctions by diluting its oil with other types of oil in places like Singapore and Saudi Arabia. When mixed with fuel from other sources, it becomes difficult to trace the origin, enabling Russia to sell the oil under the radar.

Jacobsen: Regarding broader strategy, how impactful have diplomatic and economic pressures on Russia been? Has the UN exerted meaningful influence on the situation?

Tsukerman: The UN's political pressure has been largely symbolic and ineffective. Russian officials' high-level visits to other countries have continued unabated. Russia has maintained its ability to negotiate contracts and secure deliveries in developing countries.

For example, Russia is still working on large-scale projects like civil nuclear reactors in Egypt and Turkey. It has also managed to leverage trade hubs in countries like Kyrgyzstan, which serve as intermediaries for trade with the European Union. In essence, Russia has used its diplomatic and economic relationships to turn the situation to its advantage, even under significant international sanctions.

The sanctions, in general, have not been entirely effective. For example, the U.S. never implemented sanctions on aluminum and other metals from Russia. Until recently, the EU didn't address these areas either, which led to a doubling of Russian metal imports in the second year of the war. So, as you can see, the sanctions regime is full of loopholes. Political commentary becomes meaningless when ongoing political, diplomatic, economic, and social mechanisms allow normal relations to persist.

Jacobsen: Pew Research projects that Russia's population could shrink by 25 million by mid-century—a demographic crisis with significant geopolitical ramifications. What challenges do economies face when experiencing such a drastic population decline over a single generation? Given Russia's reliance on oil and gas revenues, how do sanctions and the workarounds utilized by BRICS nations affect the Federation's long-term stability and adherence to international norms?

Tsukerman: That's precisely why they've been importing Ukrainians—essentially as forced labour to extract energy, metals, and other natural resources. This has provided them with a source of free or near-free labour. Additionally, Russia may need to rely on Chinese workers in the future, particularly in the Far East, where there are historical territorial disputes. This creates a precarious dynamic, as some of that land originally belonged to China.

Russia has a serious demographic problem. However, due to automation in extraction industries and reliance on cheap foreign labour, the Kremlin is far more focused on immediate gains for the elites than on the country's long-term viability. It prioritizes extracting as much wealth as possible in the short term while consolidating power.

That's why many of Russia's elites have moved their wealth abroad or attempted to secure assets elsewhere to the extent possible. This has created controversy around Western sanctions, such as confiscating assets and their subsequent use for Ukraine's military or loan repayments. While Russia's long-term economic prospects are grim, the Kremlin is attempting to mitigate this by exploiting foreign labour and resources to maximize short-term gains.

Jacobsen: What are the prospects for peace—or prolonged conflict—if Trump regains the U.S. presidency? How might the growing influence of conservative and libertarian movements in the West shape future diplomatic efforts?

Tsukerman: Trump is likely to push for some "frozen conflict" or a deal that benefits Russia, as his instincts and advisers—like Tucker Carlson—favour such approaches. However, Russia has consistently rejected even favourable peace proposals. This could force Trump's hand, requiring him to pressure Russia because their refusal to cooperate would make it impossible for him to present a deal as a political victory.

The Russian administration has painted itself into a corner. They have made any reasonable compromise impossible, hastily committing to antagonism. Even if certain agreements would ultimately benefit its geopolitical objectives, it has become trapped by the need to maintain credibility domestically and internationally.

Jacobsen: Have there been any notable shifts in the stance of European populist parties regarding Russia? Are these movements influencing their nations' foreign policies or support structures?

Tsukerman: Yes, dissatisfaction is growing. Populist parties in Europe that have ties to Russia are losing traction. For example, we've seen changes in public opinion in Switzerland and Slovakia. Even Viktor Orbán, a long-time supporter of closer ties with Russia, is losing popularity in Hungary. This signals a broader shift as European populations grow increasingly wary of leaders associated with Russian policies.

AfD in Germany is highly unlikely to gain significant political control, even with efforts like Musk's to influence the landscape. Nigel Farage, too, has had to moderate his rhetoric on Russia following the invasion in 2022. He's stepped back from some of his previous positions. Similarly, the Reform Party in the UK is not gaining the votes needed to dominate the political landscape.

In the short term, these parties don't have a bright future. People are starting to see that they don't deliver tangible results, and the ultimate beneficiary of their rhetoric appears to be Putin, not the average citizen.

Jacobsen: With Russia losing economic leverage, do populist movements or other actors propose viable long-term visions for their countries?

Tsukerman: There's very little they can offer. From the average citizen's perspective, aligning with Russia doesn't provide economic or political benefits. A pro-Western stance offers far more opportunities.

China might capitalize on this situation and push its agenda. Still, even China is experiencing significant internal financial problems. Its ability to expand influence as it once did is increasingly limited. The more isolated China becomes, the harder it will be to project economic power abroad, mainly because it is losing foreign direct investment.

While domestic investors might inject more capital in the short term, there's only so much they can do. Suppose Western countries take stronger measures to protect their intellectual property and decouple technologically from China. In that case, the long-term outlook for China will become bleak.

Yes, China has made significant investments in areas like AI, supported by the intellectual groundwork laid in the past. However, if the West becomes more serious about technological independence, China will struggle to maintain its current trajectory.

Jacobsen: Russia and China both face medium- and long-term demographic challenges. However, China's larger population provides it with more resilience. Declining birth rates, driven by evolving social trends, are a critical concern for both nations. In many cases, women attain higher education and career opportunities than men, leading women and men to forgo parenthood. Meanwhile, autocratic regimes often curtail gender equality, further alienating their populations and exacerbating demographic decline. How do xenophobic policies and gender parity issues affect the longevity of such regimes?

Tsukerman: Xenophobia plays a significant role in both Russia and China, though in different ways. In Russia, there's a marked ethnic divide, while in China, it manifests in crackdowns on groups like the Uyghurs. These policies deepen societal fractures, making long-term unity under these regimes more difficult.

Gender parity issues further complicate the situation. When people feel disenfranchised—whether due to gender inequality or ethnic discrimination—they become less invested in their communities and the state itself.

It all ties back to a broader nihilistic view of the future. If people have no hope for their futures, they're unlikely to invest in their communities or feel loyalty to the state, leading to societal decay.

For example, in Russia, there's a massive AIDS epidemic—not because of a lack of education or access to medical care, but because people don't care. When basic infrastructure and hope are absent, it's impossible to foster the kind of societal loyalty or stability needed for long-term autocratic or oligarchic governance.

There's also a high rate of alcoholism in Russia, driven by this pervasive social nihilism and a complete lack of optimism about the future. It seems like people are, in a way, slowly killing themselves prematurely. Women in Russia, and to some extent in China, remain in highly subservient positions. While there are a few high-profile figures—such as top propagandists or the wives of state officials—paraded around, domestic abuse is rampant.

In addition, there's a high maternal mortality rate, and child mortality rates remain significant, even though women are being pressured or compelled to reproduce more. The outlook for families in these countries, especially when they lack essential opportunities, is bleak. Yes, in the West, people may choose not to have large families. Still, the rate of societal deterioration is far more severe in countries where the state has no genuine interest in the well-being of its people.

The misogynistic and anti-family attitudes in these regimes make it clear that it's not about supporting families—it's about producing new soldiers for the regime or servants for the state. If you're giving birth to children only to see them drafted into war later, there's little incentive to want to build a family. So, despite all the propaganda about alleged Western depravity and corruption, the West offers far better conditions for building families than Russia or China.

Jacobsen: Let's consider a cultural parallel. During my tenure with Humanists International—where I served as Secretary General—I visited Iceland. What struck me was how deeply gender parity was embedded in daily life, even in blue-collar settings. In Reykjavik, for example, social norms in bars were simple: regardless of gender, if you were interested in someone, you'd buy them a drink. There was no pressure for one gender to pay over the other.

In contrast, many working-class communities in North America still adhere to traditional expectations, where men are expected to pay.

Setting aside East-West divisions or the Russia-Ukraine conflict, what lessons can a country like Iceland—hailed by the World Economic Forum as the most gender-equal nation for over a decade—offer regarding the role of gender parity in sustaining governance, whether democratic or authoritarian?

Tsukerman: You're right to highlight the importance of investing in gender parity for sustainable populations and governance. However, we need to consider Iceland's context. Its population ranges from 250,000 to 300,000, about the size of a medium city in the United States. Because of its small population, it isn't easy to make broad extrapolations for larger societies.

That said, Iceland is an interesting case study in social cohesion. Its relatively homogenous culture makes it easier for people to share norms, feel comfortable, and maintain gender-equal practices. Scandinavian and Scandinavian-adjacent cultures tend to be highly conformist, reinforcing these shared values.

However, applying Iceland's example to much larger or more diverse nations, like Russia or China, becomes significantly more challenging. These countries face deeper structural and cultural barriers to gender equality. While Iceland's model is valuable as an experiment, its scalability is limited when dealing with nations with millions—or even billions—of people.

Once something becomes the norm in one community, it can affect society, making everyone feel more comfortable. That dynamic might not hold in more heterogeneous societies, where different cultures have varying social expectations.

Interestingly, the war in Ukraine has pushed women to the forefront—not just in their professional or social functions but also in combat roles, on par with men. This is a unique situation. Even in Israel, where women have long participated in the military, the number of women in active combat roles has historically been much smaller.

What we're seeing in Ukraine is unprecedented. Women are now participating in combat positions in numbers comparable to men, which is not the traditional role for women in war. Historically, women played supporting roles during wars or took over positions vacated by men. But this time, because Ukraine faces an existential threat and doesn't have enough people, women are on the front lines.

This will likely affect gender dynamics, societal relations, and the country's rebuilding process. The constant state of "fighting mode" is reshaping traditional roles and fostering a sense of equality, camaraderie, and informality in social interactions—similar to what's observed in Iceland but driven by entirely different circumstances.

In Russia, women play significant roles as propagandists and local supporters of the war effort. Still, their overall societal roles haven't shifted due to men being sent to war. The traditional dynamic remains essentially unchanged. Men are still drafted and sent to the front lines, while women continue in their supporting roles.

Jacobsen: Does the age and health of world leaders influence geopolitical decision-making? Zelensky starkly contrasts older leaders like Putin, Trump, Xi Jinping, and Orbán.

Age, combined with health factors such as obesity, can shape leadership approaches. Many male leaders, particularly in Russia, have shorter life expectancies due to poor health habits, stress, and substance use.

How might these conditions impact their choices or urgency to secure a lasting legacy? Could this explain risk-taking behavior, such as launching wars or pursuing aggressive policies in their twilight years?

Tsukerman: Many of these leaders also have the resources to extend their lifespans well beyond what would normally be expected for someone in their demographic. They have access to the best healthcare, advanced medical treatments, and ways to mitigate some factors that shorten life expectancy.

Even so, the average man in Russia or China in their age group—without their level of wealth— would not live very long under similar conditions of obesity, unhealthy habits, and extreme stress. These realities underscore the psychological and geopolitical calculations that may come into play as leaders approach the later stages of their lives.

Life can be good for a dictator if they manage to avoid being poisoned or killed. Theoretically, they can enjoy their wealth and protect themselves far beyond what's possible for an average person. Take Putin, for instance: His paranoia about COVID-19 led him to take extreme measures to avoid exposure.

By contrast, leaders like Trump, who also contracted COVID, received treatment and remained active and publicly visible afterward. Similarly, Biden and other officials didn't wholly isolate themselves. They maintained public appearances and stayed relatively engaged. Putin, on the other hand, was the opposite. He was, and remains, highly paranoid—not just about germs but also about potential assassination attempts, including the possibility of radiation exposure or other threats.

This level of paranoia is typical for authoritarian rulers. On the one hand, it drives them to take extreme precautions to ensure their safety. Still, on the other hand, it's incredibly stressful. The constant fear of betrayal, illness, or attack undoubtedly takes a toll on their mental and physical health.

Dictators like Putin accumulate immense wealth, wield enormous power, and enjoy extravagant lifestyles, but they are also deeply invested in prolonging their lives. Despite nuclear threats and rhetoric, these leaders don't want to die. They want to preserve their legacy, enjoy their wealth, and maintain their grip on power for as long as possible.

For example, Putin lives in an opulent palace with thousands of rooms. This isn't the behaviour of someone who expects or plans to die soon. His actions suggest he is doing everything possible to extend his lifespan and safeguard his position.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Irina.

A Deep Dive into Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis with Sara Pantuliano

2025/02/02

Sara Pantuliano, Chief Executive of ODI Global, has built a career at the intersection of humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and international development.

Her advisory roles have included positions with The New Humanitarian, SOS Sahel, Oxford University's Refugee Studies Centre, the UN Association of the UK, and the UN Population Fund's ICPD25 High-Level Commission. In 2016, she was part of the Independent Team of Advisers tasked by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with reforming the UN development system.

Pantuliano's fieldwork experience includes leading a high-profile UN humanitarian response in Sudan's Nuba Mountains, directing the Peacebuilding Unit for UNDP Sudan, and observing the IGAD-mediated Sudan peace process. She has also lectured at the University of Dar es Salaam and holds a doctorate in Politics and International Studies from the University of Leeds.

Recognized for her leadership in peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, and development, Pantuliano was named a Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in the 2024 New Year Honours. Her writings explore the interconnected crises of conflict and climate change, particularly how desertification worsens tensions between pastoralists and farmers in vulnerable regions.

Through ODI Global's podcast **Think Change**, Pantuliano amplifies critical issues facing marginalized communities. She highlights the growing disparity between Khartoum's elites, who can escape instability, and those in remote regions left to endure survival-level hardships. A vocal critic of international aid's short-term focus, she calls for a greater emphasis on sustaining livelihoods and education during protracted crises. Her advocacy for decentralized governance underscores the need to empower local civil society and rethink policy frameworks to enhance long-term effectiveness.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for joining me, Sarah. Although you haven't visited Sudan in several years, you've worked extensively on issues related to the country and have closely followed recent developments. The ongoing conflict in Sudan is crucial to highlight, especially given that Western media often prioritizes crises like Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine—both undeniably significant—while other conflicts are overshadowed. How has humanitarian access in Sudan evolved over the past five years as the conflict has deepened?

Sara Pantuliano: I appreciate your focus on Sudan. As you mentioned, much of the global media's attention is directed toward other crises. Still, the humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan is one of the largest in the world today. Even though some conflicts appear more dramatic and are more frequently featured in news coverage, Sudan's crisis is staggering in terms of casualties, displacement, and the sheer number of refugees created by this latest wave of violence.

From the outset, humanitarian access has been extremely limited, but I must clarify what we mean by "access." If we are referring to international humanitarian organizations' ability to deliver aid, that has been severely restricted since the conflict began—and it remains so today.

Some cross-border access from Chad is available for those in Darfur, but very little access elsewhere, and only a small amount of humanitarian aid reaches eastern Sudan.

However, one of the most remarkable aspects of the response has been the strong civil society-led mutual aid and support network. This is a powerful and transformative model of assistance in Sudan. The problem is that it lacks adequate funding. There is very limited financial support for the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and local grassroots initiatives providing lifesaving services.

The ERRs are doing extraordinary work by establishing soup kitchens, supporting medical care, and keeping some schools operational. However, funding is not reaching them due to the fiduciary constraints that large donors face when attempting to fund local civil society groups and grassroots resistance committees directly. Additionally, the usual channels—where funding flows from the United Nations to NGOs and civil society organizations—are functioning poorly, with very little funding reaching local responders.

I have been advocating strongly for this issue alongside many colleagues. Ultimately, these local groups are highly effective. They are doing an incredible job on the ground. They are the backbone of the humanitarian response and the primary source of relief for Sudan's distressed population.

Jacobsen: Regarding humanitarian crises, one issue that tends to resonate more with North Americans is the ongoing wildfires in California, particularly in and around Los Angeles. These fires have garnered significant attention, partly because they've impacted affluent communities and destroyed high-value properties in an area with steep real estate costs. This has elevated their importance in terms of economic consequences for Americans.

However, climate change isn't just a problem for California—it's a global crisis. How is anthropogenic climate change intersecting with and exacerbating the humanitarian challenges in Sudan?

Pantuliano: Yes, massively. I am certain that the acceleration of climate-related pressures in Sudan has been a compounding factor in many aspects of the crisis. There has been ongoing local-level conflict between pastoralists and farming communities for decades.

The aggressive process of desertification in Sudan's peripheral regions has been a significant driver of this conflict. As pastureland becomes increasingly scarce and water sources dwindle, competition over natural resources intensifies.

Unfortunately, political leaders have exploited and manipulated these tensions, turning resource disputes into broader conflicts.

Many of the militias currently fighting are recruited from these struggling groups—people relying on land access for grazing and farming. Since pastures no longer exist as they once did, herders are being forced onto farmland, leading to encroachments and violent clashes with farming communities. This dynamic has long been at the heart of Sudan's conflicts.

For many years, during my work in Sudan, notably when I led the Peacebuilding Unit at UNDP, we focused on natural resource management and conflict mitigation. We knew that competition

over land and water was a major driver of conflict and that these disputes could be manipulated for wider political purposes. However, despite their pivotal role in Sudan's instability, the so-called 'international community' has paid limited attention to these structural issues.

I also want to address your earlier point about the Los Angeles wildfires and the role of wealth in shaping how crises are perceived. A notable difference in this latest iteration of the Sudanese conflict is that, for the first time, the fighting has been concentrated in Khartoum.

Khartoum is a wealthy capital city where Sudan's political and economic elites reside. Many of these elites can relate to the type of material loss seen in Los Angeles' wealthier neighbourhoods following the wildfires. This starkly contrasts past conflicts, which were largely confined to Sudan's peripheral and poorer regions. Historically, the elites in Khartoum were not deeply concerned because these conflicts did not directly affect them.

This time, however, the situation is different. The heart of the "imperial city," as Khartoum is known, has been devastated. Khartoum, a center of culture, tradition, and art, was home to luxurious villas, historic landmarks, and invaluable cultural artifacts. Many of these estates and treasures have now been destroyed or looted.

For the first time, people from the peripheries—neglected for generations and exploited by external forces—have entered the capital. Many had nothing; others had a lot in the culture, history, and art embedded in the city's grand homes and institutions. Even the National Museum in Khartoum, which houses Sudan's cultural heritage, has not been spared.

This destruction is the result of decades of inequality, structural neglect, and deep-seated disparities that have long defined Sudan's political and social landscape.

Jacobsen: When you compare the perspectives of Sudan's elites with those from the marginalized peripheries—individuals who have little to nothing—what commonalities and differences emerge in their understanding and responses to the ongoing humanitarian crisis?

Pantuliano: The people in Sudan's peripheries are, first and foremost, focused on survival because they have fewer resources and far fewer options. In contrast, the wealthy in Khartoum have networks—they can often find ways to escape and seek refuge.

That has been the case for many in Khartoum. They have relocated to Cairo, London, the Gulf, Nairobi, or other cities with family members, diaspora connections, or financial resources to draw from. Many also have money in foreign bank accounts, which has allowed them to flee and rebuild their lives elsewhere.

Of course, this is still a massive disaster for them—it is devastating to lose everything. However, their immediate survival is not as urgent as that of those in the peripheries, where people struggle to feed themselves and their children and stay alive.

We have already seen countless deaths due to acute food insecurity, which has had a devastating impact on those without resources. Many depend on aid, whether domestically mobilized or provided by international agencies.

That said, some common struggles are shared by the elites and those from lower-income communities. Access to education is a major issue for children, regardless of class. Schools have not operated for over a year and a half, leaving an entire generation at risk of losing their future. Additionally, medical assistance is either extremely limited or nonexistent in many areas, affecting both the rich and the poor. Some challenges in this crisis are universal.

Jacobsen: Let me offer a comparable example. Just yesterday, I interviewed someone about judicial reform efforts in Ukraine, a process complicated by ongoing war, corruption, and propaganda. Implementing reform under normal circumstances is difficult enough—but it's a whole different challenge when you're under daily bombardment. After just two weeks of constant air raid sirens, people began tuning them out entirely.

To provide readers with a sense of the conditions in Sudan: When experts are working amid a humanitarian crisis, armed conflict, or both, how do these realities complicate efforts to document human rights abuses and assess the need for humanitarian aid? What unique obstacles do they face in trying to maintain both accuracy and effectiveness in such an environment?

Pantuliano: The biggest challenge is security—for the experts and the people.

This phase of Sudan's conflict has been extraordinarily violent. Of course, we saw similar violence in the South and Darfur 22 years ago. However, the current level of violence is truly senseless.

One of the most pervasive and horrifying aspects of this war is sexual violence, which has spread everywhere. This alone makes it extremely difficult for experts to operate—local or international.

Quite frankly, there are very few international experts in the areas most affected by the conflict. As I mentioned before, the response has been largely left to Sudanese citizens, who are doing everything they can to document atrocities and provide aid.

But their safety is constantly at risk. Some of the reports of how people have been killed and brutalized are simply unimaginable. It's terrifying. That's why so many people have chosen to flee—not because they want to, but because they fear for their lives. For those who have remained behind, it is often not by choice—they simply cannot escape. They are not allowed to flee to safety.

Jacobsen: When delivering aid or advising on the most effective forms of assistance in humanitarian crises and conflict zones, which types of support tend to have the greatest impact? Evacuation is, of course, one form of relief. But what about addressing immediate needs—such as food, clean water, shelter, and medical care? How do you account for the needs of vulnerable groups like pregnant women, survivors of sexual violence, or those with severe injuries at risk of infection? How do humanitarian efforts prioritize and balance these critical needs in such extreme conditions?

Pantuliano: Different situations require different responses, and aid must be designed around what people themselves identify as essential.

In the most acute phase of a crisis, basic survival needs take precedence. In the initial months of any humanitarian emergency, people need shelter, food, water, and medical assistance—the universal necessities.

However, in the vast majority of crises, the acute phase transitions into a protracted crisis after six months. Even in Sudan, we witness how the conflict is shifting geographically, moving from one part of the country to another, depending on which factions are fighting for territorial control. In many areas, armed groups have established their presence, pushing the crisis into a more prolonged and entrenched phase.

At this stage, the type of assistance needed changes. People do not want to remain dependent on aid indefinitely. They want to earn a living, regain dignity, and provide for their families. They also want their children to receive an education.

In every protracted crisis I have worked in, the priorities shift after the first six to nine months. The most urgent needs become jobs, livelihoods, and education.

Unfortunately, the humanitarian sector consistently deprioritizes these areas. When humanitarian funding appeals are made, the categories related to livelihoods and education receive the least resources. There is a major mismatch between what affected communities need and what the international aid system provides.

Jacobsen: In situations where governance is fragmented due to conflict, how do you strengthen local responses to provide even temporary governance structures?

Pantuliano: That's an interesting question. Today, we just held a workshop on supporting local governance, which is becoming a defining feature in many conflict-affected contexts.

We see this dynamic in places like Sudan, Myanmar, Yemen, and Ukraine, where the central government lacks control due to armed conflict, political instability, or loss of sovereignty. Syria is another example.

Of course, local governance does not function the same way everywhere. Some regions develop robust and accountable local structures, while others struggle with legitimacy and stability.

However, one common trend is that citizens frequently organize themselves to provide better services than the central authority ever did. Despite their effectiveness, these local governance structures receive almost no external support. They lack resources, and it is extremely difficult for them to access aid on the scale that a national government would.

Local communities have often implemented small-scale taxation systems to fund basic services, but this remains insufficient. The real problem is that international partners and regional stakeholders often struggle to engage with these informal governance structures.

In the long term, there is no clear vision for how these local structures could evolve into stable institutions or contribute to democratic processes.

We saw this firsthand in Sudan after the 2019 uprising. Resistance committees emerged as key grassroots governance bodies. Still, they were pushed into an uneasy power-sharing arrangement

with the military. They resisted this, knowing it would lead to manipulation, but the international community still favoured a centralized, strongman-led approach.

This pattern repeats globally—mediating powers often insist on a single, dominant leader, and, as we have seen, it is almost always a man.

In many of these discussions, it is difficult to engage with the various expressions of local governance and civil society groups because there are too many actors, no unified structure, and no clear hierarchy.

Yet, Western societies have diffused federal structures and decentralized governance models. I don't understand why we struggle to recognize and work with similar models elsewhere.

This is something worth reflecting on. As I mentioned in today's workshop, there is an urgent need to develop a conceptual framework for engaging with diffused governance structures because many policymakers find it difficult to work with these systems—even when they function effectively.

Jacobsen: Urgent policy changes are needed to improve international humanitarian and diplomatic efficacy in Sudan. How is ODI contributing to shaping those policies?

Pantuliano: We have been a consistent ally for Sudanese voices. We must support, amplify, and advance what Sudanese citizens demand. It's about helping them shape the narrative around the crisis. Honestly, you should be interviewing a Sudanese colleague instead of me.

Jacobsen: Please connect us. I would love to interview them.

Pantuliano: Absolutely, I'd be very happy to do that. Some incredible people are leading the response—at the forefront of the crisis. If you listen to my podcast, we have interviewed several Sudanese civil society leaders. I can connect you directly with others who have led the response in Sudan.

That's what we are trying to do at ODI Global. We act as a bridge between grassroots responders and major donors, leveraging our global influence while ensuring that local actors remain at the center.

We strongly support the work of Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and Sudanese mutual aid networks. We have also helped build coalitions around mutual aid to ensure the international community does not forget Sudan.

Our role is to continue highlighting this crisis and advocating for greater attention, better coordination, and smarter policies to support those most affected.

Jacobsen: Well, thank you so much for your time. It was a pleasure to meet you.

Pantuliano: Likewise. Thank you so much.

Rebirth and Ruin: Understanding Fascism's Appeal with Roger Griffin

2025/02/04

Roger Griffin is widely regarded as one of the world's leading experts on the socio-historical and ideological dynamics of fascism. His work also explores the intersections of modernity and violence, particularly the political and religious fanaticism that fuels contemporary terrorism. His influential theory defines fascism as a revolutionary form of ultranationalism driven by a "palingenetic" myth—a vision of national rebirth through a radical new order. Since the mid-1990s, this theory has significantly shaped the field of comparative fascist studies.

In recognition of his contributions, Griffin was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Leuven in May 2011. His academic journey began more than forty-five years ago at what was then Oxford Polytechnic, now Oxford Brookes University. Under his tenure, the institution has grown into one of the UK's top new universities, with its history department frequently lauded for research excellence in the RAE/REF assessments of 2001, 2008, and 2014.

Extending his research on Nazi fanaticism and modernity's impact, Griffin has also become a key figure in the study of terrorist radicalization. His contributions to understanding and mitigating radicalization reflect a humanistic approach to extremism within and beyond academic circles. His "heroic doubling" theory underpins a major research initiative involving multi-agency collaboration aimed at scientifically addressing the root causes of terrorism.

Griffin's insights into fascism's relationship with religion, ultranationalism, totalitarianism, aesthetics, and modernism are detailed in his major works, including *The Nature of Fascism*, *Modernism and Fascism*, *Terrorist Creed*, and *Fascism: An Introduction to the Comparative Study of Fascism*. His scholarship is widely referenced, particularly in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, and has garnered attention as far afield as South Korea, China, and Japan.

Griffin's fascination with the subject was shaped by two formative experiences: a visit to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp in East Germany during the Cold War and his mentorship under Robert Murray, a scholar who studied fascism after fighting to liberate Italy from the fascists during the Second World War.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Professor Griffin, your research spans a wide range of topics, including the cultural, ideological, and modernist foundations of fascist movements, as well as the psychological underpinnings of terrorism. Scholars often trace their lifelong dedication to a particular field to a pivotal moment or a confluence of experiences. Could you share what initially sparked your interest in these areas of study?

Roger Griffin: Well, there's a simple, narrative version of the story, and then there's a deeper explanation. The narrative version involves two key moments in my life. The first was when I found myself in East Germany in 1967 during the Cold War while studying German literature and culture.

We were taken to Weimar to visit Goethe's study, the small house where Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, often called the German Shakespeare, wrote much of his work. Later that afternoon, while staying in a Soviet-run hotel, we were bused to another location: the site of a Goethe oak

tree, believed to have been one of Goethe's favourites. However, this tree was located at Buchenwald Concentration Camp, where it was sometimes used to torture prisoners.

The tree had been used as a symbolic element by the Nazis, and there was a display detailing the atrocities committed at the camp. Interestingly, the exhibit that the Soviet authorities had installed presented Buchenwald primarily as a concentration camp for communists, redacting mention of the Jewish victims and the Holocaust. Confronted with this stark juxtaposition of German cultural achievement and the Nazis' systematic inhumanity or "evil," I began to study the history of Nazism in an amateur way. However, none of the available explanations seemed sufficient. For me, the economic crises and eventual collapse of the Weimar Republic didn't fully explain how so many ordinary people became fanatical followers of Hitler or complicit in atrocities.

The second pivotal moment came when I got a job teaching the history of ideas at Oxford Brookes University, a smaller institution than the University of Oxford. The head of our history department, Robert Murray, was an American who had fought fascism in Italy during World War II. After the war, like many demobilized officers, he went to university and studied history. However, when he graduated, still was uncertain about the nature of the fascism he had risked his life fighting.

When he had the chance to design his history course, he devoted it to the question, "What is Fascism?" At the time, unless you were a Marxist—who often claimed to have the definitive understanding of fascism as a terroristic form of capitalism—there was what I call the "Babel effect": numerous conflicting theories with no clear consensus.

On a more personal level, I had married an Italian, and alongside my knowledge of French and German, I quickly acquired a reading knowledge of Italian. This allowed me to read fascist writings in their original language, which was instrumental in shaping my definition of fascism. My definition is based on how fascist leaders and apologists, not their victims or enemies, understood it.

Finally, there's an even deeper psychological dimension to my interest. I was born in 1948, three years after Auschwitz was liberated. That historical scar loomed large in the background of my life, shaping my curiosity and driving me to understand the nature of such profound evil.

As I grew into my early years, around seven, eight, or nine, I became aware that something terrible had happened in history shortly before I was born. I started discovering pictures of horrors. Browsing in bookshops, I found myself drawn to the books that had started appearing about the prisoner-of-war and concentration camps of the Second World War. It became, in a sense, an almost unhealthy fascination, perhaps even bordering on what could be called a kind of "pornography of horror." I developed an intense interest in exposing myself to accounts of torture and what people are capable of doing to one another—topics that weren't being talked about much at the time.

Additionally, my grandfather, as I later realized, was a religious fundamentalist. I didn't have the vocabulary to articulate it then, but he held fanatical beliefs. Growing up in that environment of extreme conviction and the hatred they breed made the idea that "normal" people could harbor

fanatical ideals unproblematic and accessible. So, when you combine all these factors, it now seems I was predisposed to try to solve—or at least confront—the enigma of fascism's war against human rights and how to define it meaningfully for those researching it.

Jacobsen: Is there a correlation between the psychology of religious fundamentalism, fascism, and ultranationalism?

Griffin: I believe so, though it is a far more contentious study area. My definition of fascism — which proposes that it is an ideology- and value-driven revolutionary assault on the status quo, drawing on mythic pasts and conspiracy theories to construct a new future and induce societal rebirth in every area — is already contentious. When you start delving into problems of its causation and the psychological mindsets that drive it, things become even more complex. I've developed my approach to this—a sort of personal methodology. I often compare creating academic paradigms to cooking a curry. You use familiar ingredients, but you make your mix and flavours. To give this approach an academic label, it's called methodological pluralism, or you could call it a magpie approach—picking up ideas and theories that glitter and saying, "This is interesting," and hoarding them in your mental nest.

Using this eclectic approach and partial insights drawn from a wide range of texts on extremism, psychology, and anthropology, I synthesized a theory that highlights the role played by the compartmentalization of the personality in the radicalization process. One foundational text for me is Robert Jay Lifton's analysis based on his in-depth interviews with Nazi doctors who conducted experiments at Auschwitz. In his attempt to understand how seemingly ordinary people—doctors who led everyday family lives and loved their pets—became complicit in such atrocities, he developed the theory of "doubling."

This theory posits that these individuals had developed a "normal self" and an "Auschwitz self." When they put on their uniforms, they became "another," someone ready to be manipulated by a totalitarian regime. In this state, those deemed subhuman by Nazi ideology also became "othered" by them. These individuals were stripped of their humanity and any claim to human rights or humane treatment. At that point, torturing and murdering them was no longer seen as a moral crime because the emotional threads of empathy and compassion had been severed by the doctors' identification with the Nazi ideological machine.

Lifton's theory of doubling has enormous implications and extensions. Interestingly, Lifton went on to write two other crucial books for me. One was a study of the fanatical pseudo-religion in Japan that culminated in the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo terrorist cell. The cult members, ordinary people in many ways, believed they had a sacred duty to hasten the end of the world by triggering apocalyptic events, such as the mass killing of thousands in the subway. Lifton's earlier interviews with Auschwitz doctors equipped him with the mental tools to understand how these seemingly normal Japanese individuals became radicalized to the point of wanting to hasten the end of history.

The word "fanatic" has fascinating roots. It comes from the Latin word *fanum*, meaning temple, and is linked to the words profane and profanity, which refer to actions outside the sphere of the holy. Fanaticism can be understood as a form of "holy madness." For those gripped by it, their

actions are not seen as nihilistic or terroristic but as a sacred duty. They do not feel guilty because they believe they fulfill their religious mission or political duty.

I've adapted Lifton's theory of doubling by incorporating my theoretical contributions to explore the radicalization process. It often begins with someone experiencing an existential crisis—not necessarily at a high intellectual level but a deeply cosmological or emotional one. These individuals are often disoriented and disaffected, particularly during periods of social breakdown, such as war, plague, or revolution.

In these moments of profound disorientation, people can latch onto a simplistic, paranoid worldview—like a drowning person grabbing onto a plank of wood. This revelatory, deeply mythic worldview diagnoses the root causes of chaos and misery while creating a starkly dualistic Manichean division of good and evil.

And the evil ones—anybody belonging to that world—are transformed into "monsters" or "subhumans," no longer is fully human. If you compare the psychodynamics of ISIS with Nazism or any other extreme form of political or religious fanaticism, it soon becomes clear that they all function in a very similar way. They provide emotionally stunted, unindividuated individuals who feel lost and disoriented with a totalizing worldview, which gives them a sense of identity, purpose, and, very importantly, agency. Armed with this, they feel empowered to act on the world through a cathartic act of violence against the perceived enemy or sources of evil. This can result in their sense of mission to carry out a terrorist attack on a symbolic person or institution—a parliament, a bank, or even something like a same-sex wedding—whatever the mind seizes as an emblem of the "evil" destroying humanity. In their view, these acts are always idealistic and heroic, intended to "save the world" whatever the personal cost.

This is a simplistic summary of my retrospective theory of the process of extremist and terrorist radicalization, but I was only led into this area of speculation after 9/11. That event forced me to apply my obsession with understanding what turns ordinary people into Nazis or other forms of fascism to the question of what could drive some educated, civilized Muslims, including a group of engineering postgraduates studying in Hanover, to participate in the destruction of the Twin Towers. It felt like I was witnessing a powerful example of the destructive fanaticism I had been studying for years as a historical phenomenon that safely belonged to the past.

In the light of the approach I developed, these individuals were not raving lunatics or hate-filled sociopaths but a split within their personality—between modern Western secular values and the worldview of the cult or ideology they embraced. Once you are part of a cult, you abandon personal responsibility. You don't challenge or question; you conform entirely. In Nazi Germany, this was codified in the "Führerprinzip," or "leader principle," which dictated that all authority came from above. Challenging it was considered sedition. Islamism by an ideologue such as Qtub makes a similar claim on the believer: it tells believers disturbed by modernity what they must do to save their community and the wider world from moral decay and destruction.

This dynamic completely relieves the individual of personal moral responsibility for the atrocities they commit; on the contrary, it heroizes them. In this way, all semi-ideological or fully

ideological acts of violence against perceived enemies are fundamentally similar at a psychodynamic level, contrasting the ideologies or cultures that rationalize them.

Jacobsen: How do the psychological forces you've studied manifest across different regions in today's global landscape? Specifically, how do individuals who are not officially classified as "enemies of the state" come to embrace extremist ideologies and carry out attacks in the name of what they perceive as a "righteous cause," seemingly without any moral conflict or hesitation?

Griffin: When viewed through the lens of modernity, the conditions of the modern world reveal both a key driver and effect of modernization worldwide: secularization and the erosion or loss of a metaphysical worldview that explains reality. Secularization represents the death of self-evident, totalizing truths. There was little room for self-doubt or relativism in earlier cultures—whether the Aztecs, the Maya, or the feudal Japanese. Religions like those of the Abrahamic traditions might recognize the brotherhood of other religions "of the book." Still, within each, the belief was absolute. For those within the faith, there was no question of the existence of God or an ultimate purpose enshrined in a traditional religious faith and practice.

This worldview didn't necessarily prevent violence—it could lead to ritual violence or wars—but it didn't result in mass persecutions in the way we see today or the attempts to completely transform the world through the conquest of society both domestically and through territorial expansion. This was partly due to geography and technology: the world was less connected, and movement between cultures was limited. There were generally small warrior elites, and even the massive military conquests of Alexander the Great and Genghis Kahn did not lead to secularizing society and abolishing religious culture.

In the modern world, however, everything has become porous. Barriers—cultural, physical, and political—have eroded. Today, major religions exhibit significant internal and external conflict. Consider the Myanmar Buddhists attacking Muslims, the Chinese repression of Uyghurs, or sectarian violence within Islam. These conflicts show that the boundaries between previously separate worlds have dissolved. No wonder billions of human beings now live out a permanent identity, purpose, and belonging crisis.

For example, the term "ghetto" originated in Venice, where Jewish communities lived apart but interacted with Christian communities on a business level. While they were separate, there was still a degree of coexistence, and certainties, rituals, and traditions remained intact within each community. However, in today's interconnected world, that separation and autonomy of communities no longer exist, creating a fertile ground for ideological and cultural clashes and the loss of meaning known by sociologists as "anomie."

Now, all that historical separateness has broken down. It's extraordinarily easy for people to feel that the world is falling into an abyss of apostasy, non-belief, materialism, immorality, gender fluidity, and interpenetration of identities. Everything can seem in flux, elusive, and menacing. What's one of the main targets of populist nationalists? Multiculturalism. There's almost a pathological fear of the "soup"—the idea that society has become a blend of different creeds, genders, peoples, languages, skin types, and abilities. This diversity threatens those seeking

ethnic order, religious purity, or cultural homogeneity. There is a longing for absolute "difference" and ethnic/cultural demarcations to be restored.

For those ill-equipped to cope with the sheer complexity of the modern world, the explosion of cultural mixing and diverse realities brought by modernity can create a tremendous sense of decadence, experienced as evil, as if the world is falling apart. To see this crystallized into dogma, look at the U.S. Christian sect known as Dispensationalists. They are utterly fanatical about the end of the world, interpreting earthquakes and other disasters as symptoms of the "end times," and instinctively support Donald Trump.

Modernity divides people in this context. Some embrace the flux, the intermixing of cultures, languages, and belief systems. They enjoy the unknown and the richness of diversity. Traveling or encountering otherness invigorates these people, not threatens them. For them, the infinite variety of the modern world is something to marvel at. Thus, they instinctively embrace a universal, transcultural form of humanism, secular or religious.

Others, however, feel overwhelmed. The American poet T.S. Eliot once wrote, "Human beings cannot bear very much reality." People have different thresholds for coping with the immensity of the cosmos and the diversity of ways of living and thinking. For those with a low tolerance for this diversity, there's a nostalgia for purity—ethnic purity, cultural purity, or national sovereignty. They are drawn to movements like "Make America Great Again" or similar nationalist sentiments in Russia, Britain, and France. This often leads to exclusionary ideologies, where even people born in a country are deemed not to belong because they lack some "essence"—be it Frenchness, Englishness, or Canadianness.

Of course, this idea of national or racial purity is historically baseless. Even the Inuit and other Indigenous groups migrated from somewhere. The notion of a primordial, pure race or culture is a fallacy. Interestingly, there was one fascist movement, led by Plínio Salgado in Brazil, that celebrated racial mixing. Salgado argued that Brazilianness was defined by blending Spanish, African, and Indigenous Amazonian ancestries. This stands out as a unique take on ultranationalism in the context of fascism, which is typically obsessed with notions of purity and retrieving some cultural essence.

However, for most nationalists and fundamentalists, whether religious or secular, there's a profound fear of "the other." This fear drives violence, hatred, and demonization in the modern world.

Jacobsen: We've identified the problems and explored methodological pluralism, integrating evidence, case studies, and various academic approaches to understanding these challenges. But what about practical solutions? What advice would you offer citizens living under authoritarian or theocratic regimes—or even in majoritarian democracies with autocratic tendencies? How can individuals and states counter the rise of fascist ideology, intolerance, and acts of terror driven by hatred?

Griffin: That's a tough question. To borrow a phrase from an early Bob Dylan song: "I try to harmonize with songs, the Lonesome Sparrow sings." In other words, I accept the world's chaos, carve out a little piece of it, and write books about modern reality's complex, dynamic nature.

They are useless in terms of their practical effects in countering fanaticism and extremism. My theory has informed one or two initiatives to combat terrorism, but I have no illusions about the overall impact of my publications. I take part in debates in the press about whether Trump is a fascist and so on, but I know in advance that I would never change the mind of any Trump supporter and would be instantly demonized as a "woke" academic and thus "the enemy." In short, I will give you a despairing answer about combating anti-humanistic ideologies.

Liberal humanism—the deep-seated empathetic commitment to the universality of human rights and the equal humanity of all people—is a minority view. It is not inherently secular, however. This belief has existed and has been fought for within religious traditions. I'm not talking about Western modernity here. Good Buddhism and good Hinduism—if you look at the original Hindu gurus, for instance—contained this sense of universal humanism. You have to read their works to see that.

But this lack of fear of the "other," embracing the richness of humanity and multiculturalism is now an increasingly minority response to modern existence. All over the world, except in a few rare countries such as Scandinavia—Finland, Norway, and Sweden, for example (and even there, Denmark now has a strong populist movement) — people like me, humanists, have our backs to the wall.

The Enlightenment hope—that the world would become more enlightened with prosperity, education, and growing social equality—has been proven to be a myth. That hope was formulated without any awareness of ecological crises, nuclear weapons, or the complexities of modernity. It was whistling in the dark. So-called progress has created conditions of anguish, depression, uncertainty, confusion, and a pandemic of anomie. It breeds simplistic, hate-driven visions of the world.

And that's what we saw inaugurated and ritualized yesterday with Trump's "brave new world." Hearing people whoop and cheer as he announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the opening of more opportunities for oil drilling was terrifying. It felt like bad science fiction—a dark, apocalyptic satire like *Dr. Strangelove* from the 1960s—but it's real.

I am a pessimist. I believe humanity is in the process of destroying this phase of civilization. The world will collapse into wars and poverty as the ecological crisis intensifies and natural disasters increase. Wars for resources will erupt, sectarian hatreds will deepen, and nations will turn against one another. There will likely be massive deaths—what I call a "mega-death" event—or a prolonged period of devastation.

I don't believe humanity will disappear entirely, but some Hollywood apocalyptic scenarios may prove alarmingly accurate. *The Day After Tomorrow* comes to mind, though its idea of Americans moving to Mexico and living happily ever after hosted by the Mexican government because the U.S. is frozen solid is absurdly optimistic.

So, I conclude that I can't do much more in my small life. I'll be 77 next week. Right now, I focus on staying active with my wife and looking after my mother-in-law, her uncle, and our son. This pathetic answer resonates sadly with a recent bestseller called *Let Them Theory* by Mel Robbins, but at this point, I can't offer you anything grand or heroic.

I don't foresee a great counter-movement of heroic liberals or academics rising to stem this tide of intolerance, conspiracy theory, and scapegoating. Populism and retrenchment into ethnic, ideological, or religious fortresses are taking place in various forms worldwide, whether in Viktor Orbán's "illiberal democracy" in Hungary, Putin's ethnocentrism in Russia, or China's aggressive nationalism. The world is retreating into narrow definitions of identity, which have lethal consequences for demonized "others."

We will likely see a world dominated by illiberal democracies or autocratic states. Much like antifascists during the Nazi regime in World War II, people like me will face a choice. Whether to be a coward, keep our heads down and survive or be heroic and join some underground resistance and face persecution and death.

It's a terrifying prospect, and I hope I'm wrong. But I don't see any "grand narrative" solutions right now.

And if the geniuses of history—people like Gandhi, Bob Dylan, and the visionaries who created the United Nations—haven't been able to stem the tide of leaders like Trump, Putin, or the regime in North Korea, then who am I to think I can achieve anything except stand up for liberal humanism?

I'm sorry to sound so pessimistic.

However, I will end on a more positive note with a quote from Nietzsche, who said that every great book written against life is an invitation to live life more fully. Perhaps every interview that seems like an invitation to despair is, paradoxically, an incitement for the reader to rally inner resources of idealism, hope, and heroism—and to live life more fully.

Jacobsen: Dr. Griffin, thank you very much for your time.

Griffin: I appreciate it.

Mubarak Bala and the Struggle for Freethought in Nigeria

2025/02/06

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Today, I'm honored to be joined by **Dr. Leo Igwe**, a renowned humanist and activist visiting from Ibadan, Nigeria. Dr. Igwe has spent much of his career championing the rights of those unjustly accused of witchcraft across Africa. We've known each other for years, and it's always a privilege to speak with him.

Our focus today is the recent release of Mubarak Bala, the former president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, who spent nearly five years imprisoned on charges stemming from a Facebook post. The ordeal began when Bala's post—interpreted as critical of the Prophet Muhammad—drew the ire of S.S. Umar & Co., who filed a complaint alleging the content was "provocative and annoying." Soon after, plainclothes officers, operating without a warrant, seized Bala from his home in Kaduna and transferred him to Kano, where he faced blasphemy charges under the region's strict religious laws. His case bears striking similarities to other international incidents involving so-called cybercrime and blasphemy, such as that of Ayaz Nizami.

Now that Bala has been released, this case raises critical questions about freedom of expression and belief for humanists, atheists, and ex-Muslims in Nigeria.

Dr. Igwe, how do you interpret the implications of Bala's lengthy imprisonment? What does this case reveal about the state of human rights and the ongoing struggle for religious and ideological freedom in Nigeria?

Dr. Leo Igwe: Mubarak's case involves many issues. First, it highlights how regressive Nigeria remains, especially regarding the practice of Islam within the country. The form of Islam practiced in Nigeria could be described as "Stone Age Islam." It remains trapped in medieval mindsets reminiscent of the era in Europe when the Church persecuted so-called 'heretics' or 'blasphemers.'

Many people shy away from making this comparison. Still, within the Nigerian context, Christianity is comparatively more tolerant than Islam in terms of human rights and freedom of expression. Of course, Christianity has its issues, such as dogmatism and authoritarianism. Still, it is unprecedented in the history of Christianity in Nigeria for someone to be subjected to such extreme abuse for simply posting a critical remark about the Prophet. Mubarak's case exemplifies the state of Islamic practice in Nigeria and the broader failure of the country to respect its citizens' rights to freedom of religion, belief, and expression.

Jacobsen: In addition to ex-Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and humanists, what other groups in Nigeria face comparable forms of discrimination? This question carries considerable weight, given that Nigeria is the most populous nation on the African continent. Developments within its borders inevitably have a far-reaching impact across Africa as a whole.

Igwe: It is crucial to understand that in parts of Nigeria where Muslims dominate, Christians are often in the minority and frequently find themselves on the receiving end of accusations of

blasphemy, sometimes even resulting in killings. Christian minority groups and individuals in northern Nigeria also face much of the persecution and violence Mubarak endured.

For example, we must remember the tragic case of Deborah Samuel, a college student in Sokoto. She made an innocuous comment on a WhatsApp group, which some Muslim students found offensive. This led to her being brutally attacked and killed by a mob. This incident serves as yet another example of how intolerance manifests in various forms across Nigeria, particularly in regions with significant religious tensions.

Her colleagues—fellow students—abducted her, beat her to death, and set her ablaze. This happened, I believe, in 2022. This shows that it is not just ex-Muslims who are subjected to these accusations and abuses. Christians within regions where Muslims are the majority are often targeted and killed.

That is exactly what happened in Mubarak's case. Before they could get to him, the police "disappeared" him and placed him in what they called protective custody. But then you must ask yourself: who were they protecting him from? They were protecting him from the fanatics who could kill him at any moment.

But let us not forget Muslim minorities, too. It is not only Christian minorities or Christians in the region who are accused; Muslims belonging to minority sects, denominations, or traditions are also targeted.

We see allegations, attacks, killings, and other abuses targeting Muslims from minority traditions, Christians who live in these regions, and, in this case, Mubarak, who came out as an atheist or ex-Muslim. Of course, other ex-Muslims have been targeted. Still, some manage to neutralize the threats by moving away from social media or underground. What we have seen in Mubarak's case is unprecedented in the country's history.

Jacobsen: I'm aware of other cases like Zara Kay's. She briefly appeared at the World Humanist Congress in Copenhagen. While not explicitly Tanzanian, she has Tanzanian heritage, much like I have Dutch heritage without being explicitly Dutch. Right? Zara was arrested while traveling, though her ordeal was much shorter than Mubarak's. You mentioned similar cases earlier.

It's a strange paradox—Mubarak's case is unprecedented in Nigeria, which offers both an unsettling reality and a sliver of hope. On the one hand, this case represents the extreme, signaling the potential for cultural shifts toward more tremendous respect for the rights of nonbelievers. On the other hand, such incidents still occur. You captured this tension well in your recent BBC interview, saying, "Thanks, but no thanks." Could you expand on that sentiment? I am deeply grateful for Mubarak's release, but a lingering sense of injustice tempers its gratitude.

Igwe: Yes, of course. Arresting someone, disappearing them, unjustly prosecuting them, and sentencing them to 25 years in jail—this is a gross violation of human rights. In other words, Mubarak was meant to spend 25 years in prison for committing no crime. On appeal, his sentence was reduced to five years.

Of course, we are thankful that the sentence was reduced and that he wouldn't spend 25 years behind bars. But no thanks because even the years he did spend in prison were unjust. He

committed no crime, and there was no justification for him to spend even one second behind bars.

Just because someone makes an innocuous statement and expresses their rights like every other human being, clearly stating what they believe, there should be no justification for any arrest, incarceration, or prosecution. No one should spend even one day in jail because of that. That is why I said we are happy, at least partly because, as the saying goes, the worst did not happen.

Many people thought the fanatics might invade the jail, kill Mubarak, or carry out the threats they made. In Nigeria, we have had cases where fanatics invaded police detention centers and beheaded alleged blasphemers or desecrators of the Quran. We have also seen instances where mobs beat someone to death, lynched them, or set their body ablaze. These are not rare occurrences. But in Mubarak's case, none of this happened.

So, yes, we are happy that he came out alive. At least he survived. But we are not happy about the circumstances. We are still at a point where someone cannot express what they think about a religion, its Prophet, its teachings, or its holy book without needing police protection. This situation is deeply out of step with civilization, enlightenment, and progress.

We cannot be excited about this. It is a sad reality that, in the 21st century, Africans—who endured slavery under both Arabs from the East and Westerners from the North—are now killing fellow Africans in the name of religion. These religions, the Abrahamic religions, were introduced by those who once enslaved us. And now, people who embrace these religions are perpetuating violence against their people simply to express their thoughts about the religion.

It is shameful. Instead of progressing, we should be working toward an African enlightenment— one that is critical and highlights the dark and destructive tendencies in Islam, Christianity, and all religions used to sanctify abuse and slavery, whether by non-Africans or by Africans against Africans. True enlightenment can only come from Africa, but it will remain unattainable as long as we continue placing individuals in protective custody simply because they are critical of these religious traditions.

We are holding ourselves back. We have internalized our inferiority, subordinating our humanity to the traditions of those who have historically tyrannized us. Worse still, we now use these same traditions to reinforce tyranny—not only over us but also by us. This is the direction we need to change. This is the path Africa must take to achieve true progress and liberation.

For me, this is a double tragedy. We must rally support, energy, and momentum to shake off this double tyranny. Otherwise, African enlightenment—that unique sense of enlightenment only Africa can deliver to the world—will never materialize.

Jacobsen: As Africa increasingly connects to the digital world, we're talking about hundreds of millions of young people coming online. Meanwhile, much of the world is aging, with older populations less equipped to navigate the evolving tech landscape. Given equal access and opportunity, Africa's youth could fully engage in—and even drive—the rapid, exponential growth of digital innovation.

Africa's cultural and technological contributions could soon profoundly transform global communication and perspectives. This is particularly crucial as we witness the centralization of power in key sectors like communication technology. Such centralization rarely serves democratic interests. In the United States, power is concentrated among a handful of tech giants, predominantly led by men of European descent. Russia's power structures revolve around a long-established oligarchy under the Kremlin. In China, state authority is consolidated under Xi Jinping's rigid, state-controlled Marxist ideology.

Africa's role in this equation is not merely cultural—though preserving and expanding indigenous languages and traditions are invaluable. It's also geopolitical. Africa could become a critical counterbalance to the rising tide of autocracy that has defined much of the 2010s and 2020s. A freer, more diverse digital sphere may hinge on this contribution.

I realize I don't have a specific question. Please share your thoughts on these dynamics and the role Africa might play in shaping a more democratic and inclusive online future.

Igwe: The thing is this: how much light does the centralization of power—whether in the United States, China, or Russia—shed on Africa and toward Africans? Whether it's the authoritarian tendencies in China's government, the oligarchy in Russia, or the centralization of power in a democracy in the United States, how does that enhance the humanity of Africans? For me, this is the central question.

I completely disagree with the idea that these centralized, oligarchic, and dictatorial systems somehow improve or enrich the lives of Africans. While diversity in terms of languages and cultural contributions is important, these global power centers continue to crush and take a heavy toll on the humanity of Africans.

In China, Africans are not reckoned with. In Russia's oligarchy, the same thing happens. Even in the Trump administration, you could see similar tendencies. So, where is Africa in all of this? Where are Africans in these global systems?

These centralized powers—whether democratic, authoritarian, or oligarchic—still perpetuate systems that disregard and dehumanize Africans. That is the reality we must confront.

It is still the same old idea—that if you look like me if you are African, you should remain on the margins. You should be waiting for these oligarchic, dictatorial, and totalitarian systems to tell you what to do, where to be, what to say, and what not to say. And now, we are witnessing another form of blasphemy. What is it? It is this: do not offend these secular "gods" or so-called "god-sent" authorities.

If you offend them, they will come after you. Just like in Mubarak's case, they will disappear you with impunity, or they will compel you to admit guilt, even when you know you are innocent. So, what is the hope?

The hope lies in the same courage we have seen throughout history. If we go back to Plato's *Allegory of the Cave,* it took immense courage for some to bring the light into the cave, even as they faced resistance from those still inside. Or consider the European Enlightenment, during a time when the Church held absolute control. Totalitarian regimes and authoritarian systems

eventually collapsed, giving way to freer, more equal, and more just societies. This was only possible because people dared to not only speak out but to speak their minds.

It comes down to this: What do Africans think? What do we think? Just as Mubarak expressed his thoughts about the Prophet, asking what we want for ourselves is essential. What do we believe?

We've seen this dynamic play out in other parts of the world. For instance, consider the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Despite Russia's overwhelming power, the question remains: What do the people of Ukraine think, and what do they want for themselves? Similarly, when figures like Trump or other dictators rise to power, they seem to project an impregnable dominance. But you know what?

There is power in words. The idea that "the pen is mightier than the sword" holds. Words, thoughts, and ideas can tear down physical or metaphorical walls. History has shown us this repeatedly. The walls of dictatorships and totalitarian regimes have fallen before, and they will fall again.

That is why Africans who understand their words' power, worth, and place in the world must never stop speaking out. What they think and express might be the first crack in a seemingly impregnable wall of oppression. Slowly and steadily, these walls can fall—just as we saw in Germany with the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

If walls can collapse in Germany, they can collapse elsewhere. They can give way to a society, a world where people are freer—whether they look like me, like you, or like someone else entirely. It all comes back to freedom. Without freedom, there is nothing.

If one part of the world lives freely while another part lives as enslaved people, none of us are truly free. We must continue to do our part to expand the circle of freedom despite the efforts of totalitarian systems to control the world and keep some people subdued and subordinate forever.

Slavery ended. And just as slavery ended, so too can these oppressive systems. The walls collapsed. Even the Soviet Union collapsed. So why can't all oppressive systems collapse, too? There is still hope that the remnants or replicas of these survived systems will eventually go the same way. It will always return to freedom—a quest for a freer society and world.

Jacobsen: Leo, thank you for agreeing to this interview.

Igwe: My pleasure.

South Korea's Path to Gender Equity: Interview with Sunghwa Han

2025/02/09

Founded in 1962, the **Seoul International Women's Association** (SIWA) is a vital space where women from diverse backgrounds connect, collaborate and effect change. SIWA has become a beacon of local and global impact by fostering cross-cultural friendships, empowering communities, and promoting mutual understanding. More than six decades later, the organization remains committed to solidarity, diversity, and inclusion—values expressed through volunteerism, mentorship, and leadership initiatives that unite local and international networks. At its core, SIWA aims to cultivate leaders among women and youth, advancing a vision of an equitable and inclusive future.

Sunghwa Han, SIWA's board chair and executive director, sheds light on the organization's evolution and purpose. Initially formed to support the spouses of diplomats and expatriates, SIWA has since transformed into a philanthropic nonprofit championing women's empowerment and cultural exchange. Under Han's leadership, the organization has focused on sustainable partnerships, youth mentorship, and inclusive dialogue. Initiatives such as networking events, volunteer programs, and leadership workshops have strengthened SIWA's role as a community builder. In tackling South Korea's gender equity challenges, Han emphasizes collective engagement over political rhetoric, underscoring SIWA's continued commitment to fostering connection and progress.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I'm joined today by Sunghwa Han, the current board chair and executive director of the Seoul International Women's Association (SIWA). Sunghwa became involved with SIWA in 2016 and served as the Welfare Committee Chair from May 2018 to April 2022 before assuming her leadership role.

Born and raised in New York City, Sunghwa initially built a career as a concert pianist, chamber musician, music journalist, and creative arts specialist. After relocating to Seoul with her family in 2012, she broadened her artistic endeavors through interdisciplinary collaborations. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in music from The Juilliard School and a doctorate in music education from Columbia University.

Beyond her work at SIWA, Sunghwa has served as an advisor for Rotary International and continues to mentor Changemakers, a group supporting aged-out youth. She also spent two years on the board of the Hanatour Foundation.

To start, I'd like to ask: What were the historical motivations behind the founding of SIWA in 1962, and how has the organization evolved since then?

Sunghwa Han: In 1962—of course, I wasn't there—but many diplomatic and expatriate spouses needed a support system. They sought to build friendships and foster community engagement through cultural exchange.

Over time, their efforts extended to supporting marginalized communities through fundraisers, cultural events, and volunteer-driven initiatives. As SIWA evolved, it became more of a philanthropic organization. Eventually, we transitioned into a nonprofit under the Seoul

Metropolitan Government's Foreign Ministry, which brought about significant changes and motivated us to expand our community impact.

Today, SIWA focuses on collective philanthropy and volunteerism. We believe that supporting marginalized communities is much more powerful when we collaborate and unite. Additionally, we strive to bridge local and international communities through cultural exchange and dialogue, which remains essential to our mission.

Of course, as you and I have already discussed, SIWA is also deeply committed to women's empowerment and gender equality. We work to advance leadership and professional development for women while prioritizing inclusion and sustainability. One of our long-term goals is to sustain, grow, and expand our partnerships to further these objectives. Today, SIWA operates under two core pillars: community building and social impact initiatives

We have a hybrid leadership model with members from diverse cultural backgrounds. Our leadership team likewise reflects this diversity—we have leaders from South Korea, Switzerland, the UAE, Singapore, Australia, and many other parts of the world. While this structure presents challenges, we see it as a model for sustainable leadership in the future.

Jacobsen: What foundational principles guide SIWA's initiatives?

Han: Our initiatives are guided by the principles of collaboration, philanthropy, cultural exchange, and inclusivity. Working together can create meaningful change and empower diverse communities. SIWA aims to foster social connections and create sustainable impact through leadership, education, and outreach programs.

We foster purposeful, action-driven networking. That means we always incorporate thematic networking and strategic partnerships whenever we host an event, whether a networking session or a project.

For example, we hold women's empowerment networking sessions with Green Climate Fund Women. We also collaborate with embassies and local Korean organizations, but there is always a central theme.

It could be women's empowerment, youth empowerment, partnerships, or collective volunteering. There is always a purpose behind it. Many organizations host purposeful events, but we ensure each gathering has a specific theme. The second core area is leadership development and mentorship.

We have various programs that foster young people to collaborate with us. We don't call them mentees; we refer to them as partners with a purpose.

We have realized that working with young people creates synergy—they bring fresh ideas, and we bring experience and resources. Together, we can tap into different kinds of potential.

So, while we focus heavily on leadership, we don't necessarily label it as leadership development —we see it more as a partnership. Recently, we have been focusing on cross-generational mentorship, particularly with high school and university students. Over the past few years, this

has become a significant growth area for us. The third key area is knowledge exchange and professional growth.

We host panel discussions and a special Speaking Series initiative centering on storytelling. For these sessions, we invite ambassadors' spouses, cultural center directors, and other professionals to share their personal and professional journeys.

Unlike formal speaker events, these sessions are designed to be interactive. Attendees have the opportunity to ask questions, fostering meaningful dialogue. We have found that intimate conversations create stronger connections between speakers and attendees. The impact is much greater because it highlights shared human experiences, regardless of where we come from. So, we hold many of these intimate speaking events as part of our community-building initiative.

The fourth and final core area is volunteerism and collective impact. One of our flagship programs is Coming Together and Empowering Together. We partner with nonprofits that support children in welfare centers.

As part of this initiative, we also bring in international high school students and aged-out youth to organize celebration days for children from orphanages. These events include art and sports programs, shared meals, and other activities. We bring together youth from privileged and marginalized backgrounds to foster unity, regardless of socioeconomic or cultural background.

Most importantly, when we brainstorm and plan these events, we approach them as equal partnerships. The goal is to create an environment where everyone contributes, learns, and grows together.

We also have a summer theatre program for children of unwed mothers. Additionally, we run an online English program that matches international high school students from different countries —such as Singapore—with girls who previously lived in welfare centers. Our many initiatives involve various partners, which is one way we facilitate meaningful and impactful networking.

Jacobsen: How do SIWA and the diplomatic community contribute to local charity and welfare through the SIWA Bazaar?

Han: That event was a signature initiative for us until the COVID-19 pandemic when we had to put it on pause.

Previously, the SIWA Bazaar was a major fundraising event where embassies had booths selling items from their respective countries, and all proceeds went to charity. However, we have since had to rethink our approach because Seoul has changed significantly. Unlike before, Korea now has greater access to international products, so the bazaar's original purpose of showcasing foreign goods is no longer as relevant.

Previously, local Koreans would attend to explore unique international products, but there was not much interaction beyond purchasing. The embassies would sell items, raise funds, and donate to different charities. However, we are shifting toward more direct partnerships with charities rather than providing financial donations.

We still provide funding, but our focus has moved toward collaborative programs that create deeper, long-term engagement. Instead of simply donating, we are working on integrated initiatives that bring together embassies, universities, and cultural organizations.

For example, we plan a large-scale event where arts, culture, and philanthropy intersect. This will involve embassies, arts universities, and organizations that support dancers with disabilities. The goal is to foster meaningful cultural exchange while supporting local causes.

So, while we used to fund charities primarily through direct donations, we are now shifting toward arts—and culture-based partnerships that create a more sustainable impact.

Jacobsen: How has SIWA's transition to a nonprofit corporation influenced its operational strategies?

Han: Yes, we have hybrid leadership, meaning our team is spread across different locations and operates in a collaborative model. Additionally, we are in the process of creating an online global community. This platform will allow us to connect members in Seoul and worldwide. We focus on three key themes: Reimagine, Reinvent, and Renew.

This means we are researching the root causes behind social challenges, especially those affecting marginalized communities. While we remain non-political, we recognize that many social issues persist, particularly regarding gender equality, which, as we briefly discussed, is still lagging in many ways.

By identifying underlying challenges, we aim to develop sustainable solutions that align with our mission while leveraging our global network to drive positive change. We know we cannot change everything, but we realize the importance of having more open dialogues to shift people's perspectives. That is why we are focusing on a more sustainable future, emphasizing women's empowerment, the empowerment of marginalized communities, and youth leadership.

The most significant operational or strategic change we have made is taking a long-term approach. We emphasize partnerships and collaboration because we cannot grow or sustain our initiatives alone. Instead of focusing primarily on funding, we rely more on human resources and potential. If we look at the bigger picture, our strategy is about fostering collaboration, building relationships, and ensuring sustainability. That is our core approach to strategic planning. I hope that makes sense.

Jacobsen: How does SIWA support members learning about Korean culture and navigating life in Seoul?

Han: We integrate cultural exchange and local engagement through community building and social engagement. As I mentioned, we offer various programs, including arts and culture, a Korean-speaking club, a book club, coffee meet-ups in the mornings, and volunteering at Anna's Soup Kitchen.

These are not just events; they are designed to help people connect. For example, we gather participants' perspectives instead of having social gatherings where people introduce themselves. Based on these collective responses, we shape future events around meaningful themes that strengthen relationships.

For example, our Korean Speaking Club is structured as a mentorship program where Korean women who are experts in daily life in Korea mentor younger international women. We also offer specialized programs for professional working women and expat spouses who are in Korea but cannot work.

Through these initiatives, we meet various needs while ensuring that, at the core, everything is about connecting people.

Jacobsen: What measures are in place to promote inclusivity and equal participation?

Han: Yes, that is a critical point. It is the most important aspect of our work. For example, this year's International Women's Day theme is "Accelerate Action." We believe strongly in action-driven initiatives. One example is our collaboration last November with the Austrian Embassy and Ambassador Dr. Wolfgang Angerholzer on the Orange the World Movement, which raised awareness of and worked to end violence against women and girls.

Jacobsen: Yes, I am familiar with it—it focuses on preventing violence against women.

Han: When we hosted an event under this movement, we brought in diverse attendees. We invited young women from universities and international schools, ensuring a broad, inclusive conversation.

We aim to create meaningful spaces where diverse voices are heard and participation is equal and inclusive.

We actively invite people from different sectors and backgrounds. However, we have moved away from solely focusing on established experts with professional experience. Instead, we strive to bring in diverse voices—whether they are seasoned professionals, young leaders, or emerging changemakers.

For example, in our Orange the World Movement event, one of our leaders partnered with a desk officer at the Austrian Embassy to brainstorm and initiate the event–a great testament to the power of collaboration! She is in her twenties, and we valued her perspective as a younger leader. Of course, the Austrian ambassador also gave a speech, but it wasn't just about the formal aspect. The key was ensuring that young voices were actively included as partners, not just attendees.

For our upcoming International Women's Day (IWD) event, we are organizing an interactive panel discussion featuring a diverse lineup of speakers including an executive member from UNFPA, an expert in reproductive health and women's rights, a senior representative from the Green Climate Fund, a representative from the British Embassy sharing his perspective on diversity and inclusion, a high school student from Seoul Foreign School, a Korean professional working woman, and a university student.

We intentionally include individuals from different cultural and generational backgrounds to create a more dynamic discussion. It's not just about diverse attendees; it's about ensuring that the panel reflects diverse perspectives.

Representation is more impactful than simply talking about diversity. This is why we prioritize partnerships and collaborations that bring together people from different backgrounds and generations. A visible, inclusive platform sends a stronger message than theoretical discussions about inclusivity.

Jacobsen: According to Statista, South Korea's 2024 Gender Gap Index score is 0.752, indicating an average gender gap of roughly 30%. This places the country 94th out of 146 nations surveyed. Despite South Korea's strong standing on the UNDP Human Development Index, gender parity remains challenging. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranked South Korea 105th in 2023, reflecting a paradox similar to Japan's: a high development index but persistently low gender equality scores.

Given this context, what new initiatives does SIWA have to promote women's empowerment and foster greater community engagement in Seoul?

Han: We have discussed this extensively with younger generations—both women and men–and one common challenge we've observed is the lack of open dialogue. Few spaces allow these conversations to take place, partly due to prevailing anti-feminist sentiments in Korea. This stems from the country's feminist movement evolving through different phases, leading to varying perceptions and misunderstandings. Additionally, socioeconomic and cultural barriers play a significant role and must be explored more deeply within Korean society.

That's why we are making greater efforts to create more opportunities for women and men to have meaningful discussions. However, if an event is explicitly framed as a gender discussion, men tend to disengage, viewing it as a political issue rather than a shared conversation.

Instead, we frame these gatherings around collective volunteering, cultural exchange, or international collaboration. This approach reduces resistance and increases participation. Our priority is bridging local and international communities.

Second, we recognize that change must start with younger generations. That's why we are creating more projects that engage young people. For example, when events focus on empowering marginalized communities, young men and women are likelier to join forces because they don't immediately associate it with gender politics.

We have to be strategic in how we approach these issues. Instead of saying "gender equality," we use terms like collective volunteering or open dialogue—and then they come. Once they are in the space, we can naturally introduce themes of equity and inclusion.

We have learned that nothing will change without dialogue. This isn't about us saying, "This is the correct way to think." Instead, it's about creating opportunities for discussion. Our experience speaking with young Koreans and international youth—both men and women—has shown us that this approach is more effective.

So, that's what we are working on. We aren't saying "gender equality" outright; instead, we introduce the conversation through volunteering, community service, or environmental projects —topics that make people feel more comfortable participating. The key is to bring people

together first. We can start meaningful conversations and dialogues once they are in the same space.

Jacobsen: Sunghwa, I truly appreciate your time today. Thank you so much. It was a pleasure to meet you.

Han: Thank you so much, Scott. It was lovely meeting you, too. Scott, thank you so much for what you're doing. Please continue to contact us anytime. We'd love your support.

We need more people like you. Thank you, Scott. Have a lovely day.

Jacobsen: You're welcome. Take care.

The 'Revolt of the Rich': How the 1970s Reshaped America's Economic Divide

2025/02/10

David N. Gibbs, a historian at the University of Arizona, explores the forces that reshaped U.S. economic policy in his book *Revolt of the Rich*. He traces how a conservative coalition of business elites, militarists, and social conservatives emerged in the 1970s, driving an agenda of deregulation, financialization, and the erosion of labor rights. This alliance, Gibbs argues, concentrated wealth and power at the top of American society.

Though many attribute neoliberalism to the Reagan era, Gibbs reveals that its seeds were planted during Jimmy Carter's presidency. Reagan merely built upon a foundation of pro-business policies already in motion. Today, the political right continues to mobilize working-class voters, while the left struggles with fragmentation. According to Gibbs, economic inequality endures because no political force has effectively organized the working class—a vacuum that conservative movements have skillfully exploited.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In the 1970s, a coalition of business and social conservatives, along with militarists successfully promoted a free-market agenda. How did these seemingly disparate groups come together to drive that economic and political shift?

David N. Gibbs: The 1970s was a decade of crisis, marking a significant inflection point in U.S. history. It represented a transition away from the more labour-friendly policies of the New Deal and what could be called the Extended New Deal, which had moderated wealth distribution between rich and poor. That system broke down in the 1970s, leading to a sharp shift in American economic policy toward the free-market economics of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. These changes resulted in policies that overwhelmingly favoured high-income individuals and large business interests while becoming significantly less favourable to labour.

This shift occurred through a deliberate and concerted effort by business interests and wealthy individuals. They had grown intolerant of the New Deal's labour-friendly policies and sought to repeal them, fundamentally altering the character of American society—which they ultimately achieved.

The primary trigger for this shift was historically low profit rates. During the 1970s, profit rates reached record lows for the postwar period. Additionally, inflation was high, and contrary to popular belief, it disproportionately affected the wealthy. Thus, business elites and the wealthy faced a one-two punch: low profits and high inflation.

Their solution was to invest enormous sums of money in fundamentally reshaping American politics. They engaged in deep lobbying—not just lobbying the government directly but influencing the entire climate of opinion. The idea was that shaping the intellectual and ideological landscape would have a far more enduring impact than simply pushing for specific legislative changes.

This effort was carried out with an unusual degree of unity among upper-class interests. Usually, different sectors of business conflict with one another, but in this case, they set aside their differences to pursue a shared goal. This was a well-planned, strategic initiative. In my archival research, I examined private papers from individuals involved in this movement and was struck by the strategic focus they applied.

First, they united business interests around a common cause. They then allied with militarist interests—particularly the military-industrial complex, which sought a greatly expanded military budget. They created a powerful coalition that successfully reshaped American economic and political structures.

Finally, they recruited social conservatives who weren't particularly interested in economics but were deeply concerned with social issues. These individuals opposed abortion and resisted what they saw as secularist trends in America. You might say they rejected the major cultural changes of the 1960s.

This was when the United States experienced a significant expansion of evangelical Christianity. There was an explosion of interest in evangelicalism, largely among people who were not focused on economics and not part of the elite. These were mostly members of the working and middle classes. Business interests, however, saw an opportunity to make common cause with them, pushing simultaneously for free-market economics, militarist expansion, and social conservatism. They succeeded in uniting disparate groups of people with little in common.

But they did this because they needed a majority. In private, they acknowledged that there aren't enough of us elites to win elections. They recognized that a mass base was necessary. In some ways, they learned from the political left, which had long focused on mobilizing mass movements. Conservatives studied and adapted these tactics, understanding that securing a broad base was essential for long-term political success. That mass base, they determined, would be evangelical Christianity.

Thus, business interests poured money into evangelical churches and significantly shaped the Christian Right as a political force. Their overarching strategy was fusionism, which involved merging multiple sectors of the conservative movement into a unified coalition and emphasizing majority support to drive fundamental policy changes. They were highly disciplined and strategic in this effort.

Reviewing their private papers, I was struck by how these individuals formulated and executed their strategies. Watching how they planned and implemented their policies was reminiscent of generals orchestrating a military offensive. Their level of discipline and focus was extraordinary.

By the late 1970s, they had achieved enormous success. By the second half of the Carter presidency, they had already begun securing the policy changes they sought. These changes had the predictable effect of concentrating wealth at the top, lowering the population's living standards. That was their project, and ultimately, they achieved it.

Jacobsen: How did the ideological narratives crafted by this coalition redefine the public discourse on economic policy?

Gibbs: There was a clever and deliberate emphasis on language. Conservatives have always been skillful in shaping discourse, using short, simple phrases to redefine key concepts.

For example, they took words like liberty and freedom—which have a broad range of meanings—and redefined them specifically as freedom from government regulation. Of course, freedom and liberty can encompass various interpretations, but they carefully framed these terms to prioritize economic freedom, particularly for the wealthy.

That was their technique. They emphasized using market language to describe almost every aspect of human activity. This transformation extended beyond economics and deeply influenced the social sciences. Market theory concepts insinuated themselves into economics, political science, and sociology. The new language that emerged from Friedman and Hayek's free-market economics reshaped these disciplines.

By contrast, the political left increasingly adopted academic jargon during this same period. Consider, for example, the term intersectionality. It appeals primarily to those with advanced humanities and social sciences degrees, but to people outside academic life, it comes across as vague and condescending.

Meanwhile, wealthy elites and the theorists they employed made a much better strategic decision. They communicated their ideas using simple, clear, and often Anglo-Saxon-rooted words, which made their arguments more accessible and persuasive. This gave them a significant advantage in shaping public discourse.

Jacobsen: What has been the role of academic institutions, think tanks, and intellectuals in legitimizing laissez-faire economics?

Gibbs: The widespread myth is that academics are overwhelmingly far-left and radical. That perception is only true on cultural issues. On topics like abortion rights, feminism, and transgender rights, universities do lean to the left. However, that is not the case when it comes to economics.

In reality, universities—particularly economics departments—are quite conservative. The image of the radical left-wing academic is largely a myth. Academics conduct much of the deep lobbying I have described. Wealthy individuals often hire academics as the intellectual architects of the social and economic transformations they seek.

Academics were valuable for two key reasons. First, they could develop new ideas that benefited the wealthy. Second, they possessed public credibility. Unlike traditional lobbyists—who are legally required to register—academics were not classified as lobbyists. They had an aura of objectivity, which made them far more effective at influencing public opinion and policy. They could advocate for corporate interests while maintaining a veneer of scholarly neutrality.

Academics played an instrumental role in implementing the policy shifts that made the United States a more plutocratic society by the decade's end. I highlight two key networks of academics.

The first was the Mont Pelerin Society, founded in 1947 in Switzerland. This organization brought together corporate-funded free-market economists, including Friedrich Hayek, one of its founding members. By the 1970s, the Mont Pelerin Society had grown enormously in influence.

Many of the free-market movement's most significant economic innovations originated from economists affiliated with this network and its associated think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Hoover Institution.

The second major network consisted of militarist-oriented academics. A key organization in this area was the Committee on the Present Danger, which lobbied for a substantial increase in U.S. military spending. This effort aligned closely with the goals of free-market lobbyists, as both groups sought to expand corporate power—whether through deregulation or increased defence contracts.

This movement was led by Eugene Rostow, a law professor at Yale University, and included many top-tier intellectuals and academics. What emerged was a situation in which the conservative revolution in America—and it truly was a revolution—was made possible in large part by right-wing academics, who played a crucial role in bringing it to fruition.

Additionally, the Nixon administration employed policy strategists to embed free-market principles into federal institutions. Richard Nixon is a fascinating figure because the perception of him differs significantly from reality. Before conducting my research, I shared the common perception that Nixon was a political opportunist with no deep ideological commitments. It was often said that he had no ideas—only methods.

However, when I examined archival sources at the Nixon Library in California, I found a different Nixon—one who was highly ideological and closely aligned with the free-market economists of the Mont Pelerin Society, particularly Milton Friedman. Nixon was heavily influenced by Friedman and appointed numerous Friedman acolytes to key positions in his administration, especially within the Department of the Treasury. Through these appointments, he helped reshape the economic policy bureaucracy in a way that had long-lasting effects.

Furthermore, Nixon elevated the standing of Mont Pelerin Society economists within the academic and policy-making communities. He also worked behind the scenes to encourage wealthy Republican donors to fund a right-wing intellectual infrastructure, particularly by strengthening the American Enterprise Institute. At the time, the AEI was a marginal and poorly funded think tank. Under Nixon's influence, it grew into a major Washington powerhouse, becoming one of the primary sources of policy innovation for the right throughout the 1970s and beyond.

I discovered that Nixon was central to building up this conservative intellectual and policy apparatus—and he did so with a clear strategic intent: to transform American society in a free-market direction.

However, Nixon did not remain in office long enough to see these policy changes fully materialize. Watergate cut his presidency short. Had it not been for Watergate, he would have overseen a more comprehensive policy transformation.

Although he did not implement these changes himself, he laid the intellectual groundwork for the free-market shift at the decade's end. In this sense, Nixon was key in facilitating the rightward economic shift that would later define American politics.

Jacobsen: How did the Carter administration continue neoliberal trends?

Gibbs: The neoliberal shift at the policy level occurred during the Carter presidency. **Jimmy Carter** was a far more conservative president than many people realize.

One of his defining traits was that he was anti-labor. People often forget that he came from Georgia, a right-to-work state with weak labor unions. The South, in general, has historically had weaker labour unions compared to other regions of the U.S., and Georgia was no exception. Carter served as Governor of Georgia when labour was not a significant political force in the state. As a result, he entered the White House with a fundamentally negative view of labour unions.

Carter was also a major advocate of deregulation. His chief deregulation adviser, Alfred Kahn, a professor at Cornell University, promoted policies that were not significantly different from those of Milton Friedman. Kahn saw deregulation as a method for weakening labour unions, and Carter supported these efforts.

Ultimately, many of the neoliberal policy changes often associated with Ronald Reagan began under Carter's presidency. His presidency paved the way for the full-scale neoliberal transformation that would unfold in the 1980s.

After leaving government, Kahn privately stated that one of his primary objectives had been to weaken labour unions—and he succeeded. The trend toward deregulation began with the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978, which was soon followed by the deregulation of trucking, rail, and, ultimately, finance. These changes had the effect of lowering wages in those sectors.

A particularly significant transformation was the deregulation of finance in 1980, especially the removal of interest rate regulations that had been in place since the New Deal. Under Carter, these regulations were abolished, leading to a shift toward financialization—the expansion of the financial sector from a secondary component of the economy into a dominant economic force.

This change greatly enriched the financial sector but had significant negative consequences. Financialization led to deindustrialization and lower investment in manufacturing, dismantling the high-paying blue-collar jobs that had been the foundation of working-class prosperity for decades. These jobs never returned, and working-class wages permanently declined as a result. Carter's policies had a deeply conservative impact on American economic life.

Carter also introduced fiscal austerity, cutting spending on social programs while increasing military spending. Perhaps his most significant move was using the Federal Reserve System to engineer a deep recession, the most severe since the Great Depression, which extended from 1980 into 1982 during Reagan's presidency, which increased unemployment as a means of fighting inflation.

While the policy did reduce inflation, it came at a tremendous cost—wages never fully recovered from the deep recession. More than Reagan, Carter was the president who initiated the policy revolution that shifted America rightward. Many of the neoliberal economic policies that people associate with Reagan were, in fact, first implemented under Carter. Reagan continued and

expanded what Carter had already set in motion. Carter is often overlooked but played a pivotal role in America's rightward economic shift.

Jacobsen: Why was the core emphasis on deregulation and fiscal austerity?

Gibbs: As mentioned earlier, deregulation had the effect of lowering wages. However, it was framed differently—supporters claimed it would increase productivity and lower consumer prices.

In some cases, this justification did not hold up. For example, airline deregulation did not lead to lower ticket prices. Robert Gordon, an economist at Northwestern University, conducted research showing no long-term decline in airline ticket prices due to deregulation. The positive effects were oversold, while the real impact was downward pressure on wages—which I suspect was the primary motivation for pursuing deregulation in the first place.

Austerity also played a key role. Cutting social programs justified future tax cuts, particularly for the wealthy and large corporations. In fact, Carter reduced taxes for big business, particularly by lowering the capital gains tax, which made the tax system less progressive.

Ultimately, these policies contributed significantly to the concentration of wealth in America. The wealthy elites who orchestrated this massive influence campaign in the early 1970s had a clear objective: to redistribute wealth upward. By the end of the decade, they had largely succeeded under Carter.

Jacobsen: Can these be seen as deliberate efforts by the elite and the wealthy to entrench political and economic power via the state?

Gibbs: Absolutely. The state was central to this process because it was the state itself that carried out these transformations.

This is deeply ironic because the stated goal of the free-market movement was to reduce government intervention in the economy. In reality, government action facilitated the shift toward neoliberalism.

One of the most significant state-led efforts was financial deregulation. By removing government oversight of finance, policymakers enabled massive speculation in the financial sector, which became a major source of wealth accumulation.

No sector benefited more from this shift than finance—which became the dominant force in the American economy during this period.

The problem, however, was that speculation periodically went wrong, putting banks at risk of collapse. This introduced the issue of systemic risk—the idea that if a large bank fails, it can bring down the entire banking system and the economy along with it. This is exactly what happened during the Great Depression in the early 1930s.

As a result, large financial institutions required government bailouts to survive. This created a paradox: the financial sector pushed for deregulation, demanding that the government stay out of finance—until they needed to be rescued. At that point, they wanted the government back in.

In reality, the government never left finance; it simply assumed a new role—not as a regulator but as a safety net for large banks whenever their speculative practices backfired.

Another key area where the government played a central role was the expansion of the military. This became a major source of enrichment for military contractors, what President Eisenhower famously termed the military-industrial complex.

Overseas investors also supported military expansion, as they found American military power reassuring. The presence of U.S. military bases and aircraft carriers protected their investments abroad from revolutions, wars, and other potential threats.

So, while the right-wing turn of the 1970s was ideologically framed as an effort to reduce government intervention, the state remained central to the process—whether through bank bailouts, military spending, or corporate protections.

Jacobsen: Is this pattern being repeated today?

Gibbs: Absolutely. Much of what I described in my book about the 1970s has clear echoes in the present day.

One key figure in this ongoing process is Charles Koch, one of the richest men in the United States. His net worth, as of this year, is $67.5 billion. With this vast fortune, he has orchestrated a broad coalition of corporate and ideological interests to reshape American economic and political institutions.

A significant part of Koch's strategy has been funding free-market think tanks at universities nationwide. The most recent estimate suggests that over 300 universities in the United States now host free-market think tanks or departments funded partly by Koch-affiliated interests.

This is a massive effort, including at my institution—the University of Arizona, which has one of these Koch-funded institutes. The goal is to subtly promote and expand free-market ideology within academia, inculcating these ideas among students.

Crucially, this is done quietly, in a way that most people do not realize is a corporate-funded influence campaign—which is exactly what it is. This process of deep lobbying first launched in the 1970s, has continued to expand and is now reaching new heights.

Another major example of this trend is Project 2025, a massive initiative to transform the federal government and economic policy. It is spearheaded by the Heritage Foundation, one of the think tanks founded in the 1970s as part of that decade's influence campaign.

Today, we are seeing a continuation and intensification of the same political and economic strategies that reshaped the U.S. in the 1970s.

By the way, I don't want to understate the extent to which Democrats also receive massive corporate funding and are influenced by corporate interests when it comes to economic policy. In fact, Kamala Harris received substantial corporate donations in the last election cycle.

Another major area is the culture wars.

One of the strategic tools used in the 1970s to distract the public—deliberately—was the culture war. The idea was to get people deeply divided over abortion rights, feminism, and LGBTQ+ rights, ensuring that these issues dominated political discourse. The goal was to prevent serious discussions about economic inequality and wealth concentration, which was accelerating during this period.

That was the entire point of the right-wing culture war strategy.

Jacobsen: What additional points should be made?

Gibbs: One key point I want to highlight is the extent to which the policy shift of the 1970s represented a major failure for the political left. That failure has echoes in today's politics. In the 1970s, the left had significant potential power.

The public generally supported the continuation of New Deal policies—and, in some cases, even favoured expanding them further. Given all of this, the left had the potential to act as a powerful counterforce against the right-wing shift that took place. Yet, despite these movements, big business still prevailed—even in a democracy. That is remarkable.

What happened was that the left was fragmented, so there was no organized opposition to the business-led influence campaign.

The union movement was unable to work with other social movements. It had been ossified by the Red Scare of the early 1950s, during which many of its most talented organizers were purged. Those who remained were far less competent and unable to collaborate with the youthful radicals of the 1960s and 1970s.

Meanwhile, young activists lacked a unified organization. Instead, they were split into separate groups, each representing different identity-based movements—civil rights, feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmentalism. The contrast with the right is striking.

While the left was fragmented, the right was moving toward fusion—bringing together various factions into a single coalition. The right operated strategically, while the left rejected the strategy altogether.

The left seemed almost ideologically opposed to strategic planning as if it violated their principles. The right treated politics like a chess game, carefully planning moves, counter-moves, and counter-counter-moves.

The left never did this. As a result, the left's fragmentation and lack of strategy made them incapable of stopping the right-wing juggernaut. This was further compounded by the fact that many identity-based movements were not interested in economic issues.

Another key factor is that by the 1970s the left had become an a predominantly upper middle-class movement. This was especially true of identity groups. Whereas leftist organizing had once been rooted in factories and union halls, by the 1970s, it had moved to college campuses and coffee shops.

The typical leftist was now college-educated and upper-income. For example, studies of abortion rights activists found that they were predominantly affluent, well-educated women.

This alienated them from working-class Americans, who had historically formed the left's base. However, there were not enough affluent progressives to form a strong defence against the right-wing assault on living standards. A major conclusion of my book is that the victory of neoliberal economics was made possible in part because the left was so weak and ineffectual.

This dynamic has continued into the present day. Today's left is even more detached from the non-college educated working class than it was in the 1970s.

Studies show that those who identify as left—figures like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her supporters—tend to have higher incomes and education levels than any other ideological group. This is evident in recent surveys conducted by the More in Common Foundation and Pew Research.

This represents a historic reversal of what the left traditionally stood for. The modern left is no longer a working-class movement. And in politics, a basic rule applies: If the left does not organize the working class, the right will.

That is exactly what has happened. The Republican Party under Donald Trump has been effective in using working-class language and communicating in simple terms. By contrast, the left often relies on stilted language from university seminars.

A telling example occurred with Bernie Sanders, who was an exception in that he did manage to gain significant working-class support. At one point in the 2020 campaign, Joe Rogan—host of a massively popular podcast with millions of working-class, predominantly male listeners—invited Sanders onto his show.

After their conversation, Rogan effectively endorsed Sanders, saying he supported his candidacy. Then, Ocasio-Cortez and other activist left figures boycotted Sanders' campaign, declaring they would refuse to support him if he continued engaging with Rogan.

Jacobsen: Why?

Gibbs: Because Rogan had previously made controversial remarks on gender issues. Sanders had to distance himself from Rogan, despite the fact that Rogan had just introduced Sanders to millions of working-class voters.

This was a revealing moment, underscoring the dysfunctional culture of the contemporary American left. Today's left seems remarkably comfortable in its affluent bubble and is resistant to change or self-critique. That aligns with something I've come across before—Spiro Agnew, Nixon's vice president in the 1970s, was effective at playing the populist card. Even if he was not sincere, he spoke about "snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals"—implying that American liberalism had become a movement of cultural elites. And liberals had no effective response to this accusation since it was bleakly accurate, and this remains true today.

The Democratic Party and the activist left have evolved together, moving away from working-class politics and toward cultural progressivism that primarily appeals to people with advanced degrees and high incomes.

And that is one of the biggest obstacles to addressing wealth inequality in the United States. Right now, the principal group mobilizing the working class is ironically the Republican Party—even though their actual policies actively harm working-class people.

Jacobsen: That reminds me of something someone once told me: "An option is better than no option."

So, when the left does not step up, the right does—even if their option is terrible, it is still an option.

Gibbs: Exactly. That is true. The Republicans are actively competing for working-class voters, while the Democrats have largely failed to do so, ceding the field to the right. And the activist left is even more posh than the Democrats. So, the Trumpian victory last November should not be surprising.

Jacobsen: David, thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate it, and it was great to meet you.

Gibbs: Likewise. Thank you.

Bob Rae on Diplomacy, Democracy, and Defending Canada's Values

2025/02/12

As Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, Bob Rae brings a seasoned political instinct to the world of diplomacy. In this conversation, he reflects on how his political career has shaped his approach—favoring direct engagement and forthright advocacy, particularly on Indigenous rights, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ issues. Rae discusses the challenges of fostering global dialogue, maintaining Canada's credibility on the world stage, and navigating the complexities of multilateralism.

The conversation spans a range of urgent global issues, from the uneven toll of COVID-19 and the **war in Ukraine** to the escalating crises in the Middle East and the resurgence of authoritarianism. He also delves into the delicate art of consensus-building at the UN, the tension between national interests and universal principles, and Canada's evolving role in climate policy, cybersecurity, and addressing historical injustices. Throughout, Rae underscores the trade-offs inherent in diplomacy and the ongoing necessity of sustained engagement in defending democracy, human rights, and global cooperation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Ambassador Rae, how has your extensive experience in domestic politics influenced your approach to international diplomacy?

Bob Rae: First of all, I'm referred to here at the UN as "The Politician" because there's a difference in style between someone who is used to dealing with the media and others in the diplomatic field. I speak as directly as possible about the issues without necessarily adhering to every word of a prepared text.

I take a more informal approach, but I get along extremely well with my colleagues here, and everyone works differently. Indigenous rights, for example, are issues I have pursued here at the UN. It has been very challenging, but it is nevertheless something I feel strongly about. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an anchor document at the UN, and there is the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which takes place here every spring. I will attend that under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

My long experience in Canadian politics and involvement in advancing equality rights have shaped my approach to women's equality issues. The same goes for LGBTQI+ issues—I have been advocating and pushing harder for broader recognition in that area.

I have also worked extensively on employment equity and diversity, which has given me insight into many issues affecting African delegates, for example. African countries have a strong interest in addressing historical legacy issues such as colonialism and slavery, and I believe it is important that we, as a country, recognize the depth and extent of those concerns.

So, yes, all of that has played a role. This job has allowed me to draw on my history and skill sets. It has also been a homecoming for me because, as you may know, my father was a diplomat. I grew up and attended high school at the International School of Geneva.

My father later became the Canadian Ambassador to the UN in New York. I did not live here with him because I was already studying at the University of Oxford. Still, it was a significant way for me to—like I said—come back home to something I instinctively knew about and understood. It had a major influence on how I handled political issues in Canada.

So, yes, it has been a wonderful experience, and I have enjoyed participating in the UN's life here in New York.

Jacobsen: In your experience, what are the biggest challenges in fostering meaningful dialogue on Indigenous rights, gender equality, and LGBTQI+ issues—such as within the UN LGBTI Core Group—as well as broader concerns like economic inequality? These are inherently global issues, shaped by diverse perspectives and political realities across different regions.

Canada is often seen, at least in principle, as a champion of UN values—a reputation it has carefully cultivated. But such standing is never guaranteed, and credibility on the world stage can be fragile. Given this, what are the key obstacles to advancing these conversations, and how can Canada effectively wield its soft power and commitment to multilateralism to drive progress?

Rae: The key thing, and you make a very good point, is that for us as a country, and certainly for the government that I represent, these issues are core. I need to know that I have the support of the government for which I work. That is an important part of how I have been able to operate in this forum—people know that what I say reflects the views of the Canadian government, not just in principle but also in terms of what we have done and what we are doing.

One of the critical factors for credibility and trust is that you do what you say and reflect that in both domestic and foreign policy. For example, having a feminist foreign assistance program and policy is crucial in discussions with other countries. Whether they already have such a policy, are exploring one, or are questioning why we have one. You explain the reasoning: the historic discriminations that need to be addressed, the systemic barriers that persist, and why it is important for Canada to allocate some of its discretionary funding to this issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major challenge since 2020. First, the UN, like any organization, had to adjust to the lack of in-person meetings immediately. More importantly, I quickly became aware of the massive gap in the accessibility of vaccines and treatments when they became available in North America and Europe.

The challenge was ensuring that vaccines reached other countries. That was a wake-up call for me because, at home, governments faced tremendous pressure to meet domestic needs. At the same time, Canada made historic investments in distribution networks and vaccine access, particularly through Gavi, the global vaccine alliance based in Geneva.

Still, the pandemic underscored the reality that while we might think we are all in the same boat, we are in very different boats. Some are small and fragile, while others are large and secure. The large and secure boats remain steady when the storm comes, while the fragile ones take the hardest hit.

That realization led me to work on financing for development, which is a major human rights issue for many countries. Developing nations argue that human rights extend beyond individual

rights, including social and economic rights—the right to development. The impact of COVID-19 set many things back, derailed progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and created significant debt challenges. The global response to the pandemic essentially shut down the world economy for a while, and the recovery has been uneven. Many poorer countries are still feeling the effects.

Then came the invasion of Ukraine, which immediately polarized relations between Russia, Canada, and other nations. The war in Ukraine has been a defining issue in international diplomacy.

The third major challenge has, of course, been the war in the Middle East—**the Hamas attack on Israel**, which led to Israel's counteroffensive in Gaza and the ensuing humanitarian and human rights crises. These have been incredibly challenging times, encompassing the full range of human rights concerns.

And now, with President Trump's election, there is a new polarizing factor that we are all dealing with as well.

Jacobsen: There is a state of mind for ambassadors and diplomats. I participated in more than a dozen Model United Nations.

Rae: That's where I started, too, by the way.

Jacobsen: I did two Harvard Model United Nations and several up and down the West Coast.

Rae: I did one in high school at the International School. We had one every year.

Jacobsen: For those unfamiliar, there are roughly 800 or more Model UN conferences held annually, spanning high school to graduate-level participants. At its core, Model UN operates on a consensus-building framework—a stark contrast to the often adversarial nature of politics. A seasoned politician like yourself would understand this distinction far better than I would.

With that in mind, how do you navigate deeply complex issues while engaging with individuals from vastly different cultural and political backgrounds? What strategies do you rely on to foster a mindset of consensus-building when tackling global challenges, ensuring that multiple perspectives are not just acknowledged but meaningfully integrated into the process?

Rae: You're right. The working method of the UN is consensus. And frequently, it is not achievable. In the UN Security Council, for example, there has been a notorious deadlock in recent years. The UN Security Council depends on consensus but also requires unanimity among the permanent members. That has proven difficult on several critical issues, including Haiti, where Canada has been directly involved. When the UN Security Council reaches an impasse, the General Assembly, representing all member states, plays a much greater role. It becomes a venue where issues are worked on, resolutions are drafted, and votes occur. Not all resolutions pass by consensus—many are voted up or down—so the adversarial nature of some discussions can be quite intense. That dynamic has been very much in play. However, reaching a consensus has proven to be extremely challenging.

In many cases, to achieve consensus, the final statement or resolution says far less than it originally intended. As a result, concluding documents can be bland and lack bold, forward-thinking ideas. I often joke that when the United States' founding fathers asked Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence, they did not have 193 people holding the pen. Of course, there were disagreements, but ultimately, the person drafting the document significantly influenced what it said.

That's much less true here. You have 193 countries trying to hold the pen simultaneously. This creates quite difficult conversations about your red lines, what you are prepared to do, what you are not prepared to do, and how you can bridge gaps between us.

Most recently, the document we worked on last summer—the Pact for the Future—was quite a significant document because it was the first attempt to address the post-COVID environment and discuss the need to renew the work of the UN and its vision. Getting to a consensus was very, very difficult. The Russians tried to upset the apple cart, and the Africans said, "No, we've made enough compromises. We want to have something in hand and move forward with this document." That changed the nature of the dynamic, which was quite interesting in September when it was all approved.

Jacobsen: Another fundamental concept in international relations and diplomacy is the idea of trade-offs. Nations operate on different scales and under varying pressures, often navigating competing priorities. A well-known example is Lee Kuan Yew's leadership in Singapore, where he balanced linguistic diversity, a complex religious landscape, and geopolitical tensions—managing relations with a rising China while maintaining strong ties with the United States.

Singapore's small size allows for agility, but it also necessitates strategic concessions. Canada, by contrast, operates on a different scale as a member of the G7 and G20, with broader global responsibilities. In your role as ambassador, how do you navigate the tension between safeguarding national interests and upholding universal principles on the international stage? What strategies enable Canada to maintain this equilibrium in an increasingly complex diplomatic environment?

Rae: That is the challenge. You've described it very well. Historically, diplomacy has been one of the great challenges, whether it is about principles or interests. Diplomacy is about both. In the big picture, when you look at the current tensions we face with the Trump administration, Canada's clear interest is in strengthening the multilateral system because we are a country that depends on a strong rule of law and independent international adjudication.

We depend on the networks of agreements we have reached on a wide range of issues, dating back to 1945 and even earlier in the case of the International Labour Organization, which dates back to 1919. So, it is important for us as a country to recognize that.

As a Canadian, I have felt more strongly here than in other circumstances that we are different from the United States. We have different views on how things should proceed, and they have their perspectives. Those differences have become even more pronounced regarding power politics, geopolitics, and their views on defending spheres of influence.

One reason we are where we are today is that we have to defend our perspective on the United Nations and how international systems should function. This sometimes puts us at odds with our largest trading partner and longest-standing ally. Managing that relationship and balancing these two ideas has been challenging.

But that is not the only issue. In many other situations, we must consider our position as a **NATO member**, a North American country, and a nation with overlapping international identities. Historically, we have been strong advocates for free trade and for a measured approach to immigration and migration—one that considers human rights while also addressing the realities of how many people a country can absorb at any given time. But then, what do we do about the rights of refugees? These are complex issues that do not lend themselves to a single answer.

My legal education and understanding of life have taught me that we often deal with competing goods, rights, and values. It is not simply interests versus values; it is different values in tension —the value of freedom and equality—and determining how they measure up. How do we navigate those trade-offs?

The reality is that it is a trade-off, and we need to embrace that concept. We need to accept that we will never achieve perfection or complete certainty. That has been an important lesson in my life—learning that in everything we do, by choosing to engage in political decision-making, we are making compromises.

People sometimes criticize politicians for making compromises, but everyone makes compromises. If you are in a relationship, you compromise as soon as you enter it. You will not always get your way; that is simply the way life works.

Jacobsen: How does Canadian diplomacy address emerging global challenges, such as pandemics, cybersecurity threats, and global warming?

Rae: The road we are on right now requires us to recognize that, for some issues, there is no purely national solution. Addressing climate change, for example, demands global cooperation— buy-in from all nation-states, with different levels of commitment depending on their emissions and pollution levels. But the reality is that we only find a way forward if we take climate change seriously, which we do as a country.

If we take it seriously, the next question is, how do we act? The answer is through treaties. Starting with Kyoto and continuing to Paris, we have consistently supported the treaty-making process because we understand that it must be done internationally.

Similarly, we will never ensure global safety during a pandemic unless we cooperate. As I have said many times, there was a period when airplanes and restaurants had smoking sections, but that did not work. It did not stop pollution, and it did not prevent people from inhaling secondhand smoke. In the same way, some challenges—like global health and climate change— require a broader, universal approach.

The second point is that we understand the long-term effects of colonialism as a country. The Prime Minister spoke about this in his first UN speech in 2016. Although we might like to think of ourselves as not being a colonial country, colonialism has directly shaped Canada because

Indigenous peoples lived on this land long before settlers arrived. That historical reality has created a unique dynamic we have had to confront, particularly in the past few decades.

That history allows us to approach conversations with other countries about the impact of colonialism and historical injustices, such as slavery, with a deeper understanding. We do not dismiss these concerns. We do not say, "That's not important," or "That's not our responsibility." Instead, we engage with these issues in a meaningful way.

Some countries see themselves as exceptional—as if history and global norms do not apply to them. But when nations take that stance, they are deluding themselves. No country is truly exceptional in that way. No one is beyond the rule of law and can escape the consequences of history and circumstance.

When we see ourselves that way, we recognize our place in a multilateral context. However, we also live in a time when democracy is under threat, the rule of law is being challenged, and artificial intelligence is revolutionizing how the world operates and evolves. These forces will drive major debates and transformations within global communities.

We need to stay alert to these shifts and understand why defending the values and priorities we take seriously is in our national interest. The rise of authoritarianism, the increasing attacks on institutions simply because they exist, the pushback against human rights and democratic freedoms, and the backlash against LGBTQI+ rights—these are all examples of where we must continue to stand firm. We must stand up for what we believe in and what it means to be human.

Jacobsen: Ambassador Rae, thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate it.

Rae: Good to talk to you. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

The Cost of Uncertainty: How Canadian Small Businesses are Bracing for Trump's Tariffs

2025/02/12

Corinne Pohlmann, Executive Vice-President of Advocacy at the **Canadian Federation of Independent Business** (CFIB), unpacks the potential fallout of U.S. President Donald Trump's proposed 25% tariffs on Canadian exports. For small businesses, particularly exporters, the prospect of rising costs and economic uncertainty looms large. While CFIB advocates for targeted relief funded by tariff revenues, Pohlmann warns that broad retaliatory measures could do more harm than good.

Beyond tariffs, Canada's internal trade barriers present another persistent challenge. Pohlmann argues that mutual recognition of standards offers a faster and more pragmatic solution than full regulatory harmonization. Meanwhile, existing government programs—such as Work-Sharing—may provide a temporary lifeline for businesses bracing for disruption.

With Trump's unpredictable approach to trade negotiations, Pohlmann stresses the importance of strategic, measured responses. For Canada's small businesses, the challenge isn't just weathering potential tariffs but navigating the broader economic volatility and regulatory uncertainty they could bring.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are CFIB's primary concerns regarding President Trump's proposed 25% tariffs on Canadian exports, which have been delayed but are expected to take effect on March 1st?

Corinne Pohlmann: Imposing a 25% tariff on Canadian exports to the United States would significantly impact the Canadian economy, particularly on small businesses across the country. About half of all small businesses in Canada engage in trade with the U.S. The majority—approximately 47%—import from the U.S. In comparison, around 18% to 20% of exports to the U.S. These tariffs would primarily impact exporters. In contrast, retaliatory tariffs imposed by Canada would affect importers.

When we surveyed our members at the end of last year—when this issue was already making headlines—over 80% indicated that these tariffs would have some impact on their business. While only about 50% of small businesses directly trade with the U.S., many others rely on companies that do. For example, some purchase goods from wholesalers or distributors that trade directly with the U.S., meaning they, too, will feel the effects.

Another concern is the potential impact on the Canadian dollar. If its value declines, importing goods will become more expensive, further straining businesses. These factors will significantly affect small businesses, leaving them with limited options. In fact, over two-thirds of our members told us they would likely have to raise prices, which would, in turn, affect Canadian consumers. At a time when affordability is already a concern, this will only add further financial strain.

Jacobsen: How is this affecting Canadian small business owners?

Pohlmann: There is a great deal of anxiety. We are receiving numerous calls, even though businesses have a reprieve. While this provides some breathing room, there is still widespread concern about what these tariffs will mean in the long term.

Many businesses are rethinking their entire business models because they have relied so heavily on the U.S. as either a supplier or a customer. Just before this interview, I read an article about a company in the Montreal area that is now laying off employees because 80% of its products are exported to the U.S. However, its American customers are already shifting to other markets, finding it more cost-effective to source from Asia rather than Canada due to the 25% tariffs. The company is uncertain whether its current business model will remain viable, so it is initiating layoffs while exploring ways to sustain operations.

Although this may not be a universal issue, similar situations are unfolding across many companies in Canada.

Some businesses can pivot, though shifting to other markets may take some time. Others may have to rethink their current approach and explore alternative ways to manage the situation.

Exporters will experience the most significant direct impact. They may have to decide whether to remain in Canada, retain all their employees, or pivot to other markets quickly. The situation is also challenging for importers, but they at least have the option of increasing prices and attempting to adjust as they transition to alternative markets that may offer lower costs for their customers.

Jacobsen: What is CFIB's position on broad retaliatory tariffs from the Canadian government?

Pohlmann: We are concerned that broad retaliatory tariffs would have a widespread impact on many small businesses. A more strategic approach would be to focus tariffs on products readily available within Canada or from other countries.

This would minimize disruption. Raising prices abruptly is difficult for small businesses, as they do not want to alienate their customers.

Small businesses and consumers are already struggling. However, absorbing a 25% increase is nearly impossible because most small businesses operate on razor-thin profit margins. This disadvantages them compared to large multinational corporations, which are often better equipped to absorb sudden changes in the marketplace.

We urge the government to avoid broad-based retaliatory tariffs and instead focus on select products. Additionally, we encourage flexibility so that adjustments can be made if the tariffs disproportionately impact specific sectors. The government was receptive to industry feedback during the Trump tariffs in 2017 and 2018, making modifications when necessary. We hope they will take a similarly adaptive approach this time.

Jacobsen: Canada and the United States share the longest contiguous border of any neighbouring countries. What percentage of Canadian small businesses are directly involved in trade with the U.S.?

Pohlmann: About one in two small businesses in Canada trade with the U.S. This does not mean they do so daily—some trade weekly or frequently. In contrast, others may only do so a few times a year. Even for those with infrequent trade, it remains an important part of their business operations.

The majority of these businesses are importers, sourcing products from the U.S. However, around one in five to one in six exporters send goods to the American market, a level of trade significantly higher than that of any other country.

Unfortunately, we find ourselves in this situation, and we remain hopeful that these tariffs will continue to be delayed. The uncertainty surrounding them can sometimes be as damaging as the tariffs themselves.

Jacobsen: What policy measures would help small businesses remain competitive in this uncertain market?

Pohlmann: We can take several important steps. This uncertainty presents an opportunity to address longstanding issues that have hindered businesses for years finally.

First and foremost is internal trade. Interprovincial trade barriers have long been a challenge for businesses in Canada. Yet, efforts to address them have not had a significant impact. Breaking down these barriers—especially the differing rules and regulations between provinces that add unnecessary costs and paperwork for small businesses—would be an important step forward.

Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) research suggests that Canada's internal trade barriers are equivalent to a 21% tariff. Reducing these barriers would allow for a freer movement of goods and people within Canada, making domestic trade more efficient. We have even heard from businesses that it is sometimes easier to trade with the U.S. than with other provinces, which should not be the case. We need a more concrete and bold approach rather than allowing efforts to be stalled by protectionist interests. Instead of harmonizing every rule, provinces should recognize each other's regulations, making trade easier across the country.

Second, competitiveness and productivity are critical concerns. Productivity in Canada has been declining, so our standard of living has dropped over the past decade. This is a major issue because we currently see more small businesses closing than opening, which historically has not been the norm in Canada. To reverse this trend, we must address tax structures—are they too onerous? What can be done to ease the cost of doing business? This remains the number one concern among our members, as high costs are preventing business growth.

Another key issue is red tape—the excessive regulations, paperwork, and compliance requirements that create unnecessary business burdens. Many of these regulations are outdated, redundant, or duplicative, yet businesses must still comply.

Last week, during our Red Tape Awareness Week, we released a report showing that businesses in Canada spend over $50 billion annually on government administration and regulations at all three levels: municipal, provincial, and federal. About one-third of that burden is unnecessary red tape, which could be eliminated without compromising health, safety, or environmental

protections. The problem is that governments do not effectively remove outdated regulations, leaving businesses stuck navigating bureaucratic obstacles that no longer serve a purpose.

Eliminating just one-third of unnecessary red tape would significantly boost productivity and make it easier to do business in Canada. One of the most startling statistics from our report is that two-thirds of business owners would not recommend entrepreneurship to their children due to the overwhelming regulatory burden. That is a troubling indicator of how much red tape discourages innovation and growth.

This issue also affects other professions, such as doctors. Many healthcare professionals are bogged down by administrative paperwork, limiting their time spent treating patients. If we streamline paperwork for doctors, we would have more healthcare professionals available to serve Canadians. Addressing these regulatory challenges should be a top priority for all levels of government.

Jacobsen: You mentioned that a 25% tariff is set to be implemented unless another round of negotiations results in a delay or a reversal. At the same time, internal trade barriers can sometimes act as a tariff. How should these internal trade barriers be dealt with?

Pohlmann: Canada's size undoubtedly increases the cost of doing business, particularly in terms of transportation. However, interprovincial trade barriers only make matters worse. Transportation is a great example.

A truck traveling across the country may have to stop at provincial borders and adjust its configuration based on differing provincial weight regulations, axle requirements, or cargo classifications. These variations create unnecessary costs and delays.

Each province does not intentionally make it difficult for businesses. Instead, provinces have historically developed independent regulations without considering how they align with their neighbours. Fortunately, a pilot project has been launched to mutually recognize transportation regulations across Canada.

Under this initiative, provinces will agree that if a truck is compliant in British Columbia, it will be automatically recognized as compliant in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, and beyond—without needing modifications to meet slightly different provincial regulations. This is an encouraging step and serves as a test case for a broader solution: mutual recognition of interprovincial regulations.

If expanded, this approach could significantly reduce business costs. For example, a small construction company in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia currently needs two sets of safety gear because each province has slightly different protective boots and jacket regulations. With mutual recognition, the company could use a single standardized set across both provinces.

While such differences may seem minor, they create substantial additional costs for businesses when layered together. Companies adapt as needed, but many of these regulations lack practical justification. Gravity works the same way in every province. So, if fall protection equipment is safe in Nova Scotia, it should also be considered safe in New Brunswick. Yet today, workers must use separate gear for each province.

Jacobsen: Are there any initiatives to comprehensively standardize minor trade regulations in a way that could optimize internal trade across Canada?

Pohlmann: Yes, and that is why mutual recognition is the fastest and most effective way to address these barriers. Since 2017, Canada has had the Canadian Free Trade Agreement (CFTA). At the time, there was great momentum—all provinces agreed to create a formal agreement to improve interprovincial trade.

This agreement replaced the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT), which had been in place since the early 1990s but had become outdated. Under the CFTA, provinces committed to eliminating unnecessary trade barriers. Still, they were also allowed to list exceptions—rules they could keep in place without change.

Some provinces had as few as eight exceptions, while others had as many as 30. A working group was created to review and harmonize these rules across Canada systematically.

The problem is that the process has been extremely slow. The working group identified about 30 regulations for harmonization, but only 18 have been addressed in eight years. At this pace, fully harmonizing trade rules across Canada could take centuries.

This is why mutual recognition is a much better approach. Instead of trying to standardize all regulations, provinces would agree to recognize each other's rules as valid. This would mean businesses only need to comply with the regulations of their home province. That compliance would be accepted in other provinces.

From a business perspective, this is the fastest and simplest solution. Last fall, we were pleased when all provinces agreed to launch a pilot project in the transportation industry using mutual recognition. We hope this approach will expand beyond transportation to many other sectors, if not the entire regulatory framework governing trade in Canada.

Jacobsen: The Trump administration seems likely to present some challenges for Canadian businesses. What support programs currently exist to help small businesses weather any uncertainties?

Pohlmann: Nothing comparable to the support programs we had during COVID-19 exists, and we do not believe the same level of intervention is needed. This situation is different. Businesses were completely shut down during the pandemic, and the economy reached a standstill. While the 25% tariffs will be a significant blow, they will not shut down the economy.

Any support measures should, first and foremost, be funded by the revenue collected by the Canadian government from its retaliatory tariffs. If the projected $30 billion in affected goods is accurate, and we assume a 25% tariff rate, that could generate approximately $6–7 billion. This revenue should provide targeted relief to the businesses most directly affected.

If the impact is short-term, lasting only a month or two, most businesses should be able to survive. However, if the situation persists for an extended period, further policy responses may be necessary.

Organizations such as BDC (Business Development Bank of Canada) and EDC (Export Development Canada) could offer low-interest loans. However, we are cautious about this approach, as many businesses are still struggling to repay loans from the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA), which was introduced during COVID-19. While CEBA provided temporary relief, it became a financial burden for many small businesses. Even today, about half of our members are still repaying their CEBA loans and other debts accumulated during the pandemic.

At this point, it is too early to determine additional measures until we fully understand the economic impact of the tariffs. However, there are existing programs that businesses can utilize.

For example, Employment Insurance (EI) remains available for laid-off workers. From an employer perspective, there is also the Work-Sharing Program, which helps businesses retain employees during temporary downturns. Under this program, EI partially subsidizes salaries. At the same time, employers continue to pay a portion, allowing businesses to avoid layoffs in the hope that economic conditions improve within a few months.

This program was successfully used during COVID-19 and was also implemented in response to previous tariffs in 2017–2018. Again, it could be an effective tool, particularly for exporters and manufacturers facing reduced demand due to the tariffs.

Jacobsen: It is not always wise to speculate, but what do small businesses take on the rationale behind the 25% tariffs?

Pohlmann: Regarding President Trump, I don't think anyone truly understands how his mind works. Like everyone else, we just read what's in the news. His book, *The Art of the Deal*, outlines his negotiation style, and this approach aligns with how he typically operates.

In discussions with my American counterparts, who were seeking advice on navigating this situation, they said the same thing: He thrives on making people uncomfortable, boxing them into a corner, and then extracting concessions from them. That is just how he operates. He is unpredictable, so I find myself pessimistic and optimistic about where this may go.

My optimism comes from the possibility that this is all just a negotiating tactic—that, in the end, he is simply using this as leverage to extract concessions in the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) negotiations. If that is the case, he may never impose the 25% tariffs; if he does, they could be short-lived.

The pessimist in me is concerned that he is highly unpredictable and prone to unilateral decisions. Reports from inside the White House suggest that his advisors say one thing while he says another. Although he has only been in office for a few weeks, conflicting information about his trade priorities exists.

Canada is not the main target this week, but that could change next week. He frequently shifts focus, focusing on different parts of the world. Because of this, even experienced business leaders do not necessarily have better insight into their decision-making.

At this point, all we can do is wait and see.

Jacobsen: Geopolitics requires diplomacy, compromise, and consensus-building rather than a purely adversarial approach. While a high-stakes negotiation style might work in certain business contexts, it does not translate well to international relations. Yet, Trump appears to apply the same mentality to business and politics—which is catastrophic for longstanding, stable partnerships like the one between Canada and the U.S.

Pohlmann: I would argue that this volatility is not just an international issue—it is also happening domestically within the United States. His rash decision-making is not limited to geopolitical affairs; he also makes abrupt policy changes at home.

He came into office determined to disrupt the status quo, and that is precisely what he is doing.

As we both acknowledged earlier, this will be a bumpy ride.

Jacobsen: Corinne, on that happy note, thank you for your time today. It was a pleasure to meet you, and I appreciate your insights and expertise.

Pohlmann: Thank you!

Dan O'Dowd on Lies, a Hitler Salute and How Your Tesla Might Murder You

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Dan O'Dowd is one of the world's foremost experts in designing software that never fails and cannot be hacked. Over the past four decades, he has built secure operating systems for some of the most high-stakes projects in aerospace and defense, including Boeing's 787 Dreamliner, Lockheed Martin's F-35 fighter jet, the Boeing B1-B intercontinental nuclear bomber, and NASA's Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle.

Since earning his degree from the California Institute of Technology in 1976, O'Dowd has been at the forefront of developing safety-critical systems and unhackable software, creating certified secure real-time operating systems used across industries. Dan is also the founder of both the **Dawn Project** and **Green Hills Software**.

Initially a fan of Tesla, O'Dowd grew alarmed after analyzing videos that revealed critical failures in the company's Full Self-Driving (FSD) technology—instances where the system failed to recognize school buses and misinterpreted traffic signs. He likens Tesla's approach to some of the most notorious corporate failures, from Ford's Pinto gas tank fiasco to Takata's deadly airbags. Unlike Tesla, O'Dowd argues, competitors such as Waymo have developed self-driving systems that are genuinely reliable. He also points to Elon Musk's increasingly polarizing public persona and political controversies as factors undermining Tesla's credibility and eroding its public image.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, Dan. When did you first begin to suspect that Tesla's "Full Self-Driving" might be a misleading or inadequate description of what the system actually delivers in practice?

Dan O'Dowd: The realization came gradually. I was a fan of Tesla. I own eight Teslas myself. They've been the only cars I've driven since 2010—15 years. My wife has been driving a Tesla for 13 years, and it is the same Model S we bought back then. So, we were big fans of Tesla for a long time.

The first signs that things were not as represented came around 2016 when Elon Musk made bold claims that Tesla had solved the self-driving problem. He asserted that their system was safer than a human driver and announced they would demonstrate it. Musk **described a trip** where he would get into a Tesla at his house in Los Angeles, and the car would drive him across the country, drop him off in Times Square, and then park itself. He even gave a specific timeline for this demonstration **six months later**. I remember hearing that and thinking, "Wow, that's exciting." If Tesla could do that, they would have essentially solved autonomous driving.

So, I waited, and waited. The date came, and when people started asking about it, Musk said there had been some minor hang-ups and a few details to work out, **but the demo would happen** in another four to six months. I waited again. Then, that date came and went. People started asking about it again, but Musk stopped answering this time. There was no new timeline and no further updates. The entire project was quietly abandoned.

A year or two later, it became clear that the promised demonstration wouldn't happen. No evidence supports the claims of having solved Full Self-Driving (FSD). Fast-forward to 2020 or 2021, and someone mentioned to me that I should look at the YouTube videos of Tesla's FSD demos. These were real-world tests where people installed cameras in their cars and recorded the system.

I started watching the videos, and they were shocking. The cars were **running red lights**, **rolling through stop signs**, **slamming on the brakes in the middle of the road**, and **doing all kinds of erratic and dangerous things**. At first, I thought, "Well, every system has some bugs—it's part of the development process." However, to understand the problem's scope, I asked one of my team members to analyze the videos.

We compiled a **detailed report** by counting the elapsed time and documenting the various failures in each video. The results were devastating. It became clear that Tesla's Full Self-Driving system was far from Musk's claims.

It said that the system would fail frequently—on average, every eight minutes, it would do something stupid. Over a longer period, like days, it would essentially crash. It would crash your car if you did not monitor it like a hawk and intervene to stop it. Yet, they're delivering this product to ordinary people who want it and are willing to pay for it.

They started with a small number of users—about 100 initially—which didn't seem like too many. Then, after about a year, they expanded to 11,000, then 60,000, and **eventually to half a million people**, which is where we are today. So, this product, which is supposed to be fully self-driving, has major flaws. For instance, if you turn it on and a school bus stops, puts on its flashing lights, extends its stop sign, and opens the door for kids to get off, **the car won't stop**. It'll zoom past the bus, even with children running into the road.

We created a Super Bowl commercial two years ago showing exactly this scenario. Several months later, in North Carolina, a child got off a bus and was **hit by a Tesla** operating on Full Self-Driving. It struck the child. The kid hit the windshield and ended up in the hospital for three months, on a respirator, with a broken collarbone and leg. The system **does not recognize** what a school bus is.

How can a company ship a product called "Full Self-Driving" that doesn't even know what a school bus is? The system interprets a school bus with flashing lights as a truck with its hazard lights on. And what does a driver typically do when approaching a truck with its hazard lights on? You look around the truck to see if anyone is coming from the other direction. If the road is clear, you might slow down but ultimately go around the truck and continue driving. That's exactly what Tesla's Full Self-Driving does. It treats a stopped school bus like a truck with hazard lights—it drives past without stopping.

We aired that commercial, and someone asked Elon Musk about this issue, specifically about Teslas running over kids getting off school buses. Musk **responded**, "This will greatly increase public awareness that a Tesla can drive itself (supervised for now)." That was two years ago, and the problem still hasn't been fixed. The system still doesn't know what a school bus is.

We also **ran a full-page ad** in The New York Times and another **Super Bowl ad** to raise awareness. Musk hasn't done anything about it. I've never seen any other company behave this way—except maybe a cigarette company. Companies like that deliberately sell products while telling people they're healthy, safe, and good for them, even when not. Tesla's behaviour is despicable. It's hard to believe a company would act this way.

At this point, there's no excuse for any of it. It's the depths of greed and depravity. The right thing to do would be to take it off the road and fix it. I can't imagine that if this were GM, Toyota, or BMW, they wouldn't immediately assign 100 engineers to fix the problem. But as far as Musk is concerned, he's not fixing it. Recently, he's been focused on windshield wipers, which, by the way, still don't work properly.

It cannot even properly handle windshield wipers—how can it drive a car? I've never seen an incomplete product sold to consumers, especially a safety-critical product. If this were some trivial app on a phone that occasionally failed, that would be acceptable. But this is a car, and people's lives are at stake.

Over 40 people **have already died in Tesla self-driving crashes**. So, where do we go from here? Tesla is developing the software this way—"move fast, break things." They keep doing it and continue shipping it to more and more people.

It's hard to comprehend. I can't imagine any respectable company doing this, yet Tesla does it daily. For instance, **their system doesn't even know** what a "Do Not Enter" sign means. That should be an easy thing to program. A school bus might take additional work, but a "Do Not Enter" sign? It's straightforward: don't go here. The car doesn't recognize the sign, doesn't obey it, and will go the wrong way down a one-way street because it doesn't understand what "Do Not Enter" or "One Way" signs mean. We've tested all of this, and the results are astonishingly bad.

How can you sell a product for $15,000 and tell people it's **10 times safer** than a human driver? Sometimes, **Musk says it's four times safer**. The reality is that it's not even close to the worst human driver on the road. Who's the worst driver on the road? A 15-and-a-half-year-old with a learner's permit must practice with a parent in the car. Even then, that kid must log 40 or 50 hours of road driving, and their parents must sign off that they've practiced.

Every parent who has gone through this knows how nerve-wracking it is to sit in the passenger seat while their kid learns to drive. But no sane person would sit in the passenger seat of a fully self-driving car with no one in control. No one would let it drive without being able to intervene. Elon Musk wouldn't do it. The biggest Tesla fanboy wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do it.

Well, Arthur did it. He sat in the passenger seat to test it because we wanted to know if it would work. It does work—barely. We've got a great video of him **sitting in the passenger seat** while the car drives with no one in control. But that's not something anyone would do willingly. Everyone would rather sit with their 15-and-a-half-year-old learner and not die.

Nobody sits in a Full Self-Driving (FSD) car with it in control, alone in the driver's seat, without any ability to intervene. It is a far worse driver than any 15-and-a-half-year-old with a learner's permit. Yet, Elon Musk claims it is safer than any driver—10 times safer than the average driver. And for what purpose? To get people to give Tesla their money. They've picked up billions of

dollars selling this product, telling people it will revolutionize transportation and make Tesla the most valuable company in the world. That's why Tesla is worth more than all other car companies combined—because FSD is supposedly so amazing and the best self-driving software in the world. Musk says it all the time.

Of course, except for competitors like Waymo, which has self-driving cars that have **completed over 4 million paid trips**. Amazon has Zoox, and two or three companies in China operate self-driving cars. The only company that doesn't have self-driving cars is Tesla. And here we are.

Jacobsen: When considering similar failures in the automotive industry, what case would you point to as a meaningful comparison? Are there historical examples where a car manufacturer was aware of a serious defect yet failed to address it, even as public scrutiny grew?

O'Dowd: Yes. One example is the Ford Pinto gas tanks that exploded in crashes during the 1970s. Those failures caused fatalities, and Ford faced massive fines and public backlash. Tesla's FSD has already been involved in more fatal crashes than the Pinto gas tank failures. Another case is the Takata airbag scandal from 10 years ago. Takata airbags caused fatalities due to exploding shrapnel. Tesla's FSD fatalities have now exceeded the number of deaths caused by Takata airbags.

Another example would be Toyota's sudden unintended acceleration issue from 15 to 20 years ago. People reported that their cars would suddenly accelerate out of control, leading to accidents and fatalities. Even in that case, the fatalities were fewer than those caused by Tesla's FSD. These products—Ford Pintos, Takata airbags, and Toyota's unintended acceleration—were either recalled or resulted in massive lawsuits and a significant reputational hit for the manufacturers. Yet Tesla's FSD, despite its worse track record, is still on the road today, making money and boosting Tesla's valuation.

Musk has directly linked Tesla's valuation to FSD. He's even said in a video that Tesla is "**worth basically zero**" without Full Self-Driving. With FSD, Tesla is valued higher than Toyota, GM, Ford, BMW, and Volkswagen combined despite having a tiny market share. Tesla's sales **declined last year**, and FSD doesn't deliver on its promises—it's completely unsafe.

Jacobsen: How has the media generally responded when you've presented your findings in a measured, analytical way? I've seen a few interviews where you've laid out your case, but in at least one instance, the conversation devolved into a shouting match—instigated not by you but by the opposing side. What kind of pushback have you faced when presenting a clear, evidence-based assessment?

O'Dowd: There are generally two scenarios. One is when I'm debating a pro-FSD Tesla supporter. Those debates **can get rather heated at times**. The other is when we are presenting evidence to journalists or legislators. We have mountains of evidence—hundreds of videos showing exactly what we say. I don't just go out there and make claims. I have a whole team, a staff that tests these systems ourselves. We analyze other reports and videos, and we invite people—**journalists especially**—to see it for themselves.

We tell journalists, "Do you want to see how this product works? Get in the car. We'll take you for a drive." Beforehand, we ask them, "Do you think this system is better than a human driver?"

Everyone who gets out of the car afterward says, "No way. This isn't even close to the skill of an average human driver." It does crazy things. For instance, it will stop in the middle of railroad tracks and stay there. It will run red lights and stop signs.

We've taken high-profile individuals for these demonstrations. We took the Attorney General of California on a trip. We rented a school bus with a driver, set it up on the side of the road, and had the Tesla drive by as if the bus wasn't there. People are understandably nervous. In one test, we used a mannequin designed to simulate a child stepping out from behind the bus. The Tesla ran it down without hesitation.

We've taken congresspeople and state senators on similar rides. We even went to Sacramento with a dozen legislators who wanted to see what this system does for themselves. We've invited journalists from many outlets, offering them the chance to experience FSD firsthand. We plan to go to Washington, D.C., to give senators and congresspeople similar demonstrations. Many of them hear from Elon Musk and his supporters about how "great" FSD is—that it's supposedly the best technology in the world. But that's Musk's marketing machine at work. He has 200 million followers, many amplifying his claims and attacking anyone trying to expose the truth.

I've been called a murderer **countless times** for pointing out the flaws in FSD. When we started this campaign three years ago, the overwhelming sentiment was pro-Elon and pro-FSD. But things have shifted. Waymo hadn't yet demonstrated its self-driving cars to the public. They were still under wraps. That made Tesla's claims seem more credible.

Now, though, Waymo has been successfully running fully driverless cars. They're doing **150,000 self-driving taxi rides per week**. Over the past year, they've completed over 4 million rides—4 million times, people have gotten into a Waymo car without a driver, traveled to their destinations safely, and didn't worry about the system failing. This happens daily in cities like Phoenix, San Francisco, Austin, and now Los Angeles. No one has been hurt. No one has been killed.

Meanwhile, Tesla's FSD has been involved in at least 1,700 crashes, with 42 fatalities. Oh, wait, I'm told it's now 44 fatalities—it keeps going up. The comparison couldn't be more stark.

Jacobsen: You've mentioned the marketing machine behind Tesla and Elon Musk. Can you elaborate on how that influences the narrative surrounding Full Self-Driving (FSD) and its shortcomings?

O'Dowd: We're up against one of the greatest marketing machines on Earth, selling a complete lie about this product. We're doing our best to counter it; fortunately, more journalists and others are joining in. We even have a great video **showing** Elon Musk, year after year, looking directly into the camera and confidently claiming that Tesla will have Full Self-Driving working better than a human driver by the next year.

Every year for the last 10 years, he's always made this claim with great emphasis and certainty. And every single year, it doesn't happen. Then the next year comes, and he says it again. And again. He's even saying it now. He's claiming, "By the end of the year, for sure." But it's still pathetic. They haven't even figured out how to handle something as basic as a school bus.

How can they claim they will roll this out globally when they can't even handle school buses yet? It reminds me of the old joke in artificial intelligence research. If you ask someone when AI will arrive, they'll always say, "10 years away." And then, 10 years later, they'll say the same thing. Musk does the same thing—except he says one year, every year, and expects people to forget. But the Internet now has a long memory.

We've compiled those clips of him making these claims year after year, and when you show the video to people, it has an effect. They're shocked. It's like, "Wow, this guy said that unequivocally, and he's been wrong every time." For example, in 2019, **he claimed** there would be 1 million robotaxis on the road by 2020. Where are those robo-taxis?

There are robo-taxis, though—just not from Tesla.

Waymo has robo-taxis from Google. But Tesla? Zero. That's not entirely true, though, because in October, they held an event on the backlot of Warner Brothers. They brought in about 500 or 1,000 people, let them ride in Tesla cars, and called them "robo-taxis." But the cars never left the Warner backlot. They drove around a fixed route late at night without traffic, lights, or obstacles. It wasn't a real-world demonstration.

It was **basically a 1950s Disneyland ride**. At the same event, Musk unveiled robots that were supposedly bartending and serving drinks. Except those robots turned out to be remote-controlled by humans. **People exposed this**, and eventually, Musk admitted it. The robots weren't autonomous. They were fake.

The entire event was staged. The so-called robo-taxis were just cars driving around a few blocks with no real-world challenges. The **robots were human-controlled**. It was all smoke and mirrors.

Musk said on Tesla's Q4 2024 earnings call, "There is no company in the world that is as good in real-world AI as Tesla" and asked, "Who's in second place for real-world AI? I would need a very big telescope to see them. That's how far behind they are." Tesla's claims are laughable compared to Waymo's, which conducts tens of thousands of rides per week in real cities with no drivers and no incidents. The difference is stark, yet Musk's marketing machine convinces people otherwise.

Jacobsen: In light of the issues surrounding Tesla and Musk's claims, this raises a larger question: to what degree are other CEOs of major corporations similarly inflating claims or outright spreading falsehoods about their products? How does Musk and Tesla's approach fit into the broader multinational corporate image?

O'Dowd: This is far beyond anything I've ever seen. There is no functioning product. It simply does not work. Musk has been telling people for 10 years that it works, and he's been selling it. He's taken in **billions of dollars from people** buying this software—many also bought the car because of the promise of Full Self-Driving (FSD). The software alone has generated billions, but it does not work. He's been trying for years to make it work; meanwhile, the competition has completely passed him.

In October 2016, Musk said, "All Tesla vehicles leaving the factory have all the hardware necessary for Level 5 autonomy." Eight years later, during Tesla's Q4 2024 earnings call, Musk admitted, "The honest answer is that we're gonna have to upgrade people's Hardware 3 computer for those that have bought Full Self-Driving."

Companies like Waymo already have the very thing Musk claims he will deliver. It exists, it works, and it's being used successfully. They're selling it and making money from it. I've never seen anything like this in my life. There's little difference between this and the Elizabeth Holmes case. Holmes claimed her device could run 100 blood tests from a single drop of blood. It didn't. Similarly, Tesla claims it has a fully self-driving car but does not drive itself. How is that any different?

Of course, Theranos reached a $9 billion valuation, while Tesla's valuation hit $1.4 trillion, largely based on FSD. That's where the comparison diverges. No other company makes promises on this scale. Sure, automakers occasionally show concept cars with futuristic features that might be available in five years—or might not. But everyone understands that concept cars are aspirational. Musk, on the other hand, is delivering a product to consumers that doesn't work, is unsafe, and is killing people.

Yet, he owns the public square. Remember, Musk owns one of the largest social media platforms. He has a direct link to 200 million people through his app, and he controls what is said there. Meanwhile, traditional news media outlets are in retreat—many have seen sales drop by 50%, and their subscriber bases are shrinking. Musk dominates the narrative, leveraging his platform and influence to shape public perception of Tesla and FSD.

Jacobsen: John Lyman suggested I ask you about the mounting scrutiny surrounding Elon Musk, particularly in light of Tesla's ongoing challenges—safety concerns, declining sales, and the controversies surrounding the Cybertruck.

Compounding these issues, Musk's increasing alignment with far-right ideologies—such as his endorsement of Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a party attempting to rehabilitate Hitler's image—along with his erratic social media behavior and, most recently, a gesture that any reasonable observer would interpret as a Sieg Heil salute, have raised alarms.

Under normal circumstances, a CEO exhibiting this level of volatility would likely be forced out. Given Tesla's situation, do you think the company could benefit from less polarizing leadership and not actively harming its brand? What are your thoughts on that assessment?

O'Dowd: He's right about Tesla's current situation. Their **sales dropped last year**, which is unusual because no other major car company I'm aware of experienced a decline—everyone else saw sales increase. Tesla's market share also decreased. They only have two viable models, the Model 3 and the Model Y.

As for the Cybertruck, it's a complete failure. They originally had 2 million reservations, but those didn't translate into actual orders. Now, they've run out of pre-reservations. Of the Cybertrucks shipped, it's been around 30,000—or even less. The 2 million reservations were mostly fake orders, with only tens of thousands becoming real purchases.

Meanwhile, inventory is piling up because the demand is far smaller than they expected. The Cybertruck is not a smart product—it's a bad product. This was their first major innovation since the Model Y, which came out years ago. And yet, it's going nowhere.

Tesla also has significant reliability issues. Major organizations like **J.D. Power** and **Consumer Reports** consistently rank Tesla near the bottom, not the top, for reliability and safety. Many experts have recommended against using their Full Self-Driving feature because it's unsafe. Recently, **Tesla has been linked to more fatalities** than any other car brand, which is alarming.

Politically, Musk's position has also hurt Tesla. His base was originally people who cared about reducing CO_2 emissions and transitioning to a non-fossil-fuel economy. Now, Musk has shifted to the far right. The people who believed in him—those who saw Tesla as a way to save the planet—are saying, "Wait a minute, I don't agree with these things Musk is saying." Owning a Tesla is no longer seen as a statement about environmentalism; instead, it's becoming associated with far-right politics.

This shift has led to a cultural backlash. Some Tesla owners **now put bumper stickers on their cars** that say, "I bought this before Elon went crazy," to distance themselves from him and insulate themselves from criticism while driving a Tesla.

This has hurt the Tesla brand significantly. It's not just in the United States, either. Musk's approval rating in the UK was recently reported as **71% negative**. He's jumped into British politics, trying to influence the government, and people are not reacting well. Imagine if BMW came to the U.S. and attempted to sway elections by backing Democrats or Republicans. That wouldn't go over well, and it's the same situation here.

At a high level, Musk sees himself as untouchable, almost like a modern-day emperor. He operates as though laws don't apply to him and no one can hold him accountable.

There are laws, but they don't apply to him. He does all these things, and any other CEO would have been fired in a minute for them. It's wild, but he gets away with it.

Why? Because his fanboys, shareholders, and board of directors have all made immense amounts of money off a product that doesn't work. He keeps saying it works, keeps spending money to promote it, and somehow manages to sustain the illusion. But it's taking a toll.

The Wall Street Journal released a poll today showing his favorability at -11 net approval: 40% positive, 51% negative. But that poll was taken before the Nazi salute incident. How much did that further damage his favorability? It's significant.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Dan.

A Scientist on the State of Science in MAGA America

2025/02/20

To avoid any professional repercussions, the interviewee has chosen to remain anonymous. In this conversation, 'Scientist,' a leading researcher, examines the growing politicization and suppression of science. He argues that governments are increasingly manipulating scientific discourse to control narratives, particularly on issues like climate change and public health.

The discussion delves into the troubling ways institutions such as the NIH and NSF are being defunded or staffed with political loyalists, threatening the integrity of scientific research. The 'Scientist' also draws historical parallels, likening these developments to Lysenkoism in the Soviet Union, where ideology trumped empirical evidence with disastrous consequences.

Beyond the scientific realm, the conversation touches on broader societal concerns, including attacks on women's rights and the erosion of independent thought. At its core, this interview underscores the urgent need to defend scientific integrity against political interference.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are the most pressing concerns regarding the crackdown on scientists who speak out, as well as the broader assault on science as a discipline—one that relies on government funding, demands highly trained professionals, and depends on career researchers who spend decades building institutions and advancing knowledge?

Scientist: I think the problem is broader—it is fundamentally a crackdown on any center of independent thought. In the current political climate, much revolves around control.

Those in power want to control the narrative. They perceive academics as people who believe they have the freedom to think independently and to express their findings openly. This means that academic conclusions do not always align with the preferred narratives of those in power.

This issue most obviously affects scholars in the humanities, but it also impacts scientists. There are clear cases, such as the climate crisis and greenhouse gas emissions. Every reputable climate scientist agrees that climate change is occurring and is driven by human activity, particularly the release of greenhouse gases.

The only way to mitigate this while maintaining our standard of living is to transition away from fossil fuels. However, this is an inconvenient truth for many industries and political entities. As a result, scientists are often discredited through orchestrated misinformation campaigns amplified by compliant media outlets.

This ultimately undermines trust in the scientific process, turning discussions that should be rooted in empirical evidence into political debates. When scientific findings become politicized, people retreat into ideological camps rather than objectively evaluate the evidence.

One of science's fundamental lessons is that we must continuously assess situations as new information becomes available. We must make the best possible judgments based on the available evidence. However, this process is increasingly being replaced by a system where people cling to preconceived beliefs and promote arguments that serve their ideological interests,

regardless of evidence. In doing so, they discourage genuine inquiry and suppress the pursuit of knowledge.

This, at its core, is an attack on the scientific method.

Jacobsen: A long-standing example of this phenomenon in North America is the persistent effort to insert creationism and intelligent design into school curricula.

Despite clear legal precedents barring these concepts from science classrooms, certain religious groups—primarily evangelical Protestant activists, along with some Catholic factions—continue to push for their reintroduction. These efforts typically sidestep peer review and established scientific discourse, instead relying on political maneuvering and legal challenges. When these challenges inevitably fail in court, activists adapt their strategies and try again, seeking new avenues to influence educational policy.

Scientist: I don't think they care if they lose the lawsuits. Their goal isn't necessarily to win but to amplify their message. Legal battles take years, and public attention has moved on by the time a case is resolved.

Most people only remember the initial controversy. If that controversy reinforces their existing worldview, they internalize it. When the courts ultimately rule against creationism, many don't notice—or they dismiss the ruling as biased. This cycle allows misinformation to persist, even in the face of overwhelming scientific and legal opposition.

Jacobsen: How does this type of religiously motivated activism compare to government-led efforts to suppress scientific discourse? What distinguishes grassroots campaigns—such as creationist movements—from broader, state-driven suppression of scientific research?

Scientist: Well, there's an issue of power. Fundamentalist Christian groups are just one among many factions vying for influence. In an open marketplace of ideas, people can debate, discuss, and try to persuade others. Some will be convinced, while many will reject their arguments.

Intellectual progress generally works this way, including in science. Scientists propose different hypotheses, test them, and debate their merits. What makes the current situation different is the issue of power.

Suppose a government adopts a rigid ideological position and enforces it without regard for scientific reasoning. In that case, the issue is no longer about debate. The enforcement of such views is often based on deeply held emotional or ideological convictions, rather than an objective evaluation of evidence.

In these cases, the primary goal is not societal improvement but the consolidation of power and control. The belief driving these actions is that society should conform to a specific worldview that the ruling elite deems correct.

In extreme cases, this power dynamic is purely about self-interest—where the wealthy and powerful seek to maintain their status and prevent challenges to their authority. The precise nature of this power structure varies across different political systems.

For instance, in China, the government operates under an authoritarian model. While power and wealth are concentrated at the top, the ruling party still maintains that its policies serve the broader population.

In contrast, this justification is largely absent in the United States. Policies increasingly prioritize economic redistribution from the lower and middle classes to the wealthiest individuals.

Take tariffs, for example. They are often presented as protective economic measures, but in practice, they are highly regressive. Tariffs increase costs for everyone, and much of their revenue is channelled toward tax cuts that disproportionately benefit the wealthy.

At the same time, political rhetoric around immigration is often used as a distraction—a way to shift public attention away from economic policies that ultimately transfer wealth upwards.

Jacobsen: What about individuals whose livelihoods are directly affected by these policies? When institutions face funding cuts, freezes, or mass layoffs, how do those in the scientific community respond?

Scientist: Yeah, well, this is extraordinary. In the United States, one of the most striking developments is that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is being directed by someone who actively seeks to discourage childhood vaccination.

Vaccination of children and eradicating smallpox, polio, and diphtheria was one of the most significant advancements in reducing child mortality in the 20th century. Rolling back these efforts would be catastrophic, yet there are indications that such policies may be enacted purely based on political ideology.

It is not entirely clear what will happen yet, but the individual appointed to lead the NIH has openly stated his desire to scale back vaccination programs. Furthermore, initial actions have involved removing key officials responsible for promoting these public health initiatives.

Jacobsen: What about the individuals on the ground doing the work–the ones who still have jobs and are responsible for the fundamental operations of health and science agencies?

Scientist: Well, sure. The impact is already being felt. For example, Elon Musk's extra-congressional influence has been used to push for a reduction in federal bureaucracy, leading to significant layoffs.

This includes essential personnel, such as program managers at the National Science Foundation (NSF), whose primary responsibility is to ensure that research funding is distributed as fairly and effectively as possible. Many of these individuals have already been dismissed.

The long-term consequences of these actions remain uncertain, but with fewer staff available to administer NSF funding, the allocation process will become significantly more challenging. This may be a prelude to a broader NSF budget reduction.

Jacobsen: Why are these funding programs being targeted? Why are agencies like the NIH and NSF under attack while other entities—such as the Department of Defense, where Elon Musk holds contracts—remain largely untouched?

Scientist: Fundamentally, this is about dismantling apolitical federal agencies. Many agencies, including those overseeing scientific research and public health, were established to operate above partisan politics.

These institutions were built to function independently of shifting political administrations, ensuring that federal funds are allocated wisely and effectively under congressional oversight. However, this principle of an independent civil service is now under attack.

We repeatedly see that the individuals being fired are responsible for making funding decisions. They are being replaced by political loyalists who align with the current power structure.

Jacobsen: How will this impact the future of scientific research? If the individuals responsible for equitably distributing research funding and maintaining fair systems are being replaced by MAGA loyalists, what does that mean for the direction of science?

Scientist: I don't know. It's impossible to predict with certainty. It depends on the extent of their actions.

One clear directive already stated is the exclusion of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) considerations from future funding decisions. I am not part of the U.S. system. However, many North American colleagues feel that DEI criteria have increasingly dominated grant proposals.

Some might welcome a shift toward a model where scientific excellence takes greater precedence over DEI in funding evaluations. However, it remains unclear whether these changes will stop there or extend to other politically motivated decisions.

Political interference seems inevitable in fields such as climate science and public health. The direct impact may be less obvious in disciplines like astronomy, though still possible.

There is also the defence and space research issue, where Elon Musk has an enormous conflict of interest. Notably, independent oversight figures, such as inspectors general—who are meant to operate free from political influence to prevent corruption and conflicts of interest—have all been dismissed. This pattern aligns with fascist governance tactics.

Jacobsen: How would you characterize this widespread restructuring, particularly in relation to Americans' access to highly sensitive personal information?

Scientist: I'm not American, but that does not provide much reassurance. The corporations with access to this data are transnational.

During Brexit, multiple scandals involved Facebook and Google accessing British records, manipulating public perception, and influencing political outcomes. This issue is not unique to the U.S.—it is happening globally.

With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence, we are seeing an exponential increase in the amount of funding directed toward data collection, networking, and cross-referencing massive databases. This can only make the problem worse.

The current political climate in North America is exacerbating the situation. Still, the fundamental issue of mass data collection, regardless of politics, remains deeply concerning.

Jacobsen: What about the situation in Germany with the AfD party and concerns regarding the rise of far-right activism there?

Scientist: The political consensus in Germany remains strong, with roughly 70 to 80 percent of the population solidly aligned with mainstream politics.

However, the far right is becoming increasingly vocal. They dominate the discourse by speaking loudly and persistently, often focusing on anti-immigrant rhetoric.

This pattern is not unique to Germany—it is part of a broader trend seen across multiple Western democracies, where right-wing populist movements use fear and nationalism to gain political traction.

It is quite noticeable that the places where anti-immigrant sentiment is the strongest are often areas with relatively few immigrants. In contrast, cities like Berlin, where immigrants make up a significant portion of the population, tend to be much less anti-immigrant.

This suggests that immigration is being used as a political distraction. Instead of addressing the real economic issues—such as why, despite GDP growth over the past 30 years, only a small fraction of the population has seen a significant rise in income while the lower half remains stagnant—people are being encouraged to blame immigrants.

The core issue here is economic inequality, but immigration is being used as a scapegoat to divert attention from these deeper systemic problems.

Jacobsen: How long does building up a research program within an institution take? This might help people understand the magnitude of loss when scientists and researchers are fired or defunded.

Scientist: It depends greatly on the field of research.

For a theoretician, computational resources can be rebuilt relatively quickly if necessary. However, the real issue is human capital. If you stop training scientists, you lose a generation of thinkers accustomed to scientific reasoning, critical analysis, and methodological rigour. Disrupting the education and training pipeline severely damages the entire research ecosystem.

The impact is even greater for fields requiring extensive instrumentation. Space research, for example, typically takes around 25 years to move from initial concept to launch. If a program is cancelled 10 or 15 years into its development, that's essentially two decades of progress lost.

The same applies to many other scientific disciplines, where technical expertise and specialized equipment take years to develop. It's not just about losing researchers with theoretical knowledge, it's also about losing expert technicians who know how to build and maintain the necessary infrastructure.

While losing equipment is a setback, the greater loss is, however, the disintegration of the research community itself.

Jacobsen: Can you think of any historical precedents where science has been gutted, politicized, and undermined to this extent?

Scientist: Yes, it happened in Russia in the 1930s. The most well-known example is Trofim Lysenko, whose pseudoscientific ideas were politically embraced by the Soviet regime. His rejection of Mendelian genetics led to disastrous consequences for Soviet agriculture and severely damaged biological research in the USSR.

Interestingly, this level of scientific suppression did not fully occur in Nazi Germany. While Jewish scientists were expelled from academia, the Nazi regime still recognized the need for technical expertise, particularly in military research. As a result, science was not destroyed outright. However, it was often redirected toward war-related efforts, some of which had deeply unethical and destructive consequences.

Jacobsen: Have other major scientists spoken out about these developments?

Scientist: The situation in Germany has not yet reached a critical level. However, there is widespread concern about what is happening in the United States.

Some believe the instability in American science—where researchers are losing jobs and funding —could benefit German science by attracting displaced scientists. There is speculation that this could be an opportune moment to recruit talent.

However, that is a very short-sighted view.

Jacobsen: I hope the Perimeter Institute is hiring.

Scientist: Well, they do have a solid endowment. They can afford it if they see an opportunity to attract top researchers.

Jacobsen: This presents a different kind of challenge.

Every society grapples with long-standing issues—whether it's expanding opportunities for women in science or creating pathways for skilled immigrants in search of a better future. Many nations have made strides toward inclusivity, yet racial and social tensions persist in some communities.

What we are witnessing now, however, is far more consequential—an abrupt, top-down assault on scientific institutions emanating from what remains the world's foremost scientific powerhouse.

Scientist: Yes, and this broader demonization of entire segments of the population—such as undocumented immigrants—is deeply concerning.

I have no idea where this is heading. Still, the United States is already notable for its extraordinarily high number of guns and the willingness of people to use them. If this kind of rhetoric continues, it is only a matter of time before it leads to violence.

Jacobsen: People in America already shoot each other over traffic disputes.

Scientist: I know.

I lived there for ten years, and while there were many things I enjoyed, I was glad to return to Europe. I was on faculty at a U.S. university several decades ago, but away from the campuses,

the major cities and the coastal regions, the undercurrents of this ideology were even visible back then.

People act as though this shift in the U.S. is a shocking development, but this strain of the population has always existed. You could see it when I was there, in the people driving pickup trucks with gun racks.

To ignore this, you would have had to be willfully blind. If you actually spoke to people, it would have been clear that many of their attitudes were fundamentally incompatible with pragmatic, evidence-based reasoning.

What has changed is that this relatively large segment of the population now has a figurehead—someone who speaks for them. That has allowed their worldview to gain mainstream dominance.

Jacobsen: Yes, and it's not just science under attack.

I spoke with an African American businesswoman deeply engaged in women's rights advocacy in the U.S. She has already witnessed the rollback of reproductive rights, but her greatest fear is that the broader agenda of these reactionary forces has yet to fully target women as a whole.

She worries that once that shift occurs, the assault on rights and freedoms will intensify even further.

Scientist: But it could be coming. Abortion rights are just one aspect of this broader issue. That has so far been their priority—they are very active on this front.

It is not a far leap from restricting reproductive rights to undermining women's rights more generally, including their position in society.

Jacobsen: Yes, and the challenges are especially pronounced for women in professional fields.

I recently attended a panel featuring Nobel Prize winners, including a physicist who won in 2023. She spoke about the immense pride she felt in following in Marie Curie's footsteps.

Yet, she also reflected on how long it has taken for women to gain recognition at the highest levels of science. Even today, people look back at historic footage of Marie Curie walking into that vast auditorium—at the time, the only woman to have won two Nobel Prizes.

It is deeply concerning that even as meaningful progress is being made, we are witnessing severe legal rollbacks that threaten access, opportunity, and equality.

Scientist: Yes, maybe.

Germany is still far from achieving full gender equality, especially in higher academic ranks. However, among graduate students at my institute, the gender balance is approximately 40-60.

The same trend is evident among postdoctoral researchers.

Jacobsen: What are your final thoughts?

Scientist: The current situation is highly uncertain, which makes it all the more unsettling. We do not know what will happen next.

People must focus on the importance of science, independent thought, and scientific reasoning. It is critical to uphold institutions that foster these values and demonstrate their significance to society.

Jacobsen: Excellent.

Scientist: People should not hesitate to call things out for what they are. If something aligns with fascist tactics, we should say so without fear.

Jacobsen: Agreed. Thank you very much for your time today.

Surviving the Blackout: How Ukraine's Doctors Battle War and Power Cuts

2025/02/21

Uliana Poltavets serves as the Ukraine Emergency Response Coordinator for **Physicians for Human Rights** (PHR). In a recent survey conducted between July 21 and September 18, 2024, PHR examined the impact of targeted attacks on Ukraine's healthcare and energy infrastructure. The study, which surveyed 2,261 healthcare workers, uncovered alarming consequences: 92 percent reported power outages, leading to critical disruptions in surgeries, life support systems, and water supplies—resulting in deaths and permanent health complications.

Despite efforts to adapt through backup systems, significant gaps remain. The toll on frontline medical workers is staggering, with 83 percent experiencing severe stress and burnout. The report calls for urgent action, highlighting the need for increased resources, mental health support, and legal accountability for these attacks as war crimes. Its recommendations include continued financial and political support for Ukraine, reinforced international norms against targeting civilian infrastructure, and legal action against those responsible.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What methodology was used in the survey of 2,261 Ukrainian healthcare workers?

Uliana Poltavets: We distributed an online survey to healthcare workers across Ukraine. 2,261 respondents to that survey were included in our analysis (5.6 percent were excluded due to incomplete data). The online survey is available in **Ukrainian** and **English**.

The survey gathered a wide range of data on the frequency and timing of attacks on health care and energy systems, power outages, and the impact of attacks and power cuts on health services, facility operations, and patient outcomes.
Healthcare worker respondents represented diverse demographics, including physicians (37.3 percent), nurses (10.2 percent), administrative staff (44.4 percent), and other healthcare professionals (8.2 percent), from all 24 oblasts (provinces) of Ukraine and Kyiv, with females constituting a majority (71.7 percent). Demographic data was compared to the **National Health Service of Ukraine** and **Medical Statistics of Ukraine** data and is generally consistent with these distributions.

The survey's voluntary nature and absence of probability sampling mean that the findings cannot be generalized to Ukraine's healthcare system. Under-reporting and potential double counting of incidents may affect accuracy, though flagged cases of medical complications or deaths help mitigate this risk. Self-reported data may include recall bias and inconsistencies due to the challenging conflict conditions. Given the difficulties in reporting faced by clinicians, particularly in Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine, figures may undercount the true tolls of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure.

Jacobsen: The report highlights that 92 percent of healthcare workers experienced power outages. These were targeted attacks on energy infrastructure. How do these impact patient care?

Poltavets: Electricity is the lifeblood of the health sector, powering lifesaving devices and enabling essential medical services. It supports diagnostics, emergency response, vaccinations, medication distribution, and the daily functionality of health facilities. As our report title references, health care in Ukraine was forced to proceed "in the dark" due to Russian attacks.

As recognized by many accountability mechanisms and international organizations, such as the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (UN HRMMU) and the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, energy attacks have devastating impacts on the health sector in Ukraine. The damage to power facilities and resulting blackouts have limited hospitals' capacity to provide essential services, interrupted medical procedures, and compromised patient care.

Among notable examples of impacts on patient care are interrupted or delayed surgeries, forcing surgeons to operate in darkness illuminated only by flashlights; failures in life support systems; medication and biological samples storage issues; discontinued flow of water to hospitals; diagnostic and treatment equipment becoming unusable; impeded maternal care service delivery; and other impacts on health care provision.

Jacobsen: Permanent health harms and deaths were reported because of these energy attacks. What are concrete examples of this?

Poltavets: Our survey identified 20 reports of deaths and 36 reports of permanent health harms, though these figures likely undercount the full extent of harms given the challenges in reporting. Most often, Ukrainian healthcare workers reported cases of organ damage and deaths due to inadequate oxygenation (when patients who are unable to breathe on their own lose access to their mechanical breathing support). Out of 36 reported cases of permanent harm, 11 were linked to inadequate oxygenation, and among 20 reported deaths, seven were attributed to the same cause.

In such instances, health workers resort to manual ventilation, which, if prolonged or improperly performed, can cause serious complications or fatalities. Additional harms included delays in critical surgeries, interruptions in dialysis, and failures of life-saving equipment, resulting in deaths and severe health consequences. This aligns with global findings that power outages, even in non-conflict settings, can lead to increased morbidity and mortality, particularly among patients relying on electricity-dependent medical devices.

Jacobsen: These attacks disrupt critical services like surgeries, life support systems, and water supply. How have healthcare facilities adapted to these challenges?

Poltavets: Healthcare facilities in Ukraine have implemented various measures to adapt to power outages caused by attacks on energy infrastructure. The Ministry of Health, with the help of international partners, has provided backup generators and is working to supply hospitals with alternative energy sources, such as solar panels. However, these measures are not always sufficient. Surveyed healthcare workers reported delays in activating backup systems—sometimes lasting hours or even days—which can severely disrupt critical hospital functions. While helpful, generators offer limited capacity and cannot fully replace grid power, leading to gaps in service and risks to sensitive medical equipment. Health workers emphasize the need for

additional resources such as solar panels, hybrid energy systems, and reliable Internet access to improve resilience.

Jacobsen: Stress and burnout increased among 83 percent of healthcare workers surveyed. What measures can be taken to support these frontline workers' mental health and resilience?

Poltavets: Ukrainian healthcare workers face immense stress and burnout, exacerbated by working in disaster conditions for nearly three years, grappling with power outages, trauma, and the unrelenting toll of patient care coming under attack. Measures to support their mental health and resilience should include access to counseling, mental health services, and peer support programs, as well as training on preparedness for response to attacks. Addressing systemic challenges, such as providing reliable power sources and reducing administrative burdens caused by delayed data systems, can also alleviate stress. Additionally, the government and international community must ensure that the burden of response does not fall solely on staff by equipping facilities with the necessary resources and creating robust mental health support systems.

Jacobsen: Given the minimum of 1,539 verified attacks on healthcare workers and infrastructure since February 2022, how are perpetrators held accountable under international law?

Poltavets: To date, the perpetrators of these attacks on healthcare in Ukraine have not been held to account under international law – this must remain an urgent priority for Ukrainian and international prosecutors. And it is important to note that these are not just separate incidents but a clear pattern of violations. We have analyzed these patterns, and we have a reasonable basis to believe that Russian attacks on health in Ukraine constitute war crimes and potential crimes against humanity.

We see numerous possibilities for addressing crimes, such as attacking health care. There are opportunities for investigations and arriving at justice at both the international and domestic levels—through the International Criminal Court, national prosecutions, the UN mechanisms, and compensation and restitution mechanisms. There is also the possibility of individual sanctions against perpetrators of attacks.

For years, health care has been a target of many conflicts worldwide, but these cases are hardly ever prosecuted as the international crimes that they are, if at all. The ICC charge put forward in 2024 against Russian commanders for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity during the campaign of attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure suggests "alleged strikes were directed against civilian objects" and "the expected incidental civilian harm and damage would have been excessive to the anticipated military advantage." But more needs to be done. For example, the ICC case represents an opportunity to ensure accountability for the harm to the health sector resulting from attacks on energy infrastructure.

Jacobsen: What are the key recommendations from the report to support Ukraine's healthcare system?

Poltavets: The global community must ignite efforts to hold Russia accountable for international law violations resulting from these attacks. Increasing financial and political support for Ukrainian health care facilities, condemning attacks on health and energy infrastructure as well weapons sellers to the Russian Federation for violating United Nations Security Council

resolutions, and advocating for the protection and safe release of health care workers in conflict zones should be priorities. Strengthening international norms against such attacks, enhancing data collection, and supporting accountability mechanisms to investigate and prosecute violations as war crimes and crimes against humanity are critical.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Uliana.

Breaking the Cycle: Can Ukraine Overcome Corruption?

2025/02/23

Davis Richardson, managing partner at Paradox Public Relations and CEO of AUSP, offers an incisive look at Ukraine's ongoing battle against corruption and its pursuit of economic reform. AUSP stands for America Ukraine Strategic Partners and was launched in 2023 after Davis visited Ukraine. It facilitates partnerships between Ukrainian entities and American organizations, including U.S. defence contractors and Western investors.

Davis unpacks the complexities of decentralization, the critical role of foreign investment, and the necessity of government transparency. Richardson also underscores the importance of strategic alliances among Eastern European nations in pushing back against Russian influence. Reflecting on the legacy of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, he highlights the country's enduring struggle for democracy. As Ukraine accelerates its push for EU integration, he stresses the urgency of dismantling entrenched corruption, ensuring accountability, and leveraging international support to drive economic growth and institutional reform.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: What are Ukraine's main challenges when advancing anti-corruption initiatives within government institutions?

Davis Richardson: The primary issue is structural. However, before discussing Ukraine's challenges, it is important to highlight its strengths.

Russia currently suffers from the limitations of a centralized, top-down economy and decision-making system. This has been evident in how it manages military recruitment. For example, there is currently strong demand in Russia for drone operator roles because they reduce the likelihood of being deployed to frontline combat.

As a result, many young Russian men are seeking to become drone operators to avoid being drafted for direct military service. In response, the Russian government has implemented new regulations to curb this trend, which, in turn, has fueled public dissatisfaction and unrest.

Ukraine, on the other hand, faces the opposite problem. Its government is highly decentralized, which reduces the risk of authoritarian rule like that seen under Putin. However, decentralization comes with its own set of challenges.

For example, many Ukrainian governmental institutions and municipalities do not communicate effectively with one another. As a result, two separate non-profits—perhaps one based in the U.S., but more often two Ukrainian organizations—may develop similar solutions to the same issue without even being aware of each other's existence, let alone coordinating their efforts.

Decentralization has clear benefits. The United States itself is built on a decentralized governmental model. When you read *The Federalist Papers*, you see that the separation of powers was a foundational principle that enabled America's growth and stability.

However, Ukraine is currently facing the limitations of a decentralized system during wartime, particularly as Russia has been actively undermining the country for decades, not just since World War II.

Addressing these challenges will be a difficult and complex process. However, the most critical step is improving communication between municipalities—encouraging dialogue and fostering mutual recognition and legitimacy. Sometimes, one politician may attempt to discredit another by accusing them of corruption, which only exacerbates the problem.

When Ukrainians say corruption, it has a completely different meaning than it does to Americans. When we think of anti-corruption, we often imagine oligarchs running off with taxpayer dollars. In Ukraine, however, corruption refers to something much more insidious— whether government members are taking payments from Moscow and providing intelligence to Russia.

That's a fundamentally different, existential definition of the term. As the United States continues to engage with Ukraine, it must recognize the importance of clear communication around these terms.

Jacobsen: How would you assess the effectiveness of Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions, specifically NABU, the National Anti-Corruption Bureau, and SAPO, the Specialized Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office?

Richardson: There is still a long way to go. First, there are different factions within these agencies. Kyiv has a unique political dynamic compared to the rest of the country.

In the U.S., we think of smearing political opponents in places like New York or D.C. or even at a Super Bowl game. However, Ukraine has a cultural element that is left over from the Soviet era. Political opposition is often smeared as pro-Russian, and these accusations are frequently used as a political weapon.

The paradox is that corruption is a significant issue in Ukraine, and anti-corruption initiatives are essential. However, the challenge lies in ensuring these efforts are effective, as corruption still exists at a practical level. At the same time, if everyone is labeled corrupt or pro-Russian, the term loses its meaning.

Jacobsen: If everyone is "special," no one is special.

Richardson: Exactly. That's another challenge I've encountered. However, overall, the government has made significant progress.

Ukraine is committed to integrating into the European Union, and these reforms are a key part of that effort. That said, much of the process needs to be streamlined. I believe the Ministry of Digital Transformation is an excellent starting point. Among government agencies, aside from the military, it is one of the few that enjoys broad support across Ukrainian society.

When Russia invaded, the Diia was launched, becoming a highly successful digital platform. It has been recognized by the United States and leading international institutions like the World Bank and the United Nations. The Diia is successful by every metric and is widely popular among Ukrainians.

The benefits would be substantial if a similar approach were applied to coordinating various anti-corruption task forces and initiatives.

Jacobsen: What can other transitional and post-Soviet democracies learn from Ukraine's setbacks and successes in anti-corruption reforms? I should add one qualifier—they have the significant advantage of not having to implement these reforms in the middle of a war.

Richardson: Yeah, well, that's one benefit. If you look at a country like Poland, it serves as a successful example. In many ways, Ukraine's journey now mirrors the steps that Poland's ancestors took in their march toward freedom.

The main lesson here is that conversations about anti-corruption initiatives in Ukraine are nothing new. They date back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, these discussions have often played out like a three-card Monte game. Western investors or government agencies are led to believe reforms are happening, but real change is not implemented.

Before the full-scale invasion, projects cost millions of dollars yet produced little to show. These initiatives were developed using public funds in partnership with the private sector. That is why it is crucial to establish tangible results and clear benchmarks to measure success.

The key question is: Are we having conversations that genuinely move the needle forward, or are we just going in circles? It will be a challenging process, but the focus must shift from mere discussions about corruption to achieving concrete results with clear indicators of success.

Jacobsen: What anti-corruption efforts resonate more with the Ukrainian public but may not have the same impact on an American audience? Earlier, you mentioned the definitional differences in how corruption is understood. How would the Ukrainian public perceive certain efforts as more substantive compared to the United States?

Richardson: Well, there's an interesting overlap in areas of agreement. In the U.S., the media often portrays the anti-corruption debate as Ukraine misusing American taxpayer dollars. But the reality is, if corruption occurs, who suffers even more than Americans? The answer is Ukrainians.

Before USAID was shut down, I spoke at an event they hosted in Kyiv. A brilliant scholar from Kharkiv presented research showing that municipal funds promised for specific projects never reached their intended destinations. He later won a competition for this research.

Just as Americans sometimes misunderstand the term corruption in the Ukrainian context, there is also a misinterpretation of who is most affected. In reality, Ukrainians and Americans share an interest in ensuring that financial aid is allocated properly—to both NGOs and government programs as originally intended.

This has been a significant challenge. The Biden administration issued a blank check to Ukraine without sufficient oversight. There were painful lessons, but the harshest consequences were felt on Ukraine's side.

That said, I believe Ukraine is moving in the right direction to implement the necessary reforms. However, it is a slow process and will take time.

Jacobsen: For comparison, how does corruption play out in neighbouring countries—Romania, Moldova, Russia, etc.? This will help readers understand that the conversation around anti-corruption is not isolated to Ukraine.

Richardson: So the question is, how does corruption affect those countries, and how do they respond to it?

At the end of the day, there is a common theme: Where is the funding for these anti-democratic movements coming from? In nearly every case, the source is the same.

Countries that struggle with corruption also face an existential threat—it is not just about self-interest or personal gain. Corruption often functions as active sabotage, benefiting an adversary that seeks to undermine democratic institutions. This is an ongoing fight. Look at what is happening in Georgia right now. Ukraine has consistently been—both metaphorically and literally—on the front lines of resisting Russian authoritarianism.

However, the moment you allow corruption to take hold, you can quickly end up in a situation like Georgia, where certain officials enter office under suspicious circumstances, possibly receiving foreign payments, and the fabric of the government begins to erode.

The United States decided to sanction the Georgian government for similar reasons.

When discussing countries, we need to break this down further. A country is composed of its government, but where does that government's loyalty lie? Is it acting as a proxy for a hostile foreign power, or are there individual activists and opposition groups fighting against it?

The key takeaway for those activists and opposition groups is to watch what is happening in Ukraine.

Additionally, countries facing similar challenges should consider forming strategic partnerships. Is there potential for a NATO-style alliance of Eastern and Central European countries that share these struggles and want to reduce reliance on U.S. support?

That could be one potential solution—an alliance that functions like NATO but focuses specifically on countering corruption and anti-democratic forces in the region.

Jacobsen: What needs to be done in the short term? What steps can be taken to further anti-corruption efforts and counter anti-democratic forces within Ukrainian institutions?

Richardson: I think private equity and private capital will be driving forces in Ukraine. There is already significant movement surrounding U.S. investment funds entering Ukraine's market. Many firms have strict corporate governance standards and will not tolerate certain past behaviours.

Some actors and organizations in Ukraine are eager to move away from oligarchic practices and the siphoning of public funds. They want to leave that era behind. At this point, it is essentially a "get with the program or get out" scenario.

It is a carrot-and-stick approach—if companies want to secure reconstruction contracts and requests for proposals (RFPs) from international players and U.S. investment firms, they must

meet clear benchmarks. This includes transparency regarding which vendors are involved and the principal stakeholders and ensuring government funds are spent with full accountability.

Jacobsen: Do you have any final thoughts?

Richardson: The next year is going to be critical for Ukraine. While we have discussed difficult topics, it is important to recognize that Ukrainians lead some of the most significant anti-corruption progress. They want a clean break from the past.

Opportunities have been missed in the past, but Ukraine is now in a position to thrive—especially with strong U.S. and European support.

At the end of the day, Maidan and the Revolution of Dignity were not just political protests. Nearly one million people participated in the Revolution of Dignity, which is more than a revolution—it is transformational.

What we are witnessing today is the continuation of that movement. Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not begin in 2022—it started with Crimea in 2014. Ukraine is on a path to freedom, and those taking the right steps understand that they must change some of their past business practices to become part of the European Union and attract foreign investment.

This transformation will be difficult and painful, but we are here to support them, share expertise, and connect them with the right people who can help Ukraine build a sustainable future.

Jacobsen: Thank you very much for your time today.

Richardson: Thank you so much, Scott. I appreciate it. Please keep me posted on the progress of this.

Ukraine's Information War: Valeria Kovtun on Countering Russian Disinformation

2025/02/25

Valeria Kovtun is a Ukrainian media specialist and the founder of Filter, Ukraine's first government-backed media literacy initiative. She has collaborated with global organizations, including the Zinc Network, IREX, OSCE, and UNDP, to combat disinformation and promote critical thinking. Her editorial and production experience spans major outlets such as BBC Reel, Radio Free Europe/Liberty, and Ukrainian National TV.

Currently, Kovtun works with the OpenMinds Institute, a cognitive defense agency dedicated to analyzing emerging threats, conducting research, and executing counter-influence operations.

A Chevening scholar, she earned an MSc in Media and Communications Governance from the London School of Economics. Her research explores the dynamics of international propaganda, with a particular interest in the role of humor as a tool against disinformation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: How did you become interested in media and propaganda?

Valeria Kovtun: I started in journalism because I was particularly interested in human behaviour —how people think, why they act the way they do, and how I could support those struggling with certain issues. After working in journalism, I joined the BBC, which had always been my dream. Most journalism students in Ukraine are taught that the BBC is the gold standard, but theory can differ from reality.

I always wanted to experience it in real life. Once I worked at the BBC, I realized there was much more to explore. Journalism was not the only profession I wanted to pursue; I had an entire world of opportunities.

After studying governance at LSE, I naturally progressed to policy. That's why I returned to Ukraine after my time in London—to launch a national media literacy project. Today, Filter is a well-recognized institution in Ukraine, coordinating efforts to educate people about misinformation.

Of course, during the full-scale invasion, our work shifted from policy to more immediate, action-driven solutions. Everything became much faster-paced, which accelerated our growth. At the same time, it became difficult to maintain a singular focus. Instead of just educating people about misinformation, we had to actively combat disinformation itself—proactively responding to Russian propaganda circulating within Ukraine and abroad, which sought to undermine support for our country.

As a result, I transitioned into advocacy, helping explain to the world how propaganda works. Ukraine found itself at the forefront of an extremely aggressive information war, facing an avalanche of fake stories on various platforms and within local communities. We experienced all of this firsthand on the ground.

Obviously, if you have lived experience, you know I was encircled. I spent a few weeks in a very dangerous area, witnessing firsthand how fake stories spread throughout the environment and

how lost people felt when faced with hundreds of local chat groups, but with little understanding of which ones were telling the truth.

When you have to make quick decisions to save your life or the lives of your loved ones, knowing where the truth lies, how to verify information, and which sources to trust is not just essential—it is paramount for survival.

That experience gave me firsthand insight. I understood the tactics behind disinformation, I knew how Russian propaganda operated, and at the same time, I was deeply involved in policymaking. Having all these perspectives allowed me to effectively address various communities—from policymakers to the general public—explaining why we need to act proactively, what steps we must take to protect ourselves from aggressive disinformation campaigns, and how we can build resilient societies capable of identifying and resisting propaganda in critical moments.

Jacobsen: Let's talk about humor. It has long been a tool for undermining illegitimate institutions, exposing moral hypocrisy, and challenging authority. Despite its potency, it's often dismissed as lightweight—perhaps because it can be silly or irreverent. Yet, in the context of disinformation and propaganda, humor can be remarkably effective. How do you use it in this fight?

I can offer a personal example. In the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a now largely abandoned Kremlin talking point made the rounds in North American media. The claim? Ukraine was overrun by neo-Nazis—so much so that it was supposedly led by a so-called "Jewish neo-Nazi," an absurd reference to President Zelensky himself.

I remember thinking: Zelensky is a former comedian, so this had to be one of the greatest setups for a joke in history—courtesy of the Kremlin—followed by the ultimate punchline: his very existence. The sheer contradiction of a "Jewish neo-Nazi" was so self-defeating that the narrative quickly collapsed.

Humor thrives on juxtaposition, on exposing contradictions. Given your work in media literacy and counter-disinformation, how do you employ humor to challenge international propaganda?

Kovtun: We are witnessing a significant shift in the information environment. Traditional democratic approaches—such as presenting verified information and offering a balance of perspectives—no longer capture the public's interest.

Instead, we see that individuals with charisma, who appeal to emotions, are dominating the political landscape. There is a growing demand from societies worldwide for content that resonates emotionally, prompting them to act based on feelings rather than facts.

The same applies to humour. I have encountered countless articles, long-form texts, and in-depth investigations that aim to debunk specific misinformation or disinformation. But the challenge is that debunking takes time. You must thoroughly research, gather facts, and construct solid arguments to prove that a particular disinformation is false.

By the time you publish an article or investigative report, most people have already been exposed to the disinformation itself. And because they process information emotionally, convincing them

after the fact becomes much harder. People remember what they first see, even if they scrolled past it.

Disinformation is usually emotional and appealing and can be subconsciously remembered. Once it is mentioned elsewhere, people tend to believe it even more. This is the problem with traditional debunking.

And what does humour do? Humour appeals to emotions. If you ridicule someone spreading a fake story, you evoke a positive emotion in the audience. That makes them more likely to remember your rebuttal.

It does not always have to be rational. It does not always have to be fact-based. The facts can come later. But the first thing you do is evoke emotion. And what is the most common emotional response? Laughter.

You laugh. You experience something positive—especially when there is an avalanche of negative news, which most people would rather avoid. But people are more inclined to pause and engage when something brings positivity. That is how humour works.

However, using humour effectively does not require extensive strategizing. Humour is often intuitive. Most of the time, the best jokes come to us when we are not thinking about them. We do not have to sit down and list all the potential ideas.

We do not need to brainstorm endlessly. Humour often emerges naturally from our lived experiences.

The same was true for Ukrainians in 2022. There was an incredible amount of energy within communities in Ukraine. There was resilience. There was unity. That collective spirit fueled humour and helped ridicule Russian propaganda. It also created viral stories of resilience—like the tale of an elderly Ukrainian woman knocking down a drone with a jar of tomatoes. Many of these stories were semi-true, semi-fictional. But they boosted morale at a crucial time.

Now, nearly three years after the war began, it has become harder to maintain that same level of positivity. When people constantly face existential threats, never knowing when their town might be hit or whether they will be safe the next day, humour becomes more difficult to sustain.

Humour was a powerful tool. But today, due to continuous threats and the sheer emotional toll, it is much harder for Ukrainians to create jokes that resonate with millions of people worldwide. So, going back to your question—humour works. But what works even better is developing our narratives.

If you analyze Russian propaganda, you will notice a pattern in how they communicate. Their messaging is extremely simple. It consists of short sentences, strong, active verbs, and no passive voice. It is highly emotional. It appeals to people's most basic needs. And it is always repetitive.

If you look at Russian state media, Ukrainian Telegram channels that spread Russian propaganda, or even prominent Kremlin-aligned figures in the U.S.—such as Tucker Carlson— you will see that their messaging follows the same formula: the fewer details, the better.

In 2022, we discovered several Telegram channels operated by Russian accounts designed to spread disinformation in Ukraine. Within those channels, they even shared internal guidelines on how to create fake news.

The core rules were clear: Keep it simple, repeat as often as possible, and avoid unnecessary details—except for one or two to add credibility.

It is a marketing technique. When marketers promote a product, they use the exact same approach.

That is what we need to do as well. We do not have to debunk every piece of disinformation that circulates. Instead, we need to focus on telling our own story—who we are as a nation and what we are fighting for.

If we say, "We are fighting for democracy," what does that even mean? How can people feel that? What is the tangible result of living in a democracy? Russian propaganda is effective because it simplifies concepts and makes them emotional.

We must counter it by crafting equally clear and emotionally compelling narratives.

They frame it in a way that suggests we are abandoning our traditional values. They present Russia as the key guardian of traditional Orthodoxy and family values.

This is something an ordinary person can immediately imagine. You do not need to think abstractly about liberty or freedom of speech—especially if you take those rights for granted. These concepts may not resonate as strongly. But when something is tangible and easy to picture, **propaganda** becomes effective. That is how **Russian disinformation** works.

In response, simply debunking it by saying, "Oh no, no, this is not what Russia means; let me explain," and then overwhelming people with hundreds of facts does not work. The human brain is not wired to absorb massive amounts of raw information. It is wired to process stories, to internalize them, and to apply them to real-life experiences.

This is why humour can be a powerful instrument.

Jacobsen: What ideological movements or identity-based politics are most amplified in social media disinformation?

Kovtun: One of the defining characteristics of modern propaganda is how fragmented it has become. Tailoring content to very niche communities, even sub-identities is much easier.

For example, on platforms like TikTok, there has been an increase in propaganda content specifically targeting widows of Ukrainian soldiers. The war has created this distinct community —people bound by shared grief, sadness, and the search for support or validation from each other or the state.

Another example would be mothers, sisters, and wives of soldiers who have gone missing. These women have no idea where their loved ones are—whether they are alive or not. They are living in fear, clinging to the hope that their loved ones may still be alive, and desperately searching for any information.

By exploiting their vulnerability, propaganda and disinformation can effectively manipulate these specific groups. When I talk about fragmentation, I mean that with AI and digital tools becoming cheaper and more accessible, creating and disseminating targeted content has become significantly easier. This makes propaganda more precise and allows it to tap into the specific pain points of different communities.

In Ukraine, this is evident. If we look at Latin America, we see the same pattern. Previously, major Russian-backed media outlets like Russia Today (RT) and other state-controlled groups had a strong presence. However, since many Western democratic countries have banned them, Russia has adapted.

Now, they localize their efforts. Instead of relying on large, recognizable media outlets, they create smaller, localized news sources that blend truth with disinformation. These sources legitimately report on local issues, making their narratives harder to detect.

Over time, through a cohesive, sustained effort, they introduce geopolitical narratives that favour authoritarian regimes and undermine democratic institutions. So, regarding ideologies, propaganda today is highly tailored to different communities.

The overarching goal is to promote authoritarianism. How it is executed depends on the local context. For instance, anti-U.S. sentiment is a powerful entry point in many Latin American and African countries. Any message that aligns with anti-Western rhetoric is more likely to be accepted. Once that foundation is laid, additional disinformation can be built on top with much less resistance.

Jacobsen: How do Russian and other propaganda sources frame narratives for domestic audiences versus international audiences? And also, when exporting propaganda, do they adjust their messaging for different regions?

Kovtun: The short answer is yes. Russian propaganda has been shaping narratives for domestic audiences for decades. This means the Kremlin already has a fertile ground for circulating long-established talking points.

What I mean by fertile ground is that, for many years, the Kremlin has systematically prepared its population for events like the invasion of Ukraine. One way they have done this is by suppressing any potential political opposition.

For instance, a major tactic has been ensuring that educated citizens—those with university degrees and knowledge of foreign languages—become apolitical. How do they achieve that? By creating a climate of distrust.

They make sure that people believe no one can be trusted. Even if someone recognizes that Russian state media is corrupt, they are also conditioned to distrust Western media, such as the BBC or other foreign outlets.

When people are unsure who to trust, they withdraw from political engagement altogether. They stop questioning, seeking alternative viewpoints, shutting down, and avoiding thinking about politics.

So, the Kremlin has deliberately eroded personal agency in many individuals who might have become political dissenters.

This is why, today, we see millions of Russians reluctant to speak out—not because they are all loyal to the Kremlin, but because they have been conditioned into passivity over many years.

This did not happen overnight. It was a long-term strategy. For international audiences, the Kremlin takes a localized approach to propaganda. For example, we now see a growing presence of Russian-backed media sources designed specifically for local audiences in Africa.

Interestingly, democratic institutions often overlook entertainment platforms, but Russian propaganda finds its largest audiences precisely there. A fascinating case involved a troll factory in St. Petersburg, where they had an entire specialized unit dedicated to producing astrology websites and horoscopes.

At first glance, it seems unrelated to geopolitics. However, these seemingly innocent platforms were used to subtly introduce and reinforce Kremlin-friendly narratives—gradually shaping public perception in a way that people would not immediately recognize as propaganda.

This was not just speculation—it was proven when a journalist went undercover and worked inside the troll factory for some time.

One journalist who worked at the troll factory was in charge of a special project for which she was tasked with creating a fictional persona named Contadora. Contadora was presented as a spiritual leader, and her content mixed personal stories with geopolitical narratives.

For example, in one story, she talks about her sister living in Germany and describes having a bad dream in which her sister was taken by dark forces. She then interpreted the dream as a warning—suggesting that Germany was too dependent on the U.S. and vulnerable to American influence. This is just one small example.

But imagine if most African entertainment platforms featured similar astrologers and spiritual leaders embedding subtle political messaging. And this is not just happening in Africa.

If you look at global trends, there has been a significant rise in belief in the paranormal, mysticism, and spirituality—especially among Gen Z. For instance, the **#TarotReading** hashtag has attracted millions of views on TikTok.

Within these tarot and astrology videos, we have seen cases—especially in France and Germany —where certain tarot readers subtly introduce geopolitical narratives to their audiences.

This is just one example of how propaganda adapts to digital culture. And yet, in democratic societies, where we enjoy freedom of speech and open dialogue, Russian propaganda can easily integrate into various platforms and find creative ways to spread its messages.

Meanwhile, democracies are often disadvantaged because ethical considerations bind them. They worry about the best way to communicate narratives without crossing ethical boundaries.

Because of this fundamental difference in governance, democratic societies will always face certain limitations in their response strategies. That is why I encourage my partners in the EU to

think outside the box—not just focus on discussions within our own bubble but be more creative in how we counter disinformation.

Humour could be one approach to promoting democratic narratives. But I am sure there are many more innovative strategies we have not even explored yet.

Jacobsen: Valeria, thank you for your time today. I appreciate it.

Kovtun: Thank you. Let me know if you have any questions or if you need clarification on anything. I'm happy to help.

Jacobsen: Excellent. Thank you so much.

The Tariff Tug-of-War: Michael Ashley Schulman Weighs In

2025/02/28

Michael Ashley Schulman, partner and Chief Investment Officer at Running Point Capital Advisors, offers a nuanced perspective on the economic impact of reciprocal tariffs. Rather than viewing tariffs as long-term inflationary forces, Schulman frames them as one-time price shocks that ripple through industries in distinct ways.

With deep expertise in wealth management, portfolio structuring, and financial market analysis, Schulman advises high-net-worth families and registered investment advisors on risk assessment and strategic planning. A Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), he frequently speaks at investment conferences, dissecting macroeconomic trends, market dynamics, and trade policy.

In this discussion, Schulman explores tariffs as both a strategic tool and a double-edged sword—capable of fostering domestic self-sufficiency while potentially stifling competition and innovation over time. Citing China's response to AI chip restrictions, he underscores how tariffs can shape trade negotiations and economic strategy. He also highlights the market's ability to adapt within one to four quarters, advising investors to position themselves either long or short in specific sectors based on risk tolerance.

Ultimately, Schulman situates tariffs within the broader framework of economic policy, trade balances, and global market stability—where every action risks provoking an equal and opposite reaction on the world stage.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: With President Donald Trump poised to impose tariffs across the board on several countries—and the likelihood of reciprocal tariffs in response—how would you advise your clients to navigate this evolving economic landscape?

Michael Ashley Schulman: The reality is that even with the promise of reciprocal tariffs being enacted, they probably won't affect the prices of goods already in the U.S.—in stores and inventory—so the retail and commercial price adjustments may still be a month or several months away.

We advise our clients to remember that tariffs typically represent a one-time adjustment to pricing and are only one of many factors influencing corporate economics, employment, stocks, and asset prices.

While common rhetoric suggests tariffs are inflationary, technically they are import taxes paid by the purchaser, and like other taxes, tend to be deflationary rather than inflationary.

Overall, reciprocal tariff expectations remain a wildcard, and it may be premature to predict specifically where and how they'll impact markets. Although their effects may be identifiable, the Trump administration may be leveraging them primarily as a negotiation tactic.

The advantage of reciprocal tariffs versus arbitrary ones is that they immediately provide other countries with clear parameters for negotiation.

From an economic perspective, entertainment, travel, and service companies may be less affected by tariffs, potentially offering greater stability in uncertain times.

The U.S. economy's unique positioning and robust fundamentals point to steady growth, albeit with elevated risks and a challenging investment landscape. Additionally, we anticipate AI technologies helping to address the growing pains of a transitioning labor force, as developments like self-driving vehicles may require Uber and Lyft drivers to find new opportunities within the evolving gig economy.

Recognizing that tariffs can function both as a constraint on business growth and a catalyst for structural change, institutional investors with a genuinely long-term perspective should consider investing in resilient industries affected by tariffs.

This approach may allow them to acquire assets at favorable valuations, particularly since tariffs typically represent a one-time adjustment to price levels rather than ongoing costs. Excessive fears about tariffs could present attractive buying opportunities, especially in high-demand industries.

Jacobsen: How do reciprocal tariffs differ from traditional tariffs regarding their economic impact on bilateral trade?

Schulman: It depends. How do they differ? Both are tariffs, and economically speaking, a tariff is a tax. When people hear "tariffs," most assume they are inflationary and will drive up prices. However, there are nuances to consider.

Tariffs create a one-time price increase, whereas inflation tends to be continuous. For instance, a 5% inflation rate means prices rise by 5% yearly, compounding over time. In contrast, tariffs impose a single price adjustment.

Because tariffs function as a tax, they do not necessarily cause ongoing inflation. If a government increases taxes, consumers have less disposable income, which can reduce spending—a deflationary effect. From a macroeconomic perspective, tariffs act as a deflationary measure when viewed as a tax. Even when considering their price impact, tariffs result in a one-time price increase rather than persistent inflation. Additionally, tariffs often drive changes in consumer behaviour—people may seek cheaper substitutes, alternative suppliers, or reduce consumption.

For example, if a 10% tariff is imposed on imported goods, prices will rise, but not uniformly. Some consumers will switch to domestic products, others may find alternative international suppliers, and some will buy less overall. Traditional tariffs are unilateral and imposed without necessarily targeting another country's policies. Reciprocal tariffs, however, are imposed in response to a tariff from another country. This dynamic makes reciprocal tariffs a negotiation tool, as they explicitly target specific economic sectors or industries in the retaliating nation.

Jacobsen: When it comes to reciprocal tariffs—often seen as retaliatory trade measures from other nations—do they pose a significant economic reality, or is the threat of such countermeasures largely overstated?

Schulman: It is a reality. Reciprocal tariffs, by definition, are retaliatory. Whether the initial tariff was intended as a protective measure or an economic bargaining tool, the affected country typically perceives it as an offensive move. Even if a tariff is not explicitly labelled as reciprocal, any unilateral tariff can trigger retaliatory action from trading partners. This is a fundamental

aspect of trade wars, where nations escalate tariffs and counter-tariffs, leading to disruptions in global trade, supply chains, and market stability.

If a tariff is well thought out—if imposed to protect a nascent industry or for a specific economic reason, such as safeguarding certain employees or sectors—the other country may understand the rationale. It becomes part of any negotiation. However, if tariffs are imposed willy-nilly, the other side may be taken aback.

Then, the key question becomes: Is this truly a tariff, or is the administration using it as a negotiating stance? Is there something else they want in exchange for removing the tariff? Do they want better border enforcement, stricter drug enforcement, or reductions in long-standing tariffs that have been in place for five or ten years but may no longer be necessary? Understanding the reasoning behind a tariff is crucial. It is always important to assess whether the tariff is purely retaliatory, tit-for-tat, or whether it serves as leverage to negotiate something else.

Jacobsen: It gets the other party's attention and can bring them to the negotiating table—if that is the intent.

Schulman: It gets the other side's attention and can either bring them to the negotiating table or provoke a reaction.

Jacobsen: How do nations typically respond when a tariff is imposed without a clear objective?

Schulman: If a tariff is imposed without any intent to negotiate, the reaction from the affected country is often aggressive and defensive, and it may be perceived as an insult or threat. We see this with Canada's response to some of the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration. Traditionally, the U.S. and Canada have had a strong economic relationship—we are neighbours, rely on each other, and are allies. However, when a tariff appears unjustified or imposed for its own sake, it creates an adverse reaction and puts the other country in a hostile and defensive posture. The affected country may view it as a punitive action rather than a bargaining tool, making retaliatory tariffs, trade barriers, or restrictions more likely.

Typically, the goal is to avoid a trade war. You do not want both sides escalating tariffs because, as I said earlier, tariffs function as taxes. If both sides increase tariffs, both sides will effectively raise taxes on their economies, which is harmful. It hurts growth and creates economic inefficiencies. Additionally, tariffs have broader consequences for businesses and supply chains. They can disrupt global supply networks, increase production costs, drive up consumer prices, and introduce volatility into financial markets. These uncertainties make long-term planning difficult for corporations and investors alike.

Jacobsen: How might reciprocal tariffs influence employment and consumer prices?

Schulman: The key impact is restraint—raising input costs while reducing demand. The effects will vary across industries depending on how they intersect with global supply chains. Manufacturing industries that rely heavily on imported components, such as electronics and automobiles, may face higher production costs, reduced competitiveness, and potential price increases for consumers. This could also lead to a slowdown in productivity.

On the other hand, service-based industries—such as entertainment, hospitality, restaurants, amusement parks, and travel—tend to be less affected by tariffs because they do not rely on importing goods that would be subject to such measures. However, manufacturing, agriculture, technology, automotive, and retail industries are more likely to be impacted due to rising costs.

For businesses, these increased costs usually result in one of two outcomes: either companies absorb the higher costs, which reduces their profit margins and valuations, or they pass the costs onto consumers through higher prices, reducing demand. If demand decreases and sales decline, business valuations still take a hit. However, restrictions on imports create market opportunities for domestic substitutes.

As I mentioned earlier, tariffs typically have a one-time economic impact. The market usually adapts over time. Most negative effects are short-lived, and businesses eventually adjust to the new price levels.

Jacobsen: How do multinational corporations adapt to the complexities of global supply chain shifts? Even if their manufacturing is primarily based in one nation, what strategies do they employ to navigate these evolving economic landscapes?

Schulman: The classic MBA answer is: it depends. And that is an interesting question. Rather than speaking in theory, let me give you a real-world example.

Take Procter & Gamble, a massive American multinational specializing in consumer goods and household staples. While it is based in the U.S., many key ingredients, chemicals, and raw materials are imported from China and Mexico.

Conversely, some of Procter & Gamble's competitors—Nestlé and Unilever, both foreign companies—produce much of what they sell within the U.S. rather than importing it. As a result, tariffs may negatively impact Procter & Gamble more than Nestlé and Unilever, despite all three companies operating in the same consumer goods space. Since Nestlé and Unilever source more of their goods domestically than one might expect, they are less exposed to tariffs.

Meanwhile, Procter & Gamble relies more heavily on imported ingredients and chemicals, making them more vulnerable to tariff-related cost increases.

Jacobsen: How long does it take for the market to adjust? You mentioned that these effects are typically short-term bumps—what does that look like in practical terms?

Schulman: The timeline for market adjustment depends on several factors—how clearly defined the tariffs are, when they take effect, what industries they impact, and how large the tariff amounts are. Once those factors are clear, the market can begin adjusting. However, if tariffs are uncertain—for example if retaliatory tariffs are announced but it is unclear which industries will be targeted—that delays market reactions.

This uncertainty forces companies to make short-term strategic decisions, such as stockpiling inventory or delaying product launches until tariff policies are clarified. This can cause economic adjustments to stretch over several quarters, sometimes up to seven quarters. However, businesses can adapt more efficiently once tariffs are announced and implemented. At that point,

corporate management can navigate the new conditions, and most adjustments take place within one to four quarters, depending on supply chain flexibility.

Even if companies shift their manufacturing strategies, prices often stabilize when those changes take effect. As a result, from a market reaction and economic impact perspective, most tariff-related adjustments occur within the first one to four quarters.

Jacobsen: How should institutional and retail investors adjust their portfolios to capitalize on opportunities or mitigate risks related to tariffs?

Schulman: It depends on how aggressive the portfolio strategy is. If investors are risk-averse, they may want to exit industries that tariffs, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or retail, could significantly impact. However, this approach involves a degree of speculation since it is never entirely clear whether tariffs will be implemented or are merely a negotiation tactic.

On the other hand, if investors are aggressive, they might buy into industries most affected by tariffs—such as manufacturing, agriculture, or retail—anticipating that market fear will drive prices down, creating attractive entry points. This strategy is based on the idea that eventually, market conditions will correct, and the initial fear-driven selloff will subside.

From an investment standpoint, the right strategy depends on whether someone is highly aggressive or conservative. However, to some extent, investing during tariff uncertainty remains a guessing game—investors do not always know what will be announced or how severe the tariff levels will be.

Jacobsen: To what extent can tariffs influence domestic innovation? Is that a factor that could be considered when implementing tariffs?

Schulman: Innovation is difficult to predict. You could argue that tariffs spur innovation. That is what we have seen in China with DeepSeek AI. It was not exactly a tariff but an outright restriction on selling advanced AI chips to China. As a result, China developed what appears to be a brilliant and less expensive workaround—which DeepSeek is now proving to be successful.

Tariffs, at their core, function as a tax or a restriction. I am repeating myself on the tax aspect, but fundamentally, tariffs act as barriers. Restrictions can accelerate innovation rather than slow it down. The assumption behind restricting AI chips to China was to hinder their progress—that was the intent of the U.S. government. However, in practice, it has fueled innovation instead. In this sense, tariffs and restrictions can be a catalyst for substitutes and workarounds.

That said, tariffs that shield domestic industries can also reduce competitive pressures, and competition is a major driver of innovation. Governments sometimes impose tariffs to protect and nurture an industry, but companies become complacent if these protections remain too long. Without the challenge of foreign competition, firms may feel less urgency to invest in R&D, leading to slower technological progress.

In short, tariffs can work well as temporary protection, giving companies the breathing room to make long-term investments. However, historically, reduced competition over time tends to stifle innovation, ultimately making industries less competitive in the global market.

Jacobsen: What is the role of tariffs in shaping domestic economic policy?

Schulman: Tariffs are primarily used to protect or incubate and nurture emerging industries by influencing trade relationships. They can encourage economic self-sufficiency in key sectors, such as agriculture, manufacturing, or technology. That is one way they shape domestic economic policy.

Additionally, tariffs can offset trade imbalances, protect jobs, and support domestic producers. Politically, these measures often help win votes since protecting local industries resonates with voters and policymakers alike. However, the long-term consequences of tariffs include higher consumer prices, reduced market competition, strained diplomatic relations, and potential retaliatory tariffs from other nations. We may be seeing that unfold now.

Jacobsen: Michael, thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate it.

Schulman: Sure, happy to help, Scott. I will be in touch.

A Trade Lawyer Tackles Reciprocal Tariffs, Legal Challenges, and Global Market Risks

2025/03/02

Tiffany Comprés, a leading international disputes attorney, co-chairs the Pierson Ferdinand International Disputes and Practices group. With extensive experience representing U.S. and international companies in arbitration and litigation, she specializes in the complex legal terrain of agriculture, food, logistics, distribution, heavy machinery, and energy. Among just 51 attorneys board-certified in International Law by the Florida Bar, Comprés has earned recognition as a rising star in her field.

Her expertise in global trade law—particularly in frameworks like the UN Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) and the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA)—positions her as a crucial voice on the legal and dispute resolution challenges that businesses face in an increasingly volatile trade environment.

Amid mounting tariff uncertainty, Comprés underscores the need for businesses to rethink contract terms and compliance strategies. She examines the World Trade Organization's weakening enforcement mechanisms, the role of Incoterms in cost allocation, and the escalating risks of trade wars. Additionally, she highlights the legal ambiguities surrounding presidential tariff authority and the resulting surge in arbitration cases. As global trade governance remains in flux, businesses must navigate a landscape of shifting policies and unpredictable economic conditions—where missteps can have profound financial and legal consequences.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Thank you for joining me today. How do reciprocal tariffs impact international trade relations and global market dynamics?

Tiffany Comprés: I'm a lawyer, so I can only speak to that in a limited fashion. But certainly, they have broad impacts.

For example, consider steel and aluminum tariffs. A tariff on those products has effects across many sectors of the economy. The company importing the product will either absorb the cost or pass it down to consumers. Suppose the U.S. imposes tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum, for example. In that case, the concern is that American manufacturers using those materials will face higher costs, which could lead to higher consumer prices.

As a response, Canada could impose counter-tariffs—a reciprocal measure that affects U.S. exports to Canada. This kind of tariff escalation can create ongoing disputes, with tariffs increasing or changing continuously. It can also extend beyond the initial products targeted, affecting other sectors of the economy.

And that's just in a bilateral trade relationship. Regarding multilateral trade relationships, particularly in the World Trade Organization (WTO) framework, reciprocal tariffs can trigger broader disputes. With Trump proposing reciprocal tariffs, the risk is that multiple countries could impose retaliatory measures, leading to widespread trade disruptions.

Historically, trade wars have had severe consequences. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which imposed high import tariffs, led to significant retaliatory tariffs from other nations. This exacerbated the Great Depression by reducing global trade.

Jacobsen: What legal challenges do reciprocal tariffs present for cross-border transactions?

Comprés: Several. I have clients calling me, asking what they should plan for.

In my practice, I work with many importers and exporters of fresh fruits and vegetables—products that typically do not have tariffs due to trade agreements like NAFTA (now USMCA). If reciprocal tariffs are applied unpredictably, businesses that rely on established pricing models and supply chains could face significant disruptions.

Legal challenges include:

Contract disputes: If a tariff is suddenly imposed, existing contracts may not account for the additional costs, which can lead to litigation between suppliers and buyers.

Compliance with international trade agreements: Companies must navigate whether tariffs violate agreements under the WTO, USMCA, or bilateral treaties.

Supply chain restructuring: Businesses may need to shift suppliers or renegotiate contracts, which can lead to further legal complications.

Ultimately, reciprocal tariffs introduce uncertainty, and uncertainty is a risk in trade law.

So this is an entirely new game for this industry. Companies need to set up their accounts to pay tariffs, which they are not used to. They need to start factoring that into their operations. Can they absorb the cost?

How do they shift the cost? In international trade, there are terms called Incoterms, which serve as standardized contractual guidelines for assigning responsibilities between buyers and sellers. Incoterms do not decide anything on their own—rather, the parties involved in the transaction agree on an Incoterm, which then governs key responsibilities like insurance, freight costs, and, importantly, who is responsible for paying tariffs.

One thing I expect companies to do now is start reviewing their contracts carefully. Many terms they previously took for granted—because they never had to worry about tariffs—are now becoming critical points of negotiation.

For example, a common Incoterm is FOB (Free on Board), which means responsibility for the product transfers at the port of export. Under this arrangement, the importer is typically responsible for paying the tariffs. However, suppose a company shifts to a Delivered Duty Paid (DDP) term, where responsibility stays with the exporter. In that case, the exporter must cover the tariffs.

Sometimes, businesses do not pay close attention to these details because Incoterms are often represented in contracts by just three-letter abbreviations. Suppose companies have repeatedly used the same template agreements without considering the tariff implications. In that case, they may need to re-evaluate their contract structures. Otherwise, this could slip under the radar until

someone realizes, "Wait, maybe we should change that." Renegotiating contracts may become necessary.

I also advise clients to diversify their sourcing as much as possible to spread tariff risk. Of course, not all products can be sourced from multiple places. In agriculture, for instance, certain crops are available only in specific regions at certain times of the year. In the United States, we expect to have mangoes year-round, even though they naturally grow only during certain seasons. This demand creates additional trade complexities when tariffs are introduced.

My biggest concern is that this could lead to an ongoing cycle of tariff escalations, in which one country raises tariffs, another responds, and the cycle continues indefinitely.

The second concern is that this is the broadest application of reciprocal tariffs we have ever seen. Historically, reciprocal tariffs have been implemented on specific products or sectors. However, in the February 13 memorandum outlining the Fair and Reciprocal Trade Plan, the definition of "reciprocity" is far-reaching. It suggests that tariffs should be matched product by product, country by country.

For example, if France imposes a 10% tariff on U.S. cars, then under this framework, the U.S. would match it with a 10% tariff on French cars—instead of the current 2.5% tariff. This shift fundamentally changes trade relations and could lead to widespread retaliatory measures from trading partners.

But the memo describes reciprocity in a much broader sense than just matching tariffs. It talks not only about the actual tariffs applied but also about other trade barriers, such as taxes, regulations, subsidies, and currency policies that affect trade terms. That's a very broad scope.

The memo also sets a 180-day turnaround time for presenting recommendations to the president. However, it's unclear whether this means actual tariff numbers must be determined within that time. If so, that would be an incredibly tight deadline.

Given the significantly reduced federal workforce, the ability to conduct a comprehensive and in-depth analysis in such a short time seems unrealistic. I don't see how they can do this properly without cutting corners. The administrative burden alone is going to be enormous.

This presents challenges not only in implementation but also in enforcement. For example, one of the earlier executive orders aimed to eliminate the de minimis exception. The de minimis rule allows low-value shipments, such as small online purchases under $800, to enter the U.S. without duties. The reason for this rule is largely administrative efficiency—it would be a logistical nightmare to process duties on every single small package.

However, after the rule was eliminated, it didn't last long. The U.S. does not have enough customs officers to inspect every package and assess duties. Now, with reciprocal tariffs, we are asking customs officials to determine duty rates for every country—a monumental task.

If eliminating the de minimis exception failed due to staffing shortages, I don't see how this plan can be effectively enforced. Other countries frequently change their tariffs, so this is not just a one-time adjustment.

If we're serious about maintaining this reciprocal tariff policy, then every time another country adjusts its tariffs, regulations, or subsidies, the U.S. would need to respond. This would add a constant regulatory burden to an already overburdened system.

Jacobsen: Initially, several countries set a February 1 deadline for implementing these tariffs. However, negotiations—particularly with Mexico and Canada—led to a last-minute extension. Was this extension driven by a legitimate policy rationale, or was it more about optics?

Some reports suggest it was largely a public relations move. Certain agreements that emerged during negotiations involved actions already in the pipeline but were reframed as part of the bargaining process. Regardless, the outcome was a temporary, one-month delay in the tariff deadline. Yet, the fundamental uncertainties remain: How will this policy be implemented? Is it truly enforceable? And how will businesses navigate the instability?

From a legal standpoint, when a February 1 deadline looms for tariffs at a dramatic, double-digit rate, how do legal scholars begin to assess the implications? And what happens when that deadline is abruptly extended by a month? As you pointed out, when a major policy shift is imminent, every detail is scrutinized with heightened urgency.

Comprés: The first and most fundamental legal question is: under what authority is the president implementing these tariffs?

The president used a different legal strategy with those particular tariffs—invoking his emergency powers.

His justification was based on national security concerns, specifically tying it to the drug trade and fentanyl trafficking. That rationale made much more sense in the case of Mexico than it did for Canada.

There's a significant disparity in the volume of fentanyl seized at the Canadian border versus the Mexican border. I have some figures here—hold on.

Here we go: 43 pounds of fentanyl were seized at the Canadian border last year and 22,000 pounds came through Mexico.

So, using fentanyl trafficking as the legal basis for tariffs was far more justifiable for Mexico than for Canada.

However, my concern with reciprocal tariffs is different. I don't think the date change for the Mexico-Canada tariffs is legally significant because of the legal authority under which they were imposed. Since the legal basis is emergency powers, a one-month delay does not fundamentally change the lawfulness of the tariffs.

I'm not deeply immersed in the specific scholarly debates on that particular point, so there may be other perspectives. However, once the president invokes emergency powers to impose tariffs, the exact deadline is not necessarily a major legal issue.

But with reciprocal tariffs, is it a different legal question? The legal foundation for reciprocal tariffs is far less clear.

With Mexico-Canada tariffs, even though the scope of the president's power under emergency authority is debatable, the precedent for using it exists. But reciprocal tariffs raise a completely different question:

Does the president even have the legal authority to impose them?

Trade policy is explicitly assigned to Congress under the U.S. Constitution. Congress holds the power to regulate tariffs and foreign trade. So, does the president need congressional approval?

Maybe.

A possible legal argument under Section 338 of the Tariff Act allows the president to impose new and additional duties on imports from countries that discriminate against U.S. exports.

However, this provision has never been used as the president proposes. It was not originally intended as a tool for broad reciprocal tariff implementation.

So, the legal justification for reciprocal tariffs remains an open question—and we could very well see legal challenges if they are implemented without Congressional approval.

It's a clear WTO violation.

Under WTO rules, we must maintain our tariffs within pre-agreed rate levels. This also contradicts the Most Favored Nation (MFN) principle under which the U.S. has operated since 1923.

The MFN principle ensures that U.S. tariffs on imports remain identical for all WTO member countries, except in specific cases—such as goods deemed unfairly traded (e.g., anti-dumping duties). Imports from free trade partners with whom we have separate agreements.

As a result, most countries lowered their tariffs to participate in free trade, leading to global economic integration. This movement toward trade liberalization was formally memorialized in 1934 through the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act.

However, the WTO has been severely weakened, largely because the U.S. blocked the appointment of appellate judges to its Dispute Settlement Body.

Without a functioning dispute resolution system, WTO rules become unenforceable.

If a country violates WTO rules but has no legal mechanism to resolve disputes, then what is the point of the system? It creates a frail and weakened position for global trade governance. This breakdown—combined with the proliferation of free trade agreements (FTAs)—has led countries to negotiate trade deals outside the WTO framework.

That's why we now have regional and bilateral agreements like USMCA and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). There are now thousands of these trade agreements in place. Some are bilateral (between two countries) and some are multilateral (between multiple nations).

This parallel trade system has developed for nearly a century. Still, the rule of law governing international trade has become increasingly fragile.

This shift is largely due to the U.S. reconsidering its role as the global leader—not just diplomatically and politically but also in trade.

So, trade, diplomacy, and global leadership are deeply interconnected. They are not separate issues—they all influence one another.

Jacobsen: In today's global economy, some companies operate strictly within domestic markets, while others engage in cross-border trade. But we also live in an era dominated by multinational corporations, where jurisdictional complexities can arise even in seemingly straightforward bilateral trade relationships.

You mentioned earlier that regulatory challenges emerge even in cases involving just two nations —such as a shipping vessel moving between Canada and the U.S. or Norway and the U.S. When that vessel enters international waters, its cargo falls outside the direct jurisdiction of any single country. How does that legal limbo shape trade regulations?

Expanding this to a broader scale, in a multinational or multilateral trade context—particularly for multinational corporations—how do tariffs add further layers of complexity? Do they make international trade law more difficult to navigate, or do they introduce new regulatory risks that companies must anticipate?

Comprés: Well, to give you just one example of how tariffs can disrupt global supply chains:

Most of my clients deal in fruits and vegetables. It's one product—a mango or a bunch of grapes. You grow it, and that's it. There's no complex manufacturing process and no 25,000 components like those in a car or an iPhone. Now, think about something like an iPhone or a car.

A single device or machine has components sourced from many different countries. Some components might be manufactured in Country A, but the fabrication process could occur in Country B.

So, components come from 10 different countries, are assembled in an 11th country, and then sent to a 12th country for final integration before reaching the U.S.

That's when things get complicated.

Jacobsen: How do tariffs apply in these cases?

Comprés: A product's country of origin determines the tariff rate under U.S. tariff rules.

The country of origin is where it was grown for simple goods, like oranges. If you repackage the orange, it doesn't matter—it's still an orange, and its country of origin remains the same.

However, tariff classification follows the substantial transformation rule for complex manufactured goods.

This means that the final country where the most significant transformation occurs is considered the country of origin—not necessarily where the raw materials or components were sourced. I've been advising clients who deal with complex products to rethink their supply chains.

They should strategically restructure operations so that the substantial transformation occurs in a more favourable location with lower tariffs.

However, companies can't easily relocate their factories if tariff policies keep changing.

It's not like picking up and moving a store—it's a massive logistical and financial challenge to close a factory in Country A and open another in Country B.

This ties back to your earlier question about the 30-day delay. The greater impact isn't purely legal—it's about economic stability. Business thrives on predictability. When expectations are clear, companies can manage their finances, plan investments, and forecast revenue.

However, tariff uncertainty creates a chaotic environment. Companies hesitate to act, delaying new product launches and postponing investments because the return on investment becomes unpredictable.

They don't know what tariffs to pay, making profit margins uncertain. And in some cases, tariffs can be so high that they function as a de facto tax on companies.

Jacobsen: How can dispute resolution mechanisms under the UN Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) address tariff-related conflicts that, from what you're saying, maybe inevitable?

Comprés: I'm fairly certain there will definitely be some of that. However, the CISG doesn't have its dispute resolution mechanism, like an arbitration system. Instead, it provides rules on contract breaches and contract interpretation.

One key legal issue—which may be a bit dry but is important—is how the CISG handles contract interpretation differently from U.S. contract law.

In the United States, contract law follows the "four corners rule."

Courts don't look beyond the document if a contract is clear. The only time outside evidence is allowed is when the contract is ambiguous and its meaning cannot be resolved from the text alone.

But under the CISG, there's no such rule.

Parties can introduce external negotiations and conversations to help interpret the contract. This means that a company could try to argue that an agreed-upon trade term—like FOB (Free on Board)—was never actually intended that way.

Would that argument hold up? I don't think so. If a contract has always been used a certain way, the counterargument would be that usage and custom determine its meaning.

That said, I wouldn't rule out companies trying to use CISG rules to avoid high and damaging tariffs. While unlikely to succeed, some unique contexts might allow it to work.

We are already seeing a huge increase in international arbitration over the past 10 to 20 years. That trend is only going to continue.

I also wouldn't be surprised if we start seeing state-to-state arbitration, where countries challenge tariffs under trade agreements like the USMCA. For example, China has already filed a WTO complaint over tariffs.

Jacobsen: Could that case move forward?

Comprés: It might pass the first stage, but it won't reach appeal—or, if it does, it will sit in limbo indefinitely. The reason? The WTO Appellate Body isn't functioning because the U.S. has blocked the appointment of judges.

So, even if China wins in the first instance, the U.S. can appeal, and the case will remain unresolved because there is no appeals court to hear it. This is something we will see more of as trade tensions continue.

Jacobsen: Thank you. I appreciate your time, Tiffany. It was nice to meet you and thank you for your expertise.

Comprés: Oh, you're welcome! It's a nerdy topic but a good one.

The Emperor Without Clothes: Unmasking Elon Musk with Dan O'Dowd

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Dan O'Dowd has built a career on designing software that never fails—a rare claim in an era of digital vulnerabilities. A leading authority in secure systems, O'Dowd developed the operating software for some of the world's most mission-critical projects, including Boeing's 787s, Lockheed Martin's F-35 Fighter Jets, the Boeing B1-B Intercontinental Nuclear Bomber, and NASA's Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle. Since graduating from the California Institute of Technology in 1976, he has pioneered safety-critical and unhackable software, shaping the future of embedded security across aerospace, defense, and other high-stakes industries.

Then there is **Elon Musk**, a figure whose public image is a tangle of contradictions. He is a relentless workaholic, a self-styled genius who reportedly grinds 100-hour weeks, sleeps in factories, and pushes human endurance in pursuit of his technological ambitions. He is also a family man, though his personal life—marked by multiple ex-wives and at least 14 children—suggests a far more complicated reality. And, somehow, amid running billion-dollar enterprises, **he is an elite gamer**, ranking highly in titles such as *Diablo IV*.

These contradictions raise a fundamental question: How does a man supposedly working 100-hour weeks also have the time to master competitive gaming? If his schedule is consumed by engineering and innovation, where do his children fit in? The narratives Musk cultivates—hardest-working CEO, devoted father, elite gamer—appear mutually exclusive, yet they exist in parallel, feeding into the enigma that defines his public persona.

Critics argue that Musk's self-mythologizing is no accident. Reports suggest he paid gamers to inflate his rankings, undermining his credibility in the gaming world. His leadership, too, is marked by inconsistencies—while he is celebrated as a hands-on innovator, much of his company's operations are managed by others. His influence is undeniable, but whether he is a revolutionary visionary or a master of illusion remains an open question.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Since you're approaching this from the perspective of someone scrutinizing Musk's personality, let's begin with one of the more improbable claims—his supposed prowess in competitive gaming. Achieving a world-class ranking in any high-level game requires an extraordinary investment of time, skill, and dedication. Musk has repeatedly boasted about his standing among elite players, but just weeks ago, someone uncovered the truth—and exposed exactly what he was doing.

Dan O'Dowd: Here's what happened: Musk wasn't ranking up through skill. Instead, he was paying people to grind for him, boosting his stats so he could pretend to be at an elite level. This was exposed when he live-streamed himself playing *Path of Exile*, a game where strategy and mechanics matter deeply.

A real top player was watching the stream and immediately realized something was off. Musk was making basic mistakes, failing to execute simple mechanics, and missing obvious strategic choices. The guy watching thought, Wait for a second—how could someone rank this high be

such a noob? He literally called Musk a noob on the spot. Someone couldn't reach that level of the game and still not know how to play.

That's when people really started digging. Soon, the gaming community laughed, spread the footage, and dissected his gameplay. More expert players looked into it, and another well-respected figure in the gaming world stepped in, confirming what was obvious—Elon Musk was cheating.

The truth came out: Musk had a team of people playing for him, grinding the game to boost his ranking. Then, once they levelled him up, they would inject him into high-ranked matches, making it look like he had earned his spot. But when he had to play on stream, he obviously had no idea what he was doing.

At first, Musk denied everything. He tried to deflect, ignore, and laugh it off. But the pressure kept mounting, and the evidence was too obvious to ignore. Finally, in the last few days, he admitted it. He was caught and had no choice but to confess: Yes, I have people play the game for me.

This was yet another hit to his credibility. Another segment of the public realized—that he was lying about everything. What is the entire gaming narrative he built around himself? Fake. He wasn't spending 40 or 80 hours a week playing video games. He wasn't grinding his way to the top. He wasn't an elite player. He just paid people to make him look like one.

And that's how he operates. This gaming controversy is just another example of a pattern: massive deception. Musk presents himself as a genius, workaholic, gamer, businessman, father, and visionary—but when you examine the details, so much of it is fake. And now, the gaming industry has fully exposed that part of the illusion.

So that's one contradiction off the list. The "Musk the Gamer" myth? Completely debunked.

So we don't have to worry about that one. The gamer myth? Debunked. Done. But what about the family man narrative?

Musk presents himself as someone who loves his kids. Yet one of his children despises him—hates him to the core. The others? We rarely hear about them. The only child we consistently see is little X, his now four-year-old son. And Musk takes him everywhere.

X is there whenever Musk is at business meetings, industry events, or gatherings with billionaires. The child sits on his lap, rides on his shoulders, and is always in the room. But let's be real—Musk isn't caring for him. There's always a nanny nearby. The kid isn't there because Musk is playing doting father. He's there for another reason.

We don't have direct evidence, but there are two main theories. The first is that Little X is his emotional support child. Musk is one of the most hated people in the world—ridiculed, criticized, and constantly under fire. Having a child literally attached to him provides comfort. It gives him something pure that doesn't judge him—a source of unconditional love in a world where so many people despise him.

The second theory is more cynical: X is a human shield. If you watch Musk, the kid is always physically close to him—sitting beside him in meetings, on his lap, on his shoulders, in his arms. Musk knows that even his most extreme critics will hesitate to go after him too aggressively if he's always holding his child. It creates a visual buffer. It humanizes him. It's a form of optics management.

Beyond X, though, Musk doesn't seem to spend meaningful time with his other children. He is estranged from at least one, has little public connection to the others, and appears to have no real relationships with his ex-wives or former girlfriends. As of now, he's officially single.

Musk has fathered at least 13 children—the confirmed number—but it could be more. And one of those mothers is an employee at Neuralink, Shivon Zilis, a high-ranking executive at his company.

Then there's Grimes. According to Isaacson's biography, Musk had twins with Grimes. But here's the kicker—while she was in the hospital giving birth, Shivon Zilis was in the same hospital giving birth to another set of Musk's twins. And Grimes had no idea.

Family man? Right.

Of course, there's his romantic history. He has burned through wives, girlfriends, and affairs. Amber Heard? That was a toxic disaster. Poor Johnny Depp. The absolute chaos of that relationship was brutal. Musk's involvement with Heard? Who knows how deep that really went?

Oh, and then there's Google co-founder Sergey Brin. The rumour that Musk slept with Brin's wife exploded. Both Musk and Brin denied it, of course. But the fallout? Brin and Musk didn't speak for years. Whether or not it actually happened, the damage was real.

So, family man? Not exactly. More like serial relationship wreckage.

We don't know if that story about him working 100 hours weekly is true. But what does he actually do?

Is he in the office, grinding away, running his companies? No. He's in Brazil. He's at the World Cup. He's at the Super Bowl. He's at the Met Gala. He's at every major global event where billionaires and world leaders gather.

I don't recall seeing him at Davos, but he must have been there. Maybe not. But whatever—he's everywhere else. He's not in an office working. He's in town, living the billionaire lifestyle and meeting with powerful people worldwide.

He was just in Brazil, holding talks with the Prime Minister of Italy. There are photos of them together, and she looks completely smitten—open-mouthed, adoring. He was cozying up to Macron, though that didn't last. He eventually insulted France and burned that bridge. Oh, right —he literally accused Macron of being a Nazi because someone found a photo of Macron raising his hand in a certain way. That's where Musk is spending his time.

He isn't grinding away at his companies. He's living the life of a playboy billionaire, playing ambassador, diplomat, emperor—whatever title fits. He's an emperor, yes, but possibly an emperor without clothes.

Musk used to spend time at his companies—10 years ago. He claimed he slept on the floor of the factory during Tesla's production crisis, but people who were actually there said nope. He made that up, too. It sounded good—like he was grinding, working hard, suffering alongside the workers. But in reality, he wasn't there.

Jacobsen: So, who runs the companies if Musk is barely involved?

O'Dowd: At SpaceX, it's Gwynne Shotwell. She runs the show. She handles everything. Musk shows up to do the countdowns for the rocket launches, but she's the one making it all happen. SpaceX works because it has competent leadership.

At **Tesla**, day-to-day operations are more unclear. Musk had a guy—Tom Zhu, who ran Tesla's China operations and was supposed to take over a bigger role in the U.S. But that didn't quite happen the way people expected.

And what about **Full Self-Driving** (FSD)? Ashok Elluswamy runs that department, but Musk doesn't. The truth is, these companies don't actually need him. This brings us to the biggest myth: Is Musk a super-genius?

People love to say he is. They call him a once-in-a-generation mind, a visionary, a real-life Tony Stark. But when you hear him talk about something you know a lot about, you realize…he's an idiot.

This is precisely what happened with the video game scandal. When Musk talks about something you don't know, he sounds smart. But when he talks about something you do know, you suddenly realize this guy has no idea what he's talking about.

Everybody thought Musk was a brilliant guy. But after the gaming scandal, the real experts in that community saw him for what he was: a complete idiot. And not just an ordinary novice who lacks experience—this was sheer stupidity.

He was making it up. And this isn't just limited to gaming—it's everything. He's not a rocket scientist. He doesn't have an engineering degree. He's not any of the things he wants you to believe he is. He wants you to think he's a brilliant engineer who designs all this groundbreaking technology. But he doesn't design anything.

Take SpaceX, for example. One of his only documented design decisions? He changed the shape of the Starship rocket's nose—not for aerodynamics or engineering reasons—but because it wasn't pointy enough. And why did he want it pointier? Because of a scene from The Dictator, the satirical Sacha Baron Cohen movie. That's literally why he did it. He admitted this himself.

This is how Musk operates. He doesn't actually know much about anything. He skims a Wikipedia page on a subject, memorizes a few key points, and then enters conversations acting like an expert. In many cases, he does know more than the average person because most people haven't read the Wikipedia page on that topic. But that's where his knowledge ends.

He may get briefings from real experts. But his understanding is paper-thin. And the problem? He can't stop there. He has to keep going. He must sound like he knows more than everyone else in the room. So what does he do? He starts making things up.

If an actual expert happens to be in the room while Musk is going off on one of his nonsense tangents—say, talking about mining water on Mars or some insane chemical reaction that doesn't make any sense—they'll call him out. They'll say, That's not how that works. And Musk's response?

"You don't know what you're talking about."

If the expert pushes back, saying, "Actually, I have a PhD in this field," Musk doubles down. "Well, you must've been in school a long time ago because you missed all the new advancements." And then he keeps making things up. It's easy to do. Try it sometime. I wrote 13 papers on this subject, won an award, and conducted groundbreaking research. Who's going to stop you? That's what Musk does.

And then there was the infamous Yann LeCun incident. Yann LeCun—one of the most respected AI researchers in the world—got into a Twitter exchange with Musk. And what did Musk do? He tried to correct him. He started making claims about AI research to one of the most decorated AI scientists on the planet.

This is the standard Musk tactic. It doesn't matter who he's talking to. All he has to do is say, "But I'm Elon Musk. I have access to the latest research." And for some reason, people believe him.

Jacobsen: Musk makes things up. What does he do if he loses an argument with an expert?

O'Dowd: He bluffs—throws out some nonsense about a groundbreaking project behind the scenes that nobody knows about.

"I've got people at Buffalo University working on this. You wouldn't know, but they collaborate with MIT and the Sorbonne. They're about to announce it next week, and it will completely disrupt the industry."

And what happens? The PhD in the conversation hesitates—because how do you argue against something that supposedly exists but hasn't been announced yet? That's the genius of the Musk Bluff. He creates an illusion of superior knowledge, making the expert second-guess. And when they walk away, Musk wins the argument—without ever saying a single true thing.

This is his tactic. It's bullying but in a specific way. He makes up the wildest, most impossible claims, and when people challenge him, he doubles down.

A million people on Mars? Sure.

A fully severed spinal cord? No problem—we'll make you walk again.

The blind will see? Done.

The deaf will hear? Of course.

Yes, he literally said all of this. And that brings us to Neuralink.

Neuralink might be their biggest joke. Musk promises it will cure blindness. He says it will make paralyzed people walk again. Does that sound familiar? Because it's straight out of the Bible. Every 19th-century travelling preacher with a revival tent used the same routine. They'd bring someone in a wheelchair onto the stage—someone who allegedly couldn't walk for years. The preacher would place his hands on them, say the magic words, and suddenly—they could walk. The blind? Now they could see.

That's the exact same playbook Musk is using with Neuralink.

And then there's Optimus. Optimus is going to end poverty. Yes, he actually said that. He claimed that Optimus would handle everything—it would work for us, solve all labor problems, and create a world where everyone gets whatever they want. He even put a number on it: two Optimi per person, a billion robots worldwide, solving every economic problem.

But here's the issue: What if everyone wants what Musk has?

What if every person on Earth wants a Gulfstream G650 private jet to fly wherever they want, whenever they want? Suddenly, we need 8 billion private jets—but there's a problem. The law requires two pilots per flight. But wait—those pilots also want their own private jets. The whole system collapses.

This is the absurdity of Musk's promises. He says these things honestly, and investors throw hundreds of millions—no, billions—of dollars at him. And why? Because he told them a completely preposterous fairy tale—and they believed it.

It's hilarious. It's so funny. These things aren't even serious ideas—they're jokes. But somehow, they work.

And speaking of jokes—you mentioned the Heil Hitler thing. I'm working on a theory here. Everybody asks, Is Musk a Nazi? Is he this? Is he that? I don't think he's any of those things. Oh, and one more thing—I completely forgot to mention: He's 13 years old.

No, not literally, of course. But mentally, emotionally, socially? His development stopped at 13. Everything he does makes much more sense when you look at it through that lens. His entire personality, obsessions, and antics all point to someone stuck in permanent adolescence.

So, what about the Heil Hitler thing? Yes, it was a Nazi salute. But I don't think it was because he's a Nazi. I think he did it for one reason: to see if he could get away with it.

He did it right before the seal of the President of the United States. Standing there, knowing the cameras were rolling, he raised his arm twice. Not just once—twice. He did it once, turned around, and then did it again to the crowd behind him, people he couldn't see.

Why? Because this is exactly what a 13-year-old would do. A middle schooler trying to be edgy.

This wasn't about ideology—it was about provocation. He wanted to do something outrageous that would explode in the press, something nobody else could get away with. And he knew he could because he's the emperor. He operates under a different set of rules.

Anyone else who did that was gone, immediately fired, and cancelled. But Musk understands that he's untouchable. He wanted to test it like a rebellious teenager to see how far they can push authority before facing consequences.

And guess what? He got away with it.

Sure, it pissed off some people. But then, his team came rushing to his defence. The ADL—an organization supposed to stand against antisemitism—actually defended him. Netanyahu himself came out and exonerated him.

Just think about that for a second. Imagine being able to walk up to a podium in front of the entire world, do a double Nazi salute, and still have powerful institutions defend you. That's the level of privilege Musk operates with. He could have stripped naked, and it wouldn't have been as big of a deal.

This was the one thing that should have been career-ending. The one move that no one should be able to walk away from. And yet—here he is.

And let's not forget—the way he did it. He perfected the salute. Fingers together. The arm extended just right. It was a textbook demonstration. He knew exactly what he was doing. And now? He's still standing.

Jacobsen: Let's talk about Musk's use of ketamine and other substances. If I recall correctly, the Don Lemon interview surfaced only after the fact. In that conversation, Lemon was openly critical of Musk, but one of the biggest revelations?

Musk admitted—without hesitation—to using ketamine. He claimed to have a prescription, possibly from a specialist or his regular GP. But that admission immediately raised broader questions. Why is he on ketamine?

What does it reveal about his mental state, his work habits, and the contradictions that define his public persona?

O'Dowd: I don't have personal knowledge—I'm not there with him. But as you said, Musk himself has admitted to using ketamine. And when you look at his behaviour, it tracks. His mood swings are extreme—he'll go from euphoric, manic enthusiasm to angry, explosive outbursts in an instant. That kind of volatility is noticeable. But I'll be honest—I don't know much about ketamine's actual effects. I know it's sometimes called a horse tranquillizer, but it also has real medical uses.

Then there's his history with other substances. Back in 2018, on The Joe Rogan Experience, he smoked marijuana live on air. That moment went viral, but looking back, it feels more like a stunt than a serious habit. He also used to frequent bars and high-end clubs, indulging in wine and whiskey—casual social drinking, nothing that suggests a dependency. Alcohol doesn't seem to be an issue for him.

If the ketamine claim is true, then at least he's claiming it's prescribed. But it makes you wonder—how much of this is genuine treatment, and how much is self-medication?

And then there's the bigger question—what about psychedelics? MDMA, psilocybin, and LSD—all of these are being explored for treating depression, PTSD, and anxiety. Did Musk ever dabble in those? And is there a family history of mental health struggles? If there's a familial link, it adds another layer to this story.

Musk has also used psilocybin to manage his mental state. And when it comes to PTSD and anxiety, Isaacson's biography paints a revealing picture. There are moments in the book where Musk reportedly shuts down completely.

When things get really bad, he doesn't just get upset—he becomes catatonic.

One scene in the book describes him lying on the floor of Tesla's boardroom, unresponsive, when things were falling apart. That's not just stress—that's someone mentally collapsing under pressure. But here's the paradox—every single time

Musk has hit rock bottom, he's bounced back even higher.

Isaacson describes these cycles as wild oscillations in Musk's mental state. One moment, he's in freefall; the next, he's rising to new heights. It's like watching someone dance on the edge of destruction, but somehow, he always finds a way out.

Jacobsen: Does that make him resilient? Or does it just mean he's constantly self-destructing and barely pulling himself back together?

O'Dowd: I have a saying about Musk:

To Elon Musk, words are sounds he makes to convince you to do his bidding.

That's how he operates. The words don't mean anything to him. When he says, "I promise," it's not a real commitment. It's just a sound—a tool he uses to manipulate people into action. And that brings us to the final question—does he even believe the things he says?

I'll give you a million dollars. I love you. Whatever. It doesn't matter what it is. Whatever it takes to get someone to do what he wants, he'll say it. But he doesn't connect those words to meaning. To Musk, words aren't promises—they're tools.

He doesn't see himself as committing to anything. He sees himself as making sounds that cause people to take action. Whether or not someone thinks he made a commitment—that's not his concern. He got what he wanted in that moment, and that's all that matters.

And because he's so confident he can talk out of any situation, he doesn't worry about the consequences. Sure, he gets into trouble sometimes. But every single time, he also gets out of trouble. So why would he stop? When you know you can say anything to anyone, anytime, and never face real consequences, why would you start caring about truth or integrity? You wouldn't. That's exactly where Musk is, which explains much about his operation.

Look at Autonomy Day. Tesla was in desperate financial trouble. So what did Musk do? He pulled together a spectacular story—completely made up—in just a few days and delivered it stone-faced. The entire audience believed every word, no matter how ridiculous it was. Some investors sued Tesla afterward, claiming Musk's statements were blatant lies designed to manipulate the stock price. But the judge dismissed the lawsuit. Why? Because the judge ruled

that no reasonable investor would believe what Elon Musk said. Think about that for a second. The court didn't say he didn't lie. The court said his lies were so preposterous that no rational person could have possibly taken them seriously.

And yet…they did believe him. Investors poured billions into Tesla after that speech. The stock soared. Tesla's valuation hit one trillion dollars. This is his superpower. He says utterly ridiculous things, and people believe him anyway. If you can do that, it's no surprise you're the richest man in the world. It's not even that hard when you're willing to say anything to anyone at any time to get what you want. Yes, sometimes it backfires. Sometimes it gets him into trouble. But he finds a way to talk his way out of it every single time.

You have to give him credit for that. And after enough of these moments—after escaping every single consequence—what happens? It starts to change your brain. You start believing your own myth. You start thinking maybe you are the emperor. Maybe the law doesn't apply to you. Because so far, it never has. Every time the legal system tries to hold him accountable, he finds a way to get a judge to throw the case out. Whenever people think, "This time he's gone too far," he walks away unscathed.

At some point, you start thinking it's all a joke. You start thinking you can stand in front of the President's podium, give a double Nazi salute on national TV, and still walk away untouched. Because so far…he has.

He might have actually reached the point where he believes he can get away with anything, and that's why he does these things. That's why he keeps succeeding—because he keeps making people's promises, and they keep giving him money.

Jacobsen: Then there are the stimulants. Musk has openly discussed his heavy caffeine consumption. But beyond that, he has also admitted to using Ambien (Zolpidem), a prescription sleep aid he reportedly takes regularly.

Of course, there are other speculations—whispers of additional substances. These remain unverified, and I won't wade into conjecture. Still, the known facts alone raise questions about his reliance on stimulants and sedatives, and what that balance—or imbalance—reveals about his lifestyle, performance, and state of mind.

O'Dowd: But here's what we do know: Musk has a history of substance use, extreme behaviours, and mood swings. His emotional state fluctuates wildly. When you combine that with what we discussed earlier—his habit of using words as tools to get what he wants—it starts painting a more complete picture.

Then there's his family. People who know him best have either insinuated or outright claimed that he has no real empathy—or, at the very least, blunted empathy. His mother, for example, once said that his brilliance is overshadowed by his lack of social graces or something to that effect. His father, though? That's a different story.

Errol Musk—Elon's father—is still alive, and he gives interviews. But Elon hates him. Musk has publicly called his father a horrible person. So, what do we make of that? Honestly, not much.

Because who do you trust? If Elon is a pathological liar, why assume his father is any better? Maybe both of them are unreliable narrators.

I've seen a few of Errol Musk's interviews, but he's not out there often. His mother, Maye Musk, on the other hand? She's very active online. She pops up on Twitter regularly, usually in defensive mommy mode, scolding people for saying mean things about her son. It's always the same: "Why are you attacking my boy? He doesn't deserve this." And Musk, in response, is basically like: "Mom, stop embarrassing me. I can handle myself."

But at the end of the day, his moods are erratic. His behaviour is unhinged. And when you think of him as a 13-year-old trapped in a billionaire's body, everything makes more sense.

Imagine this: a 13-year-old can deliver a speech to the entire country in front of world leaders, with cameras everywhere. What does he do? He jumps up and down, fidgeting, soaking in the attention. That's exactly what Musk does. If you compare that to someone like Donald Trump, you will see that Trump enjoys attention. He says outrageous things. But you don't see him literally bouncing up and down like an overexcited teenager.

Even in Trump's little dance routine—where he does the awkward YMCA shuffle—his feet never leave the floor. Musk, on the other hand? He jumps, throws his arms in the air, spins around. It's juvenile. Most adults don't act like that. If you just won the Super Bowl, maybe you get to go nuts. But in normal adult settings? You don't behave like that.

Musk never advanced past that stage. His social training stopped at 13; you can see it in everything he does.

And then there's Dustin Moskovitz, the Facebook co-founder. He had a moment of realization when he saw Musk's entire Tesla operation for what it really was. He finally connected the dots and said, "This is Enron. This is an outright fraud."

And when Musk responded? Oh, you have to see it. The tweet he sent back? It was peak Musk—so immature, juvenile, and 13-year-old-level petty. A typical 11-year-old wouldn't be sophisticated enough to pull it off, but a 13-year-old?

That's Musk in a nutshell. A 13-year-old with unlimited money, unlimited power, and zero accountability.

A 15-year-old would be embarrassed by this kind of behaviour. A real adult would never do it. No one would. Yet here we have the CEO of a public company, the richest man in the world, the head of multiple trillion-dollar corporations—and what is he doing? What is he posting on Twitter? The kind of juvenile, impulsive nonsense that no professional executive in history would ever think to engage in.

Connecting the Wild: Interview with Parks Canada's Christine Drake

2025/03/05

Christine Drake, Manager of Ecological Corridors and Heritage Rivers at Parks Canada, has spent more than 17 years shaping conservation policy across the country. Her expertise spans ecosystem preservation, the establishment of protected areas, and national park management. With a Master's degree in Forestry from the University of Toronto, Drake now leads efforts to expand and safeguard wildlife corridors—critical pathways that help species navigate increasingly fragmented landscapes.

In this conversation, Drake discusses Wildlife Corridors Canada and the pivotal role Parks Canada plays in ecological conservation. The agency has committed $1.3 million over two years to fund corridor projects in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Nationally, $7 million is being allocated across 11 projects, with NGOs contributing an additional $7.5 million—bringing the total investment to $14.5 million.

Parks Canada has pinpointed 23 national priority areas for conservation, with 10 already receiving direct support in seven provinces. Drake explains that funding allocations vary by project. For instance, the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute is working to protect 300 acres of vital habitat. More details on these initiatives **can be found on the Parks Canada website**.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Canada is a vast country with significant green space, making this an important topic to emphasize. Thank you for joining me today.

Christine Drake: Thank you for having me.

Jacobsen: For the ecological corridor projects in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, how much funding is being contributed by Parks Canada?

Drake: In Nova Scotia, Parks Canada is contributing $495,000 over the 2024–25 and 2025–26 fiscal years. In New Brunswick, Parks Canada is contributing $826,142 over the same two fiscal years. Altogether, this amounts to just over $1.3 million over two years for the two projects.

Jacobsen: How much inland water and land will Canada's government commit to conserving by 2030?

Drake: That question is best answered by Environment and Climate Change Canada, as they lead that file for the Government of Canada. The same applies to your next question.

Jacobsen: How many acres will the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute conserve via voluntary stewardship mechanisms?

Drake: The Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute aims to conserve at least 300 acres as part of its project through voluntary mechanisms, including conservation easements and land acquisitions.

Jacobsen: What is the total funding allocated to support ecological corridor projects across Canada?

Drake: Over $7 million is being contributed to 11 projects to support on-the-ground ecological corridor and connectivity work across the country. Additionally, environmental non-profits and

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will provide an extra $7.5 million through their own funding and partnerships. In total, this brings the investment in ecological corridors in Canada to nearly $14.5 million.

Jacobsen: Are there any noteworthy NGOs involved in these projects?

Drake: The two most recently announced organizations are Birds Canada and the Mersey Tobeatic Research Institute. A previous news release outlines all the other lead organizations receiving funding, which I can share with you.

Jacobsen: How many national priority areas has Parks Canada identified for ecological corridors?

Drake: Parks Canada has identified and mapped 23 national priority areas for ecological corridors. These are areas where ecological corridors are most urgently needed in Canada to conserve or restore connectivity. Improving or maintaining ecological connectivity in these priority areas will greatly benefit biodiversity conservation and help species and ecosystems adapt to climate change.

The priority areas for ecological corridors were identified over the last couple of years in collaboration with a diverse range of partners, experts, stakeholders, and the public. This process involved using national-scale data and several scientific assessment methods. An interactive map and more information about each of the priority areas for ecological corridors are available on the Parks Canada website.

Jacobsen: How many national priority areas will ground-based connectivity advance through approximately $7 million in contributions?

Drake: Funding from the National Program for Ecological Corridors supports on-the-ground work in 10 of the 23 national priority areas for ecological corridors. These projects are located in seven provinces: British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia.

Projects will advance ecological corridors in areas identified as nationally important for conserving or restoring ecological connectivity and strengthening the network of protected and conserved areas and natural habitats.

Jacobsen: Christine, thank you for your time today. I appreciate it.

Drake: No problem.

How Canada is Increasing Internet Coverage in Underserved Communities

2025/03/05

Since its launch in 2019, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) **Broadband Fund**has pledged more than $730 million to expand Internet access in over 270 communities, bridging the digital divide for households and essential institutions. Most recently, the CRTC allocated $14 million to CityWest Cable to construct 250 kilometers of fibre infrastructure across British Columbia and Yukon, a move that community leaders say will enhance local businesses and improve access to healthcare.

As the initiative evolves, the CRTC is refining its approach to better support Indigenous communities, introducing an Indigenous Stream designed to strengthen connectivity in historically underserved regions. Additional funding and policy updates are expected in the near future, signaling a continued push toward digital equity across Canada.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Which regions are targeted by CRTC's new fibre Internet initiative?

CRTC: The CRTC is an independent quasi-judicial tribunal that regulates the Canadian communications sector in the public interest. The CRTC holds public consultations on telecommunications and broadcasting matters and makes decisions based on the public record. Canadians need access to reliable, affordable, and high-quality Internet and cellphone services for every part of their daily lives.

Jacobsen: How is the CRTC facilitating high-speed fibre Internet?

CRTC: In 2019, the CRTC launched the Broadband Fund to help connect rural, remote, and Indigenous communities across Canada. Through its Broadband Fund, the CRTC contributes to a broad effort by federal, provincial, and territorial governments to address the gap in connectivity in underserved areas across Canada, including rural, remote, and Indigenous communities. The CRTC has held three calls for applications to its Broadband Fund, which resulted in over 700 applications. To date, the Broadband Fund has committed over $730 million to improve high-speed Internet and cellphone services for over 270 communities, connecting essential institutions such as schools, band offices and health care and community centres. This represents over 47,000 households and over 630 kilometres of major transportation roads. Further details are available on our **website**.

Jacobsen: What is the total funding allocated for this project?

CRTC: Most recently, on January 30, 2025, the CRTC committed over $14 million to CityWest Cable and Telephone Corp. to build approximately 250 kilometres of new transport fibre infrastructure to bring high-capacity transport services to the communities of Jade City and Good Hope Lake (Dease River) in British Columbia, as well as Upper Liard in the Yukon. The project will improve access to reliable and high-quality Internet service.

Jacobsen: What is the scope of the infrastructure development? Since 2019, how has the CRTC's Broadband Fund impacted rural, remote, and Indigenous communities?

CRTC: The project received support from the impacted communities. Letters of support emphasized the positive impact the project will have on daily life in these regions, including new opportunities for local businesses and improved access to health care.

A summary of these letters was **included** in Telecom Decision 2025-30:

CityWest provided evidence of direct notification to all affected communities and received letters of support, including from the 3Nations Society, a partnership between Tahltan, Kaska, and Taku River Tlingit First Nations (the Kaska Nation is made up of five Kaska First Nations, which cover two of the affected communities), and the Premier of the Yukon. The 3Nations Society stated that collaborative efforts with CityWest have fostered a sense of shared purpose, and it anticipates that this collective support will significantly contribute to the success of the project.

The Premier of the Yukon noted that dependable high-speed Internet can open new economic and social possibilities for Yukoners and support healthy, vibrant, and sustainable communities.

For further information on their views, we encourage you to reach out to them directly.

The CRTC continues to assess Broadband Fund applications and will make more funding announcements in the coming months.

Jacobsen: What benefits have the impacted communities highlighted in letters of support for this project?

CRTC: The CRTC is also continuing to make improvements to the Broadband Fund. In December 2024, the CRTC announced its first decision to improve the fund and to help advance reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. During its consultation, the CRTC received comments from 75 groups and individuals, including consumer groups, Indigenous organizations and governments, and Internet and cellphone service providers. As part of this decision, the CRTC is working to better support Indigenous applicants and communities by providing funding to build skills and support Indigenous-owned networks. The CRTC is also requiring applicants to engage meaningfully with Indigenous communities and provide proof of consent from any Indigenous community where they plan to build infrastructure. The CRTC will issue more decisions as part of its review and will launch the Indigenous Stream of the Broadband Fund later this year.

Jacobsen: What are forthcoming initiatives or policy revisions, including the Indigenous Stream of the Broadband Fund?

CRTC: As part of its broader efforts to improve Internet and cellphone services across Canada, the CRTC is taking action to help ensure residents of the Far North have access to reliable and affordable Internet services. The CRTC also created an Indigenous Relations Team to support Indigenous participation in its proceedings and ensure the distinct nature and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are considered across the CRTC's work.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

The Human Cost of 'Efficiency': A Conversation with Mandisa Thomas

2025/03/06

Mandisa Thomas is one of the most outspoken voices in America's secular movement. As the founder and president of **Black Nonbelievers**, she has dedicated her work to challenging the stigma surrounding nonbelief and amplifying the voices of African American atheists. Born and raised in New York City, Thomas grew up in a largely secular household, though she was surrounded by family members who adhered to various faiths. Her exposure to Christianity, Black Nationalism, Islam, and a range of world mythologies fostered an early skepticism, prompting her to question religious dogma from a young age.

In 2011, she launched Black Nonbelievers as a nonprofit committed to increasing the visibility of nonbelievers, particularly within Black communities. The organization, led predominantly by women and featuring strong LGBTQ representation, now boasts multiple affiliates nationwide, providing networking opportunities and support for those who reject religious faith.

In this conversation, Thomas weighs in on the sweeping impact of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), established under the Trump administration and spearheaded by Elon Musk. While billed as a cost-cutting initiative, DOGE has ushered in mass layoffs, gutted diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs, and revoked contracts under the guise of regulatory reform. Among those affected was Thomas's husband, Craig, a General Services Administration (GSA) officer with three decades of service who was abruptly laid off alongside many longtime employees.

Thomas argues that DOGE, along with the broader framework of Project 2025, is a calculated effort to dismantle government institutions while disproportionately harming minorities. She describes the Trump administration's actions as "shocking and unjust," criticizing what she sees as an administration willing to sacrifice workers' livelihoods with little regard for legal or ethical boundaries.

Though the administration claims DOGE has saved billions, independent analyses challenge these figures, and legal battles are mounting. Some Democrats have condemned the agency's sweeping authority, calling it an unprecedented expansion of executive power. "Before our very eyes, an unelected shadow government is conducting a hostile takeover of the federal government," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer warned on Monday. The agency is already subject to multiple lawsuits, including one filed by Public Citizen, the State Democracy Defenders Fund, and the American Federation of Government Employees, a union representing 800,000 federal workers. Plaintiffs argue that DOGE functions as an advisory body and should therefore be subject to federal transparency rules.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your husband has been affected by DOGE. What is his story, and how has it impacted his department and job?

Mandisa Thomas: Yes, my husband, Craig, had been a leasing contracting officer with the General Services Administration (GSA) since 1994. It has been his career for decades; he had that job before I met him, before we started our family. Unfortunately, his division and multiple

other federal offices were recently affected by the restructuring under the Department of Government Efficiency.

One thing that stood out was a message he sent through a family chat, in which he said: "It is surreal. Logic makes this all seem very off. As just one employee on a team of seven, I had 33 active projects, plus all of South Atlanta—not including my active FEMA assignment. And I was the only one with an unlimited security warrant. For my entire branch of 50 people—with at least 10 active projects—to be removed in one action is mind-boggling. While the people are gone, the work is still there. It is just unbelievable."

This demonstrates that this current administration cares nothing about the laws, procedures, and people who have to do the work to keep the government running. We saw it in Trump's first term, when he was impeached because he violated the Impoundment Control Act. He thought he could do whatever he wanted without consequences. But that's not how things in the federal government work, or at least how they're supposed to work.

The Trump administration's actions have been taken straight from Project 2025, a handbook created by conservatives (mainly the Heritage Foundation), which included dismantling the federal government and the federal workforce.

The problem is that none of this is making anything more efficient. It is causing mass instability. The immediate layoffs, firings, and the forced removal of career professionals from the federal government are not about efficiency or cutting costs. The administration had to create this structure through executive order because terminating career federal employees is difficult under normal circumstances. That's why they bypassed Congress, which controls the budget and created a workaround to push this agenda forward.

It's sad to see federal employees being forced out of their jobs when payroll expenses only make up a tiny fraction of the federal budget. By comparison, cutting these jobs does not save money —it's just a ruse.

Unfortunately, many don't understand the federal budget, how it works, or how the government operates in general. Because of this ignorance, people often vote against their own best interests.

Now, in addition to federal workforce reductions, we also see cuts to public services. Nothing about this is going to be efficient. Security, knowledge, and expertise are all required to run the government effectively, and the loss of these experienced professionals will cause everything to fall apart quickly. We are already seeing economic downturns due to tariffs, and with fewer employees available to keep the government operational, things will only get worse in the long term.

Unfortunately, so many federal employees are losing their livelihoods, and now our family is one of them.

Jacobsen: If you were to consider the perspective of an individual with children—between the ages of 5 and 15—who has a spouse and a similar job, how would that family's financial situation be affected?

Thomas: First of all, this is a day that no federal employee should ever have to experience, especially those who have dedicated years, even decades, to public service. Being a federal employee is not a welfare service. These individuals perform critical work, and their roles involve intricate processes that ensure the government remains lawful and efficient.

One of the reasons certain aspects of the government take time—although, of course, some areas could be improved—is that everything must be above board. Every action must follow legal procedures, and there cannot be mistakes or loopholes that jeopardize the system. This upheaval is devastating for federal employees with young children and families, who depended on the stability of these jobs until retirement. What are they supposed to do now?

And then there's the private sector. The job market is already highly competitive, and many federal employees—who often hold college degrees and specialized expertise—are now being forced into an uncertain future. You can imagine the confusion, shock, and fear these workers are experiencing because this was never supposed to happen in the public sector. The federal government operates very differently from private businesses, yet we have people with corporate mindsets coming in and dismantling it for their benefit.

Now, imagine a household where both spouses work in the federal government, and both jobs are suddenly at risk. What happens to their family? It's maddening. Honestly, I can only describe it as surreal. This was a career job—Craig's job is older than our children. And now, across the country, countless families are feeling the same shock, disappointment, and devastation.

Jacobsen: How do these layoffs affect federal employees differently, depending on where they are in their careers? On one side, there are recent college graduates—young professionals stepping into government service with the promise of stability and benefits, only to be blindsided. On the other, there are career public servants like your husband—seasoned professionals with decades of experience, suddenly cast aside just as they near retirement. In both cases, these workers find themselves unceremoniously dismissed, echoing the upheaval seen when Musk bought Twitter—mass layoffs delivered via abrupt emails, an indiscriminate purge of an entire workforce. What does this parallel reveal about the broader implications of these policies?

Thomas: Exactly. What's most tragic is that this administration is not valuing career public service. We've seen this in the private sector, where companies went bankrupt because CEOs mismanaged retirement funds, leaving long-term employees with nothing. But this federal government is funded by taxpayer dollars and should not be happening.

For someone like my husband, they couldn't fire him for job performance—he always had high-performance reviews. Instead, they used Reduction in Force (RIF) as the justification since they couldn't terminate him outright. And because of his years of service, they couldn't fire him immediately—they had to classify it as RIF, meaning severance packages are involved.

This is forced retirement—a mix of termination, layoffs, and an abrupt career end. Whether it happens to a veteran federal employee or a probationary new hire, it all feels equally bleak.

For individuals who were new to being a federal employee, this was supposed to be the start of a stable, long-term career. I can only imagine how heartbreaking and surreal this must be for them

—just as it is for the veteran employees who have been dedicated to public service for decades. Regardless of experience level or years of service, every one of these workers deserved the dignity of leaving on their terms, especially since they did nothing wrong.

Federal employees are not just government workers; they are taxpayers, too. Like every other working citizen, they contribute to the system. Their jobs are not handouts but essential positions that keep the government running. Yet, here we are, watching people who never voted for this administration lose their livelihoods alongside those who did support it and are now shocked to find themselves unemployed as well.

This crisis highlights not only a lack of public knowledge about how the government operates but also the cold indifference of this administration. They are profiting from public ignorance, using it to line their pockets while duping the American people into believing this is about efficiency when it is really about dismantling federal institutions for political and financial gain.

Jacobsen: In conversations with your husband, what are federal workers saying? Has he spoken with those who still have jobs versus those recently laid off? Are their perspectives different?

Thomas: One of my husband's longtime coworkers called him—on our youngest son's 16th birthday yesterday. She had been planning to retire in a year, but now the government has made that decision for her. It was still completely unexpected.

Even Craig, who is a person with a disability and a chronic illness, was only going to continue working for a few more years. Now, that choice has been taken away from him and countless others.

These were supposed to be jobs people could count on, jobs where employees could retire on their terms. Instead, we have people with privatized business mindsets who have already caused harm in the private sector, bringing that disruptive thinking into the federal government. It's causing chaos, upending lives, and having a devastating impact.

Jacobsen: From your husband's perspective—through your conversations with him over the years—there will always be some inefficiency or waste in any organization. However, efforts to reduce or streamline the workforce typically involve oversight and a more targeted approach— like a scalpel rather than a sledgehammer. Has your husband ever described how this administration's current approach to handling the federal workforce differs from previous ones?

Thomas: From the start, he has said that much of what this administration is doing violates the U.S. Constitution. He's worked through multiple administrations and experienced government shutdowns before—where employees were furloughed, then brought back to work with back pay. But this is unprecedented.

It's shocking and difficult to believe because, while there has always been talk about reducing the government workforce, having 2 million+ employees does not significantly impact the federal budget. The numbers don't justify the mass layoffs happening now.

The real issue is that Trump and his cabinet do not want people in government who understand or enforce the law. They don't want anyone telling them what is legal or illegal. They only want loyalists who will follow orders without question, no matter how unconstitutional they may be.

So, his biggest takeaway from all of this is simple: as someone who works in leasing, contracting policy, and federal law, this is illegal – period.

Jacobsen: It may still be too early for a comprehensive analysis, and I'm not sure if any has been conducted yet—I haven't looked. Of course, I have my own assumptions, but assumptions aren't evidence; they're speculation. Do we have any data on whether certain groups—young professionals, older workers, women, or minorities—are being disproportionately affected by these layoffs? Or is the impact more evenly distributed across the workforce?

Thomas: Right now, there is a disproportionate impact on minorities, especially Black employees in the federal government. While the firings are happening across the board, a large number of Black and brown employees—many of whom have spent decades in federal service—are being affected at a much higher rate.

This is particularly concerning because Black workers had to fight hard to secure these positions —especially in agencies like the Department of Defense (DoD). We just saw a four-star general fired, and the justification used was that he was a DEI hire, which is a coded attack rather than a legitimate performance-based decision.

Even though the policies don't explicitly state it, the language and execution of these layoffs disproportionately affect people of colour and people with disabilities. It's a rollback to when only certain groups had rights and access to stable government careers.

So, while sometimes the racist undertones are subtle, in other cases, they are blatantly obvious. This administration is making it clear who they believe should have power and who they consider expendable.

Jacobsen: How do you feel watching your husband suffer not just an economic hit but a personal loss? Far be it from me to agree with the Pope, but he was right about the dignity people find in work. What has your husband said about his sense of dignity and identity after 31 years in public service?

Thomas: I can only imagine how much this has affected his sense of dignity. Craig normally takes a significant amount of time to process change, so after 30+ years on the job, this is a serious adjustment. This is still very new—it only happened a few days ago—so he is still trying to figure out how to navigate it. I can't fully speak for him, even though I had been cautious and concerned about this happening long before it did. Now, we are focused on regrouping and maximizing his remaining paid leave while we explore our options moving forward.

As for me, I must keep working with Black Nonbelievers and my other projects. We have always supported our household and children together, but now, we must renegotiate and redefine our future under this administration. It's not going to be easy.

We take it one day at a time—that's all we can do. We are simply trying to keep our heads above water because that's exactly what it feels like. That's about all I can say for now.

Jacobsen: Thank you for your time, Mandisa.

Dan O'Dowd on Elon Musk's Empire of Broken Promises

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Dan O'Dowd is a world-renowned expert in developing software that is both fail-proof and impenetrable to hackers. His work underpins some of the most critical technological advancements in defense and aerospace, including the secure operating systems for Boeing's 787 Dreamliner, Lockheed Martin's F-35 fighter jets, the Boeing B-1B intercontinental nuclear bomber, and NASA's Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle. Since graduating from the California Institute of Technology in 1976, O'Dowd has been at the forefront of designing safety-critical systems and unhackable software, shaping the standards of modern cybersecurity over four decades.

In this conversation, O'Dowd takes aim at Elon Musk, dissecting the billionaire's lofty promises and self-mythologizing. Biographers **Walter Isaacson** and Ashlee Vance have described Musk's empathy as "warped"—a characterization O'Dowd expands on, arguing that Musk's ambitions, from Mars colonization to Tesla's vision for sustainable transportation and AI dominance, are less about innovation and more about marketing spectacle. He critiques Musk's pattern of revisionist history, reckless leadership, and a track record of grand promises that frequently go unfulfilled—such as Tesla's never-realized affordable car and SpaceX's ongoing struggles.

O'Dowd also challenges **Musk's self-proclaimed Asperger's diagnosis**, arguing that it serves as a convenient excuse for erratic behavior rather than a genuine explanation. He draws comparisons between Musk and cult-like figures such as Keith Raniere, suggesting that Musk's public persona is carefully crafted to mask his true motivations: power, control, and self-enrichment.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Regarding empathy, Walter Isaacson has outright stated that Musk lacks it. Ashlee Vance, another biographer who spent three years studying Musk's life, arrived at a similar conclusion. At the time of his research, Vance was a veteran journalist for Bloomberg Businessweek, and in 2015, he published *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future*. His assessment? Musk's sense of empathy is, at best, distorted—if it exists at all.

Vance put it this way: "Elon has the weirdest empathy of anyone I've ever encountered. He doesn't have a lot of interpersonal empathy, but he has a lot of empathy for humanity."

That statement alone is telling. If someone lacks interpersonal empathy—true, human-to-human emotional connection—can they really be considered empathetic? What they seem to possess instead is cognitive empathy: an intellectual understanding of emotions rather than a genuine emotional experience of them.

This distinction is one I've heard repeatedly from experts on narcissism and psychopathy. Figures like Musk don't experience emotions the way most people do; they recognize how emotions function, but only in a detached, strategic sense.

When Musk speaks of "humanity," he is speaking in abstraction, not in terms of individuals. And here's the problem: only individuals exist. The notion of "empathy for mankind" is, in reality, not empathy at all.

Dan O'Dowd: It's a sales pitch—a marketing tool to make his vision sound inspiring enough for people to join his cause. And that's the key: it's always about him being in charge. He doesn't care about humanity—unless he's running it. That's the only condition under which he's invested.

And we're not the only ones who see this. Sam Altman, CEO of **OpenAI**, once said: "Elon wants the world to be saved—but only if he can be the one to save it." That line stuck with me because it's completely true.

I don't think Musk experiences sympathy at all, and in some ways, that's one of his greatest strengths. He doesn't care about hurting people or the destruction he leaves behind. If you get in his way, he'll run you over without a second thought. You are not a person to him. You are an obstacle that needs to be removed.

And this is where I reject the idea that Musk's behaviour is due to Asperger's or autism. That's just another layer of fiction he's built around himself. Musk has claimed to be on the spectrum. Still, there is nothing in his personality that actually aligns with autistic traits. People with autism often struggle with social cues and norms. Still, they are also deeply loyal, morally driven, and emotionally intense. They don't manipulate people for sport. They don't fabricate realities to maintain control. They don't ruthlessly discard people the moment they are no longer useful.

What Musk exhibits is not autism. It's unchecked narcissism, sociopathy, and a pathological inability to care about anyone but himself. The idea that he's autistic is just another lie—another excuse—to explain away his callousness and cruelty.

Musk's claim of Asperger's is just another one of his excuses—a convenient way to justify his erratic behaviour and impulsive decisions. It gives him something to fall back on whenever he does something insane or socially inappropriate. He can say, "Oh, well, I have a diagnosis, so I sometimes say crazy things and act in funny ways. It's a condition—I can't help it." But that's not what's really happening.

The reality is that Musk never developed self-control. He never developed the internal mechanisms that most adults do. Everything about his behaviour suggests he is stuck at 13 years old. Everything is new and exciting, and everything is about instant gratification. He never learned about the real consequences of life. He has been sheltered in a way that most 13-year-olds are sheltered, but what happens between ages 13 and 18 for most people? They grow up. They face the real world. They learn that actions have consequences.

But Musk never had that moment. He never went through that transition. He has been frozen at that stage of development ever since. That's my personal belief—of course, I don't have a medical test for it, nor does he. But his supposed Asperger's diagnosis? It's another convenient excuse to deflect accountability and say, "Oh, I can't help it. That's just my condition." When, in reality, it's just his lack of self-control.

Jacobsen: Let's discuss Musk's so-called "visionary" ideas. For years, he has championed grand ambitions—making humanity a multi-planetary species, carrying the light of human consciousness into the cosmos, and expanding civilization beyond Earth. To his credit, he has remained consistent in promoting these ideals.

On the surface, it all sounds poetic, almost lyrical—language designed to inspire. But what is the true function of these statements? Are they genuine aspirations, or do they serve another purpose? Are they, in the end, just another tool of manipulation, carefully crafted to rally people behind him?

O'Dowd: The answer is obvious. These visions are completely fabricated. Some are ripped straight from science fiction books and movies that Musk read as a kid. Others are just marketing slogans designed to give people "precedents and superlatives," as he puts it, to motivate them. But none of them hold up under any level of scrutiny.

Take the Mars Colony idea—a million people on Mars. It's preposterous. No serious planetary scientist thinks this is remotely feasible. Mars has no oxygen, no water, and is freezing cold nearly all the time. These are big problems. You need air and water, and Mars doesn't have them.

Sure, some of these things could be manufactured—with enormous amounts of electricity. But where does that electricity come from? Unlike Earth, Mars doesn't have fossil fuels—there were no dinosaurs or trees 300 million years ago that could have turned into oil or coal. So, that's not an option. Solar power? Good idea—except Mars gets half the solar radiation that Earth does. That's not necessarily a dealbreaker, but it does make things harder.

And then there's the dust storms. Every so often, Mars gets a planet-wide dust storm that lasts for months or even years. Good luck keeping solar panels running through that. You'd need enormous battery storage—but even on Earth, we don't have battery technology advanced enough to store months of electricity. And we certainly wouldn't be able to ship that much battery capacity to Mars.

So now we're looking at no energy, water, or air. What are these one million people supposed to do? It's simply impossible. And then you get to the industrial problem. To sustain one million people, you'd need a full industrial civilization—semiconductor factories, plastics factories, concrete production. Oh, and guess what?

Mars doesn't have concrete.

Concrete is made from limestone, clays, and specific minerals that Mars lacks. So, how exactly do you build anything? And what about metal mining? Sure, there might be metals underground, but we don't know where they are, we don't have a way to find them, and we don't have the equipment to mine them.

It's absurd.

Then there's Optimus, the humanoid robot. Musk claimed that Optimus would end poverty and that every person on Earth would have everything they wanted because robots would do all the work. It's the same nonsense utopia every scammer has sold since dawn. But not everybody can have what Musk has. There isn't enough material on Earth to give every person a Gulfstream

G650 private jet, a mansion, and billions of dollars. The math doesn't work. It's logistically impossible.

Then there's Neuralink—which Musk claimed would cure paralysis and restore sight to blind people. It's just another Jesus-level miracle he's selling. The spinal cord repair claim? Completely ridiculous. The restoring vision claim? Utterly unproven. But Musk knows that if he says, "I can make the blind see and the crippled walk," he'll get people to throw money at him. It's a modern version of what revival preachers did in the 19th century—bringing people up on stage, "healing" them and collecting donations.

And then there's The Boring Company, which is supposed to revolutionize underground transportation. So, what has it actually done?

One tunnel in Las Vegas.

That's it. And what is this tunnel? It's just a small underground road where Teslas drive slowly in single file with human drivers. That's the entire achievement of The Boring Company after ten years.

This is the pattern. The Mars Colony? Fake. Optimus? Fake. Neuralink's miracle claims? Fake. The Boring Company? Useless. But people keep believing him. They keep giving him money.

Because that's his real skill. Not building things. Not designing things. Selling dreams.

Musk's xAI, the so-called cutting-edge AI company that can't even spell Pennsylvania correctly. And that's where we are now—none of this makes sense.

And let's not forget Tesla's so-called "Secret Master Plan." In 2006, Musk published what he called the "Secret" Master Plan—which wasn't actually secret. It was just another gimmick. He laid out a three-step vision for Tesla's future:
Step one – build the Roadster, an expensive sports car, and sell it to rich people. Step two – take those profits and build a mid-range electric car. Step three – use those profits to build a mass-market, affordable electric car.

It sounded like a brilliant long-term plan. Only one problem: It never actually happened.

Yes, **Tesla** built the Roadster. But Musk didn't invent it. He didn't design it. The actual founders of Tesla had already developed the Roadster prototype before Musk entered the picture. He didn't have the original idea and didn't do the engineering. But what did happen?

They shipped the Roadster, but they lost a lot of money on it. There were no profits to fund the next step. So what did Tesla do? Did they build an affordable electric car next? No. Instead, they built the Model S, a luxury electric car.

I bought one myself—for $105,000. I was among the first 2,000 buyers. That is not an affordable electric car. Even today, with government incentives, a Model 3 still costs $40,000+. That's mid-range at best, but it's not affordable for most people.

And what about Step Three—the truly affordable mass-market electric car? It was cancelled. It's in Isaacson's biography. Musk himself admitted it. He has since confirmed that Tesla will not make a low-cost electric car.

Why? Because he can't make any money off it. That's why he's not doing it. Tesla's whole purpose was supposed to be making electric cars affordable for the masses. That's how you transition the world to renewable energy for transportation. That's how you make a real difference. But after 17 years and a trillion-dollar company, Musk has given up on that mission.

Let's break this down: If only the rich could afford electric cars, how much of a real impact would EVs have on the environment?

If only 10% of the population switches to EVs, that's only a 10% reduction in emissions—right? No. Because 70% of the electricity grid still runs on fossil fuels. So the actual impact is 3% of 10%—basically nothing.

And the wealthy—the people most likely to buy Teslas—also have the biggest carbon footprints. They fly private jets, own multiple homes, and consume more energy than the average person ever could. So, even if all of them drive EVs, the net impact is minuscule.

This is why Tesla has failed its own mission. Musk was supposed to lead the world toward a sustainable transportation revolution. But instead, he's abandoning the idea of affordable EVs altogether.

But you know who isn't giving up? BYD.

BYD just released an $11,000 electric car. That's an affordable price almost anyone can afford, and it can change the market.

Musk had 17 years and trillions of dollars to do this. He didn't. BYD did.

If only the upper-class switches to electric cars while everyone else continues driving gasoline-powered vehicles, then we haven't solved anything. That applies to the U.S., where 70% of Americans still drive gasoline cars, and India, Africa, and the rest of the developing world, where billions rely on traditional fuels. Switching to electric vehicles only works if EVs become cheaper than gas-powered cars—or at least close enough in price to make switching a realistic option for the masses.

However, Musk's entire strategy has been the opposite. Instead of making affordable electric cars, he focused on luxury EVs. And make no mistake—Teslas are still categorized as luxury vehicles. So what is the point of an electric car company that makes less than 1% of the world's cars—only to be sold to rich people?

The real purpose of Tesla isn't to solve climate change—it's to sell wealthy people a badge of moral superiority. Tesla is a status symbol, a way for the rich to look down on the poor who still drive gas-powered cars and blame them for ruining the planet. But who actually consumes the most energy? The rich. They are the ones who fly private jets, own massive homes, and produce 5–10 times more carbon than the average person.

Tesla gives those same people an indulgence—a way to pretend they're helping when they are the problem. But by buying a Tesla, they can say, "I'm part of the solution." And Musk profits off of that guilt. It's not the poor farmers in India who are destroying the environment. It's the tech billionaires in Silicon Valley. But buy an electric car, and suddenly, you're the hero.

And now? Musk has abandoned the very mission that made Tesla famous.

For 17 years, he was celebrated worldwide as a visionary, a humanitarian, and a man paving the way for a greener future. But now? He's openly saying he won't build a truly affordable EV. His own employees at Tesla were plotting behind his back to modify the CyberCab into a $25,000 EV—something that could actually bring EVs to the masses. But Musk figured it out.

And what did he do?

He killed it.

Because the real money—the trillion-dollar valuation that keeps Musk at the top of the world—isn't in low-cost EVs. It's in the CyberCab RoboTaxi fantasy. That's what keeps the stock price inflated. That's what keeps investors dumping billions into Tesla.

So now, after 17 years, he's saying: "Actually, I'm not going to do the thing I built my entire reputation on. I won't make EVs accessible to the masses. Because I can't make enough money off of it." The mission that made him beloved, worshipped, and called a humanitarian? It's over. The only thing that matters to him now is the RoboTaxi scheme, which keeps him the richest man in the world.

Jacobsen: What about the claims of founding?

O'Dowd: Musk did not found Tesla. Legally, he won the right to call himself a co-founder—but only after suing the actual founders into financial ruin. The original Tesla team had already built a Roadster prototype before Musk even joined the company. He did not create the idea, engineer the product, or start the company. He invested $6 million and took over.

Same story with Twitter—he didn't found it; he bought it.

The Boring Company and Neuralink? Those were his projects.

SpaceX? That's one company where he was the founder—so credit where it's due.

But here's the thing—it shouldn't even matter. Whether or not he founded Tesla is irrelevant in the grand scheme. It matters to Musk, though, because to him, image is everything. His entire brand is built on being the "genius founder."

Jacobsen: So, what good can we say about Musk?

O'Dowd: He did play a role in accelerating the EV industry, that's true. But it wasn't because of his engineering brilliance—it was because he forced the auto industry to take EVs seriously.

That's the best you can say about him. He didn't invent EVs. He didn't create Tesla. He didn't make EVs accessible. But he did push the industry forward. But now? He's walking away from even that accomplishment.

When I bought a Roadster, it was the only electric vehicle on the market. There were no other EVs available to buy. So, in that sense, Musk did build something meaningful. And I've thanked him for that—I even wrote an official thank-you note, saying what a great idea it was.

It's given me 15 years of great entertainment. I drive that car every day, even in the middle of January. I take it through the hills, across the valleys, along the ocean, and into my office. It's fantastic. I love my Roadster, and I won't give it up. Actually, I have five Roadsters now—I forgot to mention that. Oops.

So, credit where it's due—the Roadster was great. And I've got to say, the Model S was pretty darn good too. It was electric. It worked. And it still works. We still have our Model S—my wife drives it every day. After 13 years, it's still going strong. That's not bad. It's a nice car—good size, range, solid build. It was a well-designed EV.

But Tesla never made money on it. It was too expensive, and not enough people could afford one. Then there's the Model X—which I don't think was a good product. And let's talk about those Falcon Wing doors—that was pure Musk. You can tell that was one of his stupid ideas. And it never worked properly. It was a gimmick, not a practical feature.

Now, let's talk about Starlink. It has been useful—once. Except for the one time we needed it, it dropped out. So, yes, that happened. It's also expensive. And the problem with Starlink? It doesn't scale well. They're launching massive amounts of satellites, but they can't effectively support large numbers of users. We'll see what happens with Starlink in the long term, but I'm not convinced it's a sustainable business model.

And then there's Starship. That thing keeps blowing up. Seven launches—seven explosions. That's his way of pushing forward with SpaceX, but at this point, it's trial and error—with many errors.

So, let's break this down.

Musk isn't going to fulfill Tesla's original mission of making affordable EVs for the masses.

For SpaceX, he thinks the key to getting to Mars is to build a Starship—but so far, it has failed.

And then you hear people say, "Musk is a genius because he built a rocket company." But did he really? No, he didn't invent the technology. He didn't design the rockets. What he did do was raise the money. He sucked in $20 billion in funding. And that is something.

But then you have to ask—if you gave someone else $20 billion, could they also build a rocket company?

We landed on the moon before Elon Musk was even born. I watched it happen—well, on TV, but still, it happened more than 50 years ago. We had a rocket called the Saturn V, capable of lifting over 100 tons into space. When Musk first proposed Starship, the original design was supposed to lift 300 tons—then that number dropped to 150—and now? It's down to around 100.

Jacobsen: So what, exactly, is Musk doing that hasn't been done before?

O'Dowd: The Apollo engineers built their rockets with slide rules and analog computers. They didn't have AI, supercomputers, or Musk's $20 billion war chest. And yet, they did it. Musk, meanwhile, is still blowing up prototypes.

Let's talk about Tesla's real founders because Musk's legal title as "co-founder" does not tell the full story.

Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning were the real founders of Tesla. Musk did not create Tesla. But through legal settlements, Musk secured the right to call himself a co-founder—even though Tesla already had a prototype Roadster before he got involved.

So let's be clear: Technically? Musk is legally a co-founder—because a court settlement allowed him to claim that title. Chronologically? He is not a real founder.

And Martin Eberhard has never held back his opinion on Musk. In an interview, he said that Musk was one of the biggest assholes he had ever worked with. And this wasn't coming from some random critic but from one of the actual Tesla founders. This guy has worked with many difficult people in Silicon Valley. That was his paraphrased, direct opinion of Musk.

Jacobsen: And what about the argument that Musk "works his ass off" to save companies?

O'Dowd: Some people—including those who worked with him—claim that sometimes, he does. In his biography, Walter Isaacson describes this phenomenon as "Demon Mode." Musk goes into a hyper-focused, problem-solving frenzy when things fall apart, pushing everyone around him to the limit. Isaacson might have quoted Kimbal Musk or one of Musk's close associates when describing this state.

But here's the thing—Demon Mode isn't genius. It's panic-driven chaos. It's not a sign of great leadership—it's a sign of a leader who lets everything spiral out of control, only to throw himself into the fire to put out the blaze he helped create.

There's a difference between being a great strategist and a reckless gambler who sometimes gets lucky. So yes—Musk does have moments where he grinds, works, and pushes through challenges. But they aren't a sign of discipline or stability—they're signs of desperation and damage control.

Because the truth is, he doesn't run companies well. He throws them into chaos, makes huge promises, and only occasionally pulls off a victory. And that's why he's been successful. Because when you don't care about rules, honesty, or people, you can play the game differently than everyone else.

And if you get enough money, you can keep betting big until something works.

Jacobsen: Did Musk found OpenAI, or was he just an early investor?

O'Dowd: He was an early investor and sat on the board. But did he found it? Well, he certainly claims to be the reason OpenAI exists. That's part of his usual revisionist history—whenever something succeeds, he inserts himself into the origin story.

When OpenAI needed funding, Musk helped fund the project. According to The Economic Times, he was listed as one of the co-founders when OpenAI was launched in 2015. But if you look at more reliable sources, like Euronews or

According to Wikipedia, the founding team included 12 people: Sam Altman, Greg Brockman, Ilya Sutskever, and others.

So yes, Musk was technically a co-founder but not the key operator. He was involved early, put in money, and left the organization when things didn't go how he wanted. And now? He spends

his time attacking OpenAI, claiming it has betrayed its original mission—even though he wasn't there to build it out.

And that's a pattern with Musk—being in and out of everything.

The Boring Company—did he found that? Yes. But did it go anywhere? No. It's still operating but has only drilled one tunnel in Las Vegas and a short tunnel outside the Tesla factory in Texas. That's it. It was supposed to revolutionize urban traffic but never built a high-speed tunnel system in Los Angeles, the East Coast, or anywhere else.

X (Twitter)? He didn't found it—he bought it.
Neuralink? Co-founder.
Zip2? Co-founder.
PayPal? Co-founder.

The Musk Foundation? Well, that's just a personal fund that builds houses for him.

Jacobsen: Wait—didn't Musk claim he had no houses?

O'Dowd: Yes, he claimed he sold all his homes. But here's the real reason he sold his properties: tax avoidance.

Musk was holding onto $40 billion in stock options. If he cashed them in while living in California, the state would tax him 13%—over $5 billion in taxes. So what did he do? He moved to Texas, a state with no income tax.

However, California has strict tax rules—they determine residency based on where you own property, where you spend time, and even whether you have a country club membership. If Musk had kept his house in California, the state could have claimed he was still a resident and taxed him accordingly. So, to avoid paying billions in taxes, he sold everything and moved to Texas before cashing out his stock.

So when he pretends he lives in a tiny rented house, it's not because he's a minimalist—he needed to ditch his California residency to avoid taxes.

That's the real story.

So, Musk had to sell all his houses quickly—he had five or six of them and offloaded them as quickly as possible. Why? Because he needed to get out of California before cashing out his stock options. He had to be physically in Texas before executing the sale, or California would take 13% of his $40 billion payout—$5 billion in taxes he was trying to avoid.

That's the real reason Musk sold his house and moved to Texas. But what did he say at the time? He framed it as some philosophical awakening, claiming he no longer wanted material attachments, houses slowed him down, and he wanted to be free. That was the public narrative. But the real story was simple: It was a business decision to escape California taxes.

Jacobsen: I've heard that lie before. After years of interviewing members of high-IQ societies and elite circles, I've noticed a recurring pattern. There's always the carefully curated public face —a façade of genius, altruism, or self-sacrifice. But beneath it? The real game is power, control, and self-enrichment.

Take Keith Raniere, for example. Have you heard of NXIVM or DOS?

What began as a multi-level marketing scheme in the U.S. eventually morphed into a sex cult—one that ensnared powerful and wealthy individuals. Raniere managed to con $150 million from the Bronfman sisters, heirs to the Seagram fortune, by convincing them he was a brilliant philosopher. He even manipulated his way into the Guinness Book of World Records for having one of the highest recorded IQs—an accolade that, at the time, was essentially self-registerable.

But he wasn't a genius. He lost that $150 million in the stock market because he had no idea what he was doing. Meanwhile, he was secretly running DOS—a group whose name, in Latin, means "master over slave." Disguised as a women's empowerment movement, DOS functioned as a recruitment pipeline, ultimately leading women into sexual servitude to Raniere.

And here's where the parallel to Musk emerges. Raniere meticulously cultivated an image of renunciation—a thinker above material desires, a philosopher unburdened by the trivialities of wealth or power. He presented himself as an ascetic, someone guided by ethics and higher purpose. And yet, behind closed doors, he was indulging in total control, coercing his followers, including celebrities like *Smallville* actress Allison Mack, into submission.

His downfall? Branding. Quite literally. His followers were burned—marked near their groins with his initials, as if they were cattle. That moment shattered the illusion. It led to his arrest, prosecution, and a prison sentence of over a century.

The pattern is clear. The public persona and the hidden reality rarely align.

O'Dowd: Musk pretended to be homeless—but it was just a legal and financial move. He pretends to be a humanitarian, but his actions contradict everything he stands for.

Jacobsen: Thanks so much Dan, I appreciate it.

O'Dowd: Thanks again. It's been fun.

Dan O'Dowd on Elon Musk's Hollow Pettiness

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Dan O'Dowd is a leading authority on software systems that are not only failproof but also impervious to hacking. Over a career spanning more than four decades, he has developed secure operating systems for some of the world's most high-stakes projects, including Boeing's 787 Dreamliner, Lockheed Martin's F-35 fighter jet, the Boeing B1-B Intercontinental Nuclear Bomber, and NASA's Orion Crew Exploration Vehicle. A graduate of the California Institute of Technology, O'Dowd has dedicated his career to pioneering safety-critical and unhackable software, setting industry standards in embedded security.

Beyond his technical expertise, O'Dowd has emerged as a vocal critic of **Tesla's approach to safety** and corporate accountability. He points to a troubling pattern of retaliation against those who challenge the company's practices. He highlights the case of Missy Cummings, a safety expert whose appointment to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) was reportedly blocked due to Elon Musk's influence. He also sheds light on the plight of Christina Balan, a former Tesla employee who was allegedly forced to resign after raising safety concerns. Whistleblowers within the company, O'Dowd argues, have faced severe repercussions—whether through legal battles, smear campaigns, or, in the case of former Tesla technician Martin Tripp, a false report that led to an armed police response.

O'Dowd further critiques Tesla's marketing tactics, arguing that staged product demonstrations for Full Self-Driving, the Cybertruck, and solar roofing systems have misled consumers and regulators alike. He warns that the company's pattern of deception, coupled with a lack of accountability, poses serious ethical and safety risks.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: On the topic of progress, I'd like to discuss Tesla's critics. What typically happens to those who have publicly scrutinized Tesla or its products? This isn't about Elon Musk's personality or politics, but rather about product-based critiques. When someone systematically evaluates Tesla's claims, gathers evidence, and reports on the real-world performance of its products, what kind of response do they usually face?

Dan O'Dowd: It depends, but there's a troubling trend. Let me give you an example. There's a woman named Missy Cummings, a former fighter pilot and a professor at Duke University. Her expertise lies in safety and automotive engineering, though I don't recall her specialty. About three or four years ago, she put a couple of her grad students on Tesla's Full Self-Driving beta program to evaluate it. They wrote up a report detailing how bad the system was, and the response was vicious.

She was inundated with attacks—vicious ones. We've got documentation of tweets sent to her. She was accused of being a porn star, among other absurd and offensive things. It was a ridiculous smear campaign aimed at discrediting her because she's an authoritative figure in her field.

Jacobsen: Did that affect her career or ability to continue her work?

O'Dowd: It did. At one point, NHTSA—the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration—tried to hire her. She's a respected expert, after all. However, Elon Musk called the heads of NHTSA and screamed at them, demanding that she be disqualified because, according to him, she was "biased" against Tesla.

The irony is that she was critical of Tesla because the product is terrible. Yet Musk essentially got to choose his regulator, saying, "This person can't oversee us because they're critical of our product." She was disqualified.

Jacobsen: What is she doing now?

O'Dowd: She works for the California DMV and attends a new university—though I don't recall which one. We've got all of that documented if you want it.

Another example is Christina Balan. She worked for Tesla and received an email from Elon Musk—not just her, but the entire company. The email said, "If you ever identify a safety issue, report it to your boss or whoever handles such matters—but also email me directly because I want to ensure it gets followed up."

If you sent safety concerns directly to Elon, the issues would be taken seriously. Employees knew that the responsible parties would be pressured to follow up once it reached Elon. One employee, Christina Balan, found a safety defect in the car. It involved the floor mats, which would curl up and potentially block the accelerator or brake pedal. She wrote a report, sent it to the appropriate department, and, as instructed, also sent a copy to Elon Musk.

The next day, she was called in and asked to "come with us." They put her in a room with no windows and interrogated her with security personnel present. She asked, "What is going on?" They accused her of claiming that Tesla was unsafe. She responded, "What? I was following instructions. I have the email that said to send safety concerns directly to Elon."

Jacobsen: What happened next?

O'Dowd: They told her she had to resign. She said, "I don't want to resign. I'm not leaving the company." But they insisted, saying, "You have to resign." According to her story—which, to be clear, I'm recounting as she told it—they then threatened to revoke the green card applications for everyone in her department if she didn't resign immediately.

Christina was an immigrant on an H-1B visa, and they used that as leverage. Essentially, they told her that not only would her green card application be jeopardized, but so would those of her colleagues. Under that pressure, she left the company. Since then, there have been numerous lawsuits, and it's turned into a gigantic mess. You can verify this. We have all the documentation.

Jacobsen: That's shocking.

O'Dowd: It gets worse. There's another case involving a former Tesla employee in Norway. To be clear, what he did was not legal, but it highlights internal issues at Tesla.

This employee was upset with Tesla over some unresolved matter—I don't recall the exact details—and decided to take a copy of Tesla's customer support database and send it to a European newspaper, Der Spiegel or another major European outlet. The newspaper started

digging through the database, and the findings were shocking. There were numerous documented cases of questionable practices.

For example, customer support employees were trained to gaslight customers who came in with complaints. If someone said their car wasn't achieving the advertised mileage per charge, the support staff were instructed to talk the customer out of filing a claim.

Here's the kicker: every time a staff member successfully persuaded a customer not to file a complaint, they'd ring a bell to celebrate. It was a culture of rewarding employees for dismissing legitimate customer concerns.

Jacobsen: That's appalling.

O'Dowd: Absolutely. There's more, too, like issues with the front axle. These problems and the culture around them have been documented in articles, and the fallout has been significant. There was a claim that the front axle on Model X vehicles could break. The regulators investigated and issued a recall in China, requiring Tesla to fix the problem.

When American regulators found out about the Chinese recall, they decided to open an investigation and potentially issue a recall in the U.S. Tesla, however, pushed back, saying, "No, we're not going to do a recall." Their argument? "That's bullshit. We were forced to do that in China. Those regulators hate us and want to put us out of business. It's unfair." Tesla denied any front axle or suspension issue, calling the entire claim "ridiculous."

Jacobsen: That's an incredibly toxic culture.

O'Dowd: It was, and the whistleblower paid a heavy price. He was blasted from all sides, received death threats, and his life was completely upended.

Another case involves Martin Tripp, who worked at Tesla's Nevada factory. He claimed significant waste and fraud was happening inside the company. Tripp leaked technical data to a reporter, which was likely illegal. Still, the reporter published a series of stories based on the information.

Jacobsen: How did Tesla respond?

O'Dowd: Tesla was furious. They read the stories and immediately tried to find out who the leaker was. They tapped employees' phones and conducted internal surveillance until they identified Tripp as the source.

Jacobsen: That's incredibly invasive.

O'Dowd: These cases highlight how Tesla deals with criticism—through aggressive tactics aimed at silencing critics and whistleblowers rather than addressing the underlying issues.

They eventually confronted him, though I'm unsure if he was officially fired. Regardless, it became a big issue, and Tesla was upset about it. What happened next was outrageous. Tesla allegedly told the police that Martin Tripp had threatened to return to the factory and "shoot the place up," which he hadn't.

Tripp, terrified, had holed up in a motel in Reno, Nevada because he feared for his safety. The police couldn't find him initially, so they put out a BOLO—"Be On the Lookout"—for a potential shooter.

Jacobsen: How did they figure out where he was?

O'Dowd: That's the questionable part. It's speculated that Tesla told the police where Tripp was hiding, but how did they know? Most likely, they had hacked his phone or used some other surveillance method to track him down.

There's a podcast series—three or four episodes—dedicated to investigating Musk's tactics, including accusations of spying on critics, stalking them, and gathering personal information about anyone who speaks out against him. From what I've heard, the reporting on this is very thorough.

Jacobsen: What happened after they located him?

O'Dowd: Tesla informed the police that Tripp was holed up in a specific motel room in Reno. The SWAT team was deployed, with officers arriving armed and ready, fingers on triggers, under the impression that Tripp was a dangerous shooter planning to attack the factory.

They dragged him out of the motel room. He was crying as they pulled him out, understandably terrified. Thankfully, the officers didn't shoot him, but this was effectively a case of swatting. Filing a false shooter report like that is incredibly dangerous—it could have easily ended in someone being killed.

Jacobsen: That's horrifying.

O'Dowd: What Tripp did was wrong—he took proprietary data from Tesla and gave it to a reporter, which he shouldn't have done. But swatting someone, putting their life at risk like that, is far worse. All it takes is one overanxious officer pulling the trigger for it to end in tragedy.

Jacobsen: Were there other incidents like this?

O'Dowd: Another one involving Elon Musk when he took over Twitter. When Musk took over Twitter, the "Trust and Safety Team" was in place. It was a euphemism for censorship—deciding what content could stay up and what needed to be taken down. When Musk bought Twitter, he initially didn't fire the team's head. Musk publicly praised him, saying he was a great guy doing a fantastic job and that he'd keep him around to continue his work.

However, as Musk started implementing new policies, the dynamic changed. The guy, realizing he no longer fit in, quietly left. He didn't make a scene, didn't badmouth Musk, didn't go to the press. He wanted to move on, find another job, and start fresh.

Jacobsen: That seems like a reasonable approach.

O'Dowd: You'd think so. But Elon, being Elon, had a fit. He got pissed off and sent the hordes after the guy. Suddenly, the man was being harassed—people showed up at his house, issued threats, and made him fear for his safety. It got so bad that he had to move. He left his home and relocated to escape the storm Musk unleashed.

Jacobsen: That's extreme.

O'Dowd: It is. And the ironic part is that this guy wasn't looking to cause trouble. He wasn't like others who went to the press with accusations or tried to stir things up. He just wanted to leave quietly. But Elon, true to form, made it personal and turned it into a crisis.

Jacobsen: This behaviour seems to be a recurring theme with Musk.

O'Dowd: During his recent drama involving lawsuits—or "lawsuit, no lawsuit, lawsuit, no lawsuit"—Sam Altman publicly said on a prominent news show, "Elon is a bully." Altman also listed several prominent figures in the tech space who have been victimized in similar ways. Musk's behaviour—getting into fights, chasing people down, and harassing them—seems entirely in character.

Jacobsen: Do you have examples of Musk acknowledging this kind of behaviour?

O'Dowd: He's made some chilling statements. One of his tweets reads, "There is a large graveyard full of my enemies." Another says, "I don't start fights, but I always finish them." These are classic mafia-don-style threats, and they reflect his approach to conflict.

Jacobsen: Is it true that Tesla has been involved in hundreds of lawsuits ranging from alleged fraud to labour disputes?

O'Dowd: Yes, I believe that's true. I don't have an exact count, but Tesla has been sued for fraud, labour disputes, safety issues, and other issues. The number of lawsuits is likely staggering.

Jacobsen: How do Elon Musk's political affiliations, along with customers' discomfort with some of these perceived or actual affiliations, impact Tesla's image and, therefore, its sales? We discussed this earlier, but I'd like to explore it further.

O'Dowd: It's clear that the people most likely to buy an electric car are typically liberals, environmentally conscious individuals, and those concerned about climate change. That's been the core demographic. These customers wanted an alternative to gas-powered vehicles. When Elon Musk delivered an electric car, they lined up to buy it and were happy with their purchases.

But now, Musk's recent opinions—opinions he's been moderately open about—are creating friction. For example, he has said publicly that he voted for Biden and was a Democrat, supporting environmental causes and the reduction of CO_2 emissions. But recently, he's made comments that contradict those earlier positions.

Jacobsen: What kind of comments?

O'Dowd: He's said things like, "We shouldn't be so hard on oil and gas companies because without them, we'd be doomed." He's also pointed out that most electricity used to power electric cars comes from the electric grid, which still relies heavily on fossil fuels. Essentially, he's suggesting that if everyone switched to electric vehicles tomorrow, the grid wouldn't be able to handle the demand. We'd need to build many more power plants—many of which would still burn fossil fuels.

These comments represent a shift in his public stance, and they've alienated many of his earlier supporters. The people who once saw him as a champion of environmentalism are now questioning his motives and direction. Some are saying, "I don't recognize this guy anymore. I don't support anything he's doing."

Jacobsen: Twitter is another factor that's caused controversy.

O'Dowd: The acquisition caused much backlash when he bought Twitter, but let's set that aside for now. He fired half the staff on day two—or shortly after taking over. There couldn't have been enough time to do any meaningful analysis to determine who should stay and who should go.

Typically, a manager would take at least a day or two to review team structures, evaluate performance, and decide who to retain. Musk didn't bother. He sent an email to the entire staff with two options: Check the first box to agree to work 80 hours a week, be "super hardcore," and spend at least 40 hours a week in the office. Check the second box to accept a three-month severance package and leave the company.

Thousands of employees were fired this way without any real review or evaluation. Within a few months, Musk cut 75% of Twitter's workforce.

Jacobsen: That's a staggering number.

O'Dowd: It is. And what's interesting is that he made these drastic cuts so quickly, without regard for the platform's long-term implications or immediate functionality. It wasn't just controversial—it was unprecedented.

Jacobsen: How did Elon Musk make those decisions and implement such drastic changes on Twitter?

O'Dowd: It's interesting. There's a theory supported by some recent evidence: Musk may have relied heavily on employees with H-1B visas or those on green card pathways because they couldn't leave.

Here's how it works: If someone is on an H-1B visa or in the green card process leaves their company—whether by quitting or being fired—they must start over. They need to find another company willing to sponsor them, fill out all the paperwork again, and reset the clock on a process that takes three to five years. Essentially, they're stuck.

The theory is that Musk rebuilt Twitter around these employees because they didn't have the option to leave. When he told them to work 80 hours a week, they responded, "I'll do it until I get my green card, and then I can quit." They were too invested in the process to walk away, so they had no choice but to comply.

Jacobsen: That's a pretty grim strategy.

O'Dowd: It is. This approach is in stark contrast to how Twitter used to operate. Before Musk, Twitter focused on making employees as comfortable as possible—offering generous time off, flexible work conditions, and various perks. Musk eliminated all of that within days.

It was a complete cultural overhaul, similar to Donald Trump's issuing executive orders. Musk essentially rewrote Twitter's playbook, cutting perks, firing thousands, and demanding extreme work hours. Despite widespread complaints and staff departures, the company is still alive, but the workplace culture is now unrecognizable.

Jacobsen: It reflects his broader, "brutal" approach to leadership.

O'Dowd: This "brutal" approach isn't limited to Twitter. Tesla has faced significant labour issues, including sexual harassment allegations. Musk has made some telling statements about lawsuits. At two different times, he's said something like this: "We would never settle if we were not guilty, and we would always settle if we were guilty."

Jacobsen: That's quite an admission.

O'Dowd: It is. By Musk's logic, if Tesla settles a case, it implies guilt. Take, for example, the case involving a private jet flight attendant who alleged Musk asked for a sexual massage after a regular massage. She claimed he offered her a horse in return. Tesla ended up settling the case.

Jacobsen: And people pointed to his earlier statement, right?

O'Dowd: Many people concluded, "Well, if Musk says they'd never settle unless they were guilty, then settling this case makes them look guilty." Whether or not that's the whole story, it certainly doesn't help Tesla's image.

Jacobsen: Based on Musk's statements, if Tesla wanted to avoid the appearance of guilt, they would need to fight lawsuits to the end instead of settling. But Tesla has faced numerous complaints.

O'Dowd: There have been countless complaints, particularly about harassment. There are also ongoing lawsuits related to racial discrimination, and if you read those complaints, they're horrifying. It's like reading about 1950s Alabama or 1980s apartheid. I'm serious—you need to read them.

Jacobsen: That bad?

O'Dowd: Yes. State-level and federal complaints have been filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The allegations are shocking, and the cases are still ongoing. It's been years, and nothing has been fully resolved yet.

Jacobsen: What about data privacy concerns? In 2023, there were lawsuits about Tesla employees allegedly sharing sensitive videos and images captured by customers' car cameras. Do you have any reflections on this issue?

O'Dowd: Yes, those reports are true. Tesla vehicles have eight cameras, which are always recording. The company can turn those cameras on at any time. Employees had access to the footage, and when they found something they thought was "fun" or "interesting," they shared it internally.

Jacobsen: What kind of footage are we talking about?

O'Dowd: It ranged from bizarre to deeply invasive. For example, there were videos of people having sex in their garages or even inside their cars. There were also videos capturing private conversations and other personal moments. Because the cameras always record in all directions, they also pick up nearby activities, like people walking or interacting near the car.

In some cases, the footage included horrific car crashes—sometimes not involving the Tesla itself, but incidents the Tesla's cameras witnessed. Employees reportedly shared videos of these crashes, including those where people died. These videos circulated internally within Tesla, though I don't recall if there were allegations of employees sharing them outside the company.

Jacobsen: That's a serious breach of privacy.

O'Dowd: The fact that employees had access to such sensitive and personal footage—and could share it casually—raises major concerns about internal controls and data privacy at Tesla.

Putting eight cameras on your car is a problem—someone is always watching. In China, Teslas were restricted from certain government buildings because officials expressed security concerns that the vehicles' external cameras could be used for surveillance. The Chinese government, citing national security risks, decided to limit Tesla vehicles near sensitive sites.

Jacobsen: Many ambitious or overhyped targets and delivery dates often fail to be met. Based on your analysis and expertise, Tesla's Full Self-Driving (FSD) is the quintessential example. However, there have also been significant delays in Model 3 production and solar-powered Superchargers. Specifically, in terms of marketing and business ethics—what are your thoughts?

O'Dowd: Yes, **Tesla has missed many deadlines**. The solar-powered Superchargers are a good example. Initially, Musk claimed they would be implemented. However, people pointed out that using electricity from the grid still meant relying on fossil fuels, which undermined the environmental benefit. In response, Musk stated, "No, no, no. We're going to use solar panels to charge at the Superchargers." However, only a handful of Supercharger locations have been equipped with solar panels, and they generate a fraction of the required energy.

A large solar array would be necessary to fully power a Supercharger station, likely requiring an acre or more of panels to provide sufficient energy. Thus, the promise of widespread solar-powered Superchargers was significantly overstated.

Another example is Tesla's solar roof. This is a somewhat complex story, but SolarCity—a company in which Elon Musk was the largest shareholder—was struggling financially. His cousins, Lyndon and Peter Rive, were running a business that was losing money on solar panel installations. The company was on the verge of collapse, which would have reflected poorly on Musk. To prevent this, Tesla acquired SolarCity in 2016, a controversial move among investors, as it bailed out a financially unstable company.

To promote the concept of Tesla's solar roof, Musk staged a demonstration on the set of *Desperate Housewives* at Universal Studios. The event showcased what appeared to be functioning solar roof tiles. Still, later reports suggested that the display tiles were not operational. The idea was to create roofing materials integrated with solar cells, eliminating the

need for traditional panels mounted on top of roofs. While Tesla does sell solar roof tiles, their production and installation have been slow, with significant challenges in scaling the technology.

So you didn't have to have a roof and then put solar panels on it. Instead, you tiled the roof with these solar tiles, which were supposed to be cheaper, faster, and revolutionary.

When Musk inspected the prototype, he told them to build a solar roof, but they had no idea what he was talking about. They improvised something hastily, and when he saw it, he said, "This looks terrible. You can't put this on a roof." Aesthetics are important to him, so he immediately rejected it.

He then instructed his team to fabricate something entirely fake—ceramic tiles with no solar capability whatsoever—no wires, no photovoltaic cells, nothing. These were just ceramic tiles in various interesting colors. He ordered the entire *Desperate Housewives* set—six houses or so—to be reroofed with these fake tiles to showcase his "great new solar roof" concept, which he claimed would revolutionize solar installations worldwide.

Musk announced that Tesla would produce 5,000 of these per week or some other exaggerated number. He invited the press—all the business and technology media—and unveiled his big revelation. He declared, "Look at these houses. These are the solar panels of the future." The media ran with it, publishing glowing stories about how this would change the world.

But all the roofs were fake. The solar panels were fake—completely. That entire event is documented in *Elon Musk*, the biography by Walter Isaacson. There's a whole section in the book that covers this. The entire thing was fabricated.

When Musk ordered the tiles to be installed, his team did not follow his instructions blindly. Instead, they installed a single roof with real prototype solar tiles—the ones they were actually working on. But when Musk arrived for the inspection before the event, he looked at them and said, "What the hell is this? These look terrible." When told they were the real solar tiles, he ordered them removed immediately and replaced with fake ones.

So he knowingly swapped out non-functional prototypes—at least an attempt at a real product—for completely fake tiles for showmanship. It's the same pattern with Tesla's humanoid robot, Optimus. At its unveiling, people in robot suits performed behind Musk. It was totally staged.

That's how he operates. Every demo is a fake.

I almost forgot—the Cybertruck. I have to say, when I first saw it, the demonstration was impressive. Musk wanted to race a Porsche 911 against the Cybertruck. A real sports car versus an electric pickup—who would win? So, he set it up, filmed the whole thing, and put on a big show.

The surprising part came when the Cybertruck beat the Porsche in a quarter-mile race. It looked incredible. Then, the camera panned out, and the big reveal happened—the Porsche 911 was towing another Porsche 911. That's right. A Cybertruck towing another vehicle supposedly beat a standalone Porsche 911 in a drag race. It was an impressive stunt, and it got press coverage worldwide. People were calling the Cybertruck revolutionary.

But then the details started coming out. First, the Porsche 911 they used was reportedly one of the cheapest, weakest models available. Second, Musk claimed it was a quarter-mile race, but it wasn't—it was an eighth-mile. Once people analyzed the footage and reconstructed the distance, they realized the deception. What is the reason for calling it a "quarter-mile"? Because that's the standard measure for drag racing. An eighth mile isn't the same, but he had to claim to add legitimacy.

Why shorten the race? Because in a full quarter-mile, the Cybertruck loses. They must have tested it and realized it couldn't beat the Porsche over that distance. So, they adjusted the race to an eighth mile—just enough for the Cybertruck to pull ahead while towing. It was completely misleading. Later, real Porsche 911s, driven properly, easily outperformed the Cybertruck in actual drag races. The entire thing was a staged marketing stunt designed to make the Cybertruck look like the fastest truck on the planet.

Then there was another fake test—a Cybertruck versus a Ford F-150 in a tug-of-war. They showed the Cybertruck dragging the F-150 backward as if it were effortlessly superior. However, there was a major problem: Tesla used a two-wheel-drive F-150 against a four-wheel-drive Cybertruck. Once someone brought in a proper four-wheel-drive F-150 for the same test, it outmatched the Cybertruck. Again, this is another staged demo—completely misleading.

Everything was fake—all fake.

Then you have 2016—the infamous **Full Self-Driving** (FSD) announcement. Elon Musk tweeted, "Here's a video of a Tesla driving itself from a house to an office—no human input— navigating surface streets, highways, and even parking itself." The video made it look like FSD was already a reality.

Years later, during a lawsuit, the head of Tesla's FSD engineering was put under oath in a deposition. He was asked about that video. His response? The test Tesla used to film the video crashed into a fence. They had to cut that footage out.

The car wasn't truly driving itself—it was a carefully curated and edited presentation. They had staged the entire thing to make it appear functional, even though the technology wasn't there.

They did dozens and dozens of runs. They took clips where the system didn't fail, cut out the mistakes, and pieced together a fake drive that looked like the car could go autonomously from Point A to Point B. They removed all the parts where it failed, used camera cuts to hide errors, and manufactured the illusion that Full Self-Driving (FSD) was fully operational.

Seven years later, we tried the same thing. Within 100 yards, the car got stuck on the sidewalk. It decided to drive up the curb, got stuck, and failed repeatedly. There was no way the technology worked as advertised in that original video. It was a complete lie.

Even the head of Tesla's own FSD engineering team later admitted it. Musk had called him and said, "I want a video of how great Full Self-Driving will be someday. I know it doesn't do everything today—we're fixing that—but I want a video of what it will look like in the future."

So, the engineers put together what they thought was a concept video—a vision of the technology's potential. But when Musk got it, he released it as reality, claiming this was what

FSD could already do. The engineers had been misled, thinking they were making a prototype demo, and Musk sold it as a finished product. The entire thing was a fraud.

That was Full Self-Driving. Then there was the robot, the solar roofs, the Cybertruck tug-of-war, the quarter-mile race, and Optimus folding a shirt.

That was a good one. Musk posted a video of Optimus, the humanoid robot, folding a shirt. The idea was that these robots could eventually work as household assistants—cleaning, organizing, and doing chores. The video made it look like Tesla had built a breakthrough AI-powered robot capable of delicate, precise tasks.

Then, people took a closer look. Someone noticed a human hand in the lower-left corner of the frame, moving in perfect sync with Optimus. They had put a guy in a haptic suit, directly controlling the robot's movements in real-time. Optimus wasn't folding the shirt—the human was. The entire demonstration was staged—another complete fake.

Everything Musk does is fake. Every major product launch includes some misleading demo. It's incredible. Every time Tesla unveils something new, it looks groundbreaking—until you realize it doesn't work as shown.

And yet, he's still standing. How many SEC violations is this? How many consumer fraud cases? He tells people that the product exists, that it works today, and that they can buy it now. Customers pay, and then—nothing. None of it works as promised. It's astonishing.

And that's not even getting into the other problems—like allegations of workplace discrimination and safety violations.

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Author Biography

Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These interviews include scientists and philosophers, activists and public intellectuals, addressing themes such as secular ethics, freedom of expression, evidence-based policymaking, and the global defence of human rights. His work appears regularly in peer-recognized outlets, including *The Good Men Project*, *International Policy Digest* (ISSN: 2332–9416), *The Humanist* (Print: ISSN 0018-7399; Online: ISSN 2163-3576), Basic Income Earth Network (UK Registered Charity 1177066), *A Further Inquiry*, Canadian Humanist Publications (CA Registered Charity 118833284 RR 0001), *Uncommon Ground Media* (UK Registration 11836548), The New Enlightenment Project, *News Intervention*, *Canadian Atheist*, Trusted Clothes (CN: 9562184; BN: 791402928RC0001), among dozens of others.

Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought with over 10,000 . Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.