# International Policy Digest 2:

## Authoritarian Backlash, Human Rights, and Global Accountability

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Foreword by John Lyman

# IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

# International Policy Digest 2: Authoritarian Backlash, Human Rights, and Global Accountability

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

June 25, 2026

# Foreword: John Lyman

There is a peculiar temptation in periods of upheaval to view every crisis as an isolated event. A war erupts in one corner of the world. Democratic institutions falter in another. A new technology disrupts long-established norms. Human rights abuses emerge, seemingly disconnected from broader political currents. Yet history rarely unfolds as a collection of unrelated incidents. More often, crises reveal deeper patterns that bind societies together across borders, cultures, and political systems.

That reality is what makes this collection so valuable.

In *International Policy Digest 2: Authoritarian Backlash, Human Rights, and Global Accountability*, Scott Douglas Jacobsen assembles a remarkable series of conversations and reports that collectively illuminate the defining tensions of our time. Spanning multiple continents and a wide array of subjects, these interviews and essays explore not only the visible manifestations of political and social conflict but also the underlying structures that produce them.

The individuals featured in these pages come from vastly different backgrounds. They include human rights advocates, scholars, policymakers, activists, journalists, survivors, and public intellectuals. Their concerns range from democratic backsliding in South Korea and the consequences of technological disruption to the ongoing struggle for justice in war-torn regions and the persistence of discrimination, inequality, and political repression. Yet despite the diversity of topics, a common thread runs throughout the volume: the question of accountability.

Who holds power accountable when institutions fail? How do citizens defend democratic norms when authoritarian tendencies emerge within elected governments? What happens when technological innovation outpaces ethical oversight? How can societies confront historical atrocities while preventing new ones? And perhaps most importantly, what role does civil society play when formal mechanisms of accountability prove insufficient?

These are not abstract questions. They define the political landscape of the twenty first century.

One of the strengths of Jacobsen's work is his willingness to engage directly with those confronting these challenges on the ground. Rather than presenting a singular ideological framework, he allows his subjects to articulate their experiences, disagreements, and aspirations in their own words. The result is a collection that values inquiry over certainty and complexity oversimplification.

That approach is particularly important in an era dominated by polarization and information overload. Public discourse increasingly rewards certainty, outrage, and ideological conformity. Nuance often becomes a casualty of political tribalism. Yet meaningful understanding requires precisely the opposite. It demands careful listening, intellectual humility, and a willingness to examine uncomfortable realities even when they challenge our assumptions.

Throughout this volume, readers will encounter stories of resilience alongside stories of failure. They will see examples of democratic institutions under strain and examples of ordinary individuals organizing to defend them. They will encounter evidence of human cruelty but also

examples of extraordinary courage. This balance is essential. A world viewed only through the lens of catastrophe can produce cynicism and resignation. A world viewed only through the lens of optimism risks ignoring the dangers before us. Jacobsen's collection navigates between these extremes.

The timing of this book is especially significant. Across much of the world, confidence in democratic institutions has weakened. Authoritarian movements have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of media, technology, and cultural grievances. Disinformation spreads with unprecedented speed. Political violence and repression continue to threaten vulnerable populations. At the same time, new generations of activists, journalists, scholars, and citizens continue to push back against these trends, often at considerable personal risk.

This struggle is not confined to any single nation. It is global in scope and local in consequence. The questions explored in these pages affect established democracies and emerging ones alike. They touch questions of governance, identity, justice, technology, economics, and human dignity. In doing so, they remind us that democracy is not a permanent achievement but an ongoing project requiring constant vigilance and renewal.

Books such as this serve an important function. They preserve testimony. They document debate. They capture moments that might otherwise be lost amid the relentless pace of contemporary events. Future readers may look back on these conversations not merely as commentary on a particular period but as evidence of how individuals and institutions grappled with profound uncertainty.

At its best, journalism creates a first draft of history. At its best, public inquiry helps societies understand themselves. *International Policy Digest 2* accomplishes both. It offers readers a panoramic view of a world confronting old dangers in new forms while reminding us that accountability, however imperfect, remains one of the essential foundations of a free society.

The interviews and essays that follow do not provide easy answers. Nor should they. Their value lies in asking the right questions and preserving the voices of those working to answer them. In an age increasingly defined by competing narratives, that task may be more important than ever.

— John Lyman

Editor-in-Chief

International Policy Digest

# How South Korean Feminists Are Resisting the Conservative Tide

2025/03/17

Founded in 1987, the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU) emerged as a coalition of women's rights groups committed to advancing gender equality, democracy, and social justice in South Korea. Over the decades, KWAU has been at the forefront of major legal and policy victories, from the abolition of the patriarchal Hoju family registry system in 2008 to the implementation of gender quotas in politics and stronger protections against sexual and domestic violence. However, as South Korea's political landscape shifts, so do the challenges facing the feminist movement.

With conservative governments pushing back against gender policies, KWAU has recalibrated its strategy—emphasizing public awareness campaigns, international solidarity, and grassroots organizing to sustain the momentum for women's rights. Kyungjin Oh, former Executive Director and now Vice Chair of KWAU's International Solidarity Center, speaks to the movement's latest battles: a growing anti-feminist backlash among young men, the country's record-low birth rate, and the broader rollback of gender equality under conservative leadership. Despite mounting opposition, KWAU remains steadfast—mobilizing intergenerational feminist activism, leveraging UN advocacy mechanisms, and rallying national support to assert that gender equality isn't just a political stance but common sense.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Can you start by giving some of your background?

**Kyungjin Oh:** I began my activism career in 2014. After two years of experience working with the Korean Women's Political Solidarity, a member organization of KWAU, I moved to KWAU in February 2016. So, I have been working with KWAU for more than nine years. Since my recent transition, I would like to briefly introduce my new role before moving on to the main questions.

We are increasingly focusing on international solidarity and activism, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. Although feminist issues are diverse globally, we are working to amplify women's voices from Asia-Pacific countries.

KWAU has a strong tradition of women's organizing. Many women's rights organizations in the Asia-Pacific region look to KWAU's experiences to learn how to build strong organizations and effectively mobilize women's voices nationwide, as we have done for more than 37 years.

We are trying to share our organizing experiences and build solidarity and a network among the Asia-Pacific countries. I will strengthen the women's network in the region. One organization is APWLD—the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development.

APWLD is also an umbrella networking organization comprising more than 200 women's rights organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. KWAU plays a major role in organizing women's networks in the Asia-Pacific region.

Additionally, we are engaged in many advocacy activities directed at the United Nations. For example, at the domestic level, it has become increasingly challenging to raise women's voices

under the current South Korean government, which is opposed to feminist values and women's organizations' activities.

So, we are utilizing UN mechanisms to strengthen our advocacy at the domestic level by gaining international recognition and support.

**Jacobsen:** What are the key advocacy areas of the Korean Women's Associations United today?

**Oh:** KWAU was founded in 1987, so it has been more than 37 years now.

Traditionally, we have focused on legal and policy advancements related to women's rights and gender equality. For more than 30 years, we have concentrated on leading legal and policy changes, engaging in advocacy efforts directed at the government and the National Assembly. We work to strengthen networks and partnerships with government stakeholders and politicians who support women's rights.

Yes, we have made significant progress. For example, we contributed to the adoption of the Sexual Violence Law in the 1990s. Additionally, we played a role in implementing gender quotas in politics, which require political parties to nominate at least 50% of women candidates in the proportional representation system.

However, despite these legal and policy advancements, we face a new challenge. Internationally, South Korea is often regarded as a country with high-quality laws and policies on gender equality and women's rights. However, these laws are poorly implemented due to low gender awareness in society.

Therefore, we focus more on raising public awareness about feminist values and gender equality. We aim to reach more people, particularly young women, university students, and teenagers, so they can understand that feminist values are a fundamental part of common sense.

**Jacobsen:** How have KWAU's strategic priorities evolved? Targeted objectives for the organization in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s. They would have been different in each decade. How have they changed over time?

**Oh:** The history of Korean democracy is relatively short. Only in 1987 did Korea achieve formal democracy. During the military regime before 1987, Korean citizens had no right to elect their president directly.

KWAU was founded in 1987, at the same time that Korea transitioned to democracy. Many of our senior members who founded KWAU were activists who fought for Korean democracy. However, they soon realized that without an independent organization dedicated specifically to women's rights, women's rights would never be fully achieved.

Even within the democracy movement, women were not recognized as genuine activists. Korea was, and still is, a patriarchal society, and even within the pro-democracy movement, women faced gender-based discrimination.

Our senior members saw an urgent need to establish a women's rights organization fully dedicated to fighting for gender equality. That is why KWAU was founded.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, KWAU focused on passing laws and policies that would protect and advance women's rights. At that time, South Korea had very few legal protections for women. Although there were some policies for women, they were based on conservative family values, which primarily saw women as mothers and homemakers.

During this period, we worked to introduce and improve legal protections for women. That is why, from the 1990s to the early 2000s, we achieved many legal and policy advancements for women's rights.

From the 1990s to the early 2000s, the women's movement achieved many legal and policy advancements.

However, from the mid-2000s to 2010, we faced increasing challenges. We had so much success in the 1990s and early 2000s because we could gain support from the National Assembly, especially politicians favoring women's rights. At that time, the government was led by progressive or semi-progressive parties, which allowed us to collaborate with policymakers and government institutions.

However, in February 2008, the Lee Myung-bak government took power. His administration was highly conservative and strongly opposed the progressive women's rights movement.

After his term, Park Geun-hye became South Korea's first female president. Still, she was also from a conservative party—the party currently in power, the People Power Party (PPP). From 2008 to early 2017, the women's rights movement struggled to progress significantly. Even though we remained active in advocacy efforts, we received very little support from the government, as it sought to suppress progressive women's activism.

So, from the late 2000s to early 2017, we could not achieve the same legal and policy advancements as in the 1990s and early 2000s. During this period, we shifted our focus to strengthening the grassroots movement.

In February 2017, Park Geun-hye was impeached, and her administration ended.

After that, the Moon Jae-in government took power. His government favoured women's rights activism more than the previous conservative administrations. However, there were still gaps between the demands of the women's movement and the government's policies.

During the Moon Jae-in administration, we saw the rise of a new wave of feminist activism, particularly among young women. Many of these activists were not affiliated with traditional women's rights organizations, but they self-organized, using online platforms to advocate for gender equality.

In May 2022, after Moon Jae-in's presidency, Yoon Suk Yeol came to power. As you mentioned, one of his central campaign promises was anti-feminism.

He mobilized young male voters who were against feminist values, the MeToo movement, and young women's organizing efforts. He openly opposed gender equality policies and promised to dismantle institutions that supported women's rights. Unfortunately, he became president.

Under Yoon Suk Yeol's administration, for the past three years, the women's rights movement has faced severe repression.

**Jacobsen:** Now, for those who may not be aware—just as a note on cosmic irony—what happened to that government in December? Where is that anti-feminist leader now?

**Oh:** After he took office in May 2022, progressive women's rights organizations led the opposition to him.

Over the past three years, Yoon Suk Yeol's policies have been extremely regressive, not only on women's rights but also on social progress in general. Many progressive civil society organizations have opposed his political agenda.

In October and November of last year, civil society organizations—including us—began internal discussions about whether we should actively campaign for his impeachment.

However, in December, everything escalated suddenly. Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law, which outraged many people. So, just two or three weeks ago, we gathered in large numbers.

Even 30 or 40 years ago, during the era of dictatorship in Korea, people suffered immensely. Many of our parents, their friends, siblings, and family members were disappeared, kidnapped, tortured, and even killed by the authoritarian government.

So, when martial law was declared, its symbolic meaning was clear to the Korean people. It immediately reminded them of those painful times—before Korea achieved democracy. Martial law was declared on December 3. However, within one to two hours, the National Assembly passed a resolution to lift it. The martial law was lifted just six hours after it was declared.

Although the immediate crisis was resolved, the people and progressive politicians came to a clear realization: Yoon Suk Yeol is too dangerous to remain in office. He cannot be allowed to serve even one more day as president.

Civil society organizations urgently formed a coalition in response to force him out of office. We began organizing regular demonstrations before the National Assembly, calling for President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment. On December 14, the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion.

Now, we are holding regular mass demonstrations in Gwanghwamun Square and Seoul Square, demanding that the Korean Constitutional Court uphold the impeachment. The court's final decision on whether to remove Yoon Suk Yeol from office is expected in late March.

However, even though Yoon Suk-you is in prison, he is actively working to organize ultra-conservative groups. Korean society is now profoundly politically divided.

**Jacobsen:** What do you want to say about your thoughts on the potential presidential election?

**Oh:** Yes. Well, there are a few things to consider. First, regarding the anti-feminist leader who attempted to declare martial law, to clarify, martial law is an extremely serious crime under the Korean Criminal Act, with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. So, one way or another, Yoon Suk Yeol will receive a prison sentence. However, the dangerous thing is that, as I

mentioned before, even while in prison, he is actively working to organize ultra-conservative groups.

The People Power Party (PPP), which Yoon Suk Yeol belongs to, is doing everything possible to prevent the progressive party from winning the next presidential election. Meanwhile, progressive civil society organizations like ours organize large demonstrations, press conferences, and public advocacy campaigns. However, in central Seoul, many people still support the messages of the ultra-conservative groups.

This has led to street conflicts, as both sides hold mass demonstrations simultaneously, with extreme and polarizing messages. South Korea is now witnessing a deep political divide, much more than before.

You probably already know this, but we have a very strong ultra-conservative Christian network in Korea. This group holds significant political power, and its influence is growing. The People Power Party (PPP) is now strengthening its ties with these ultra-conservative Christian groups because they believe this Christian network can mobilize the conservative public.

This is not our first experience organizing an impeachment campaign. We went through a similar movement seven years ago, between February 2016 and February 2017, when we successfully pushed for President Park Geun-hye's impeachment. However, back then, Korean society was not as politically divided as today.

At that time, even some conservative politicians within Park Geun-hye's party acknowledged that she had committed serious wrongdoing. They supported her impeachment to protect their political future, believing that allowing her to remain in office would be more damaging in the long run. This created space for social and judicial accountability to take place.

However, the situation today is entirely different. The People Power Party (PPP) is now taking an extreme position—it is doing everything it can to prevent the progressive political party from gaining power in the next presidential election.

One of their most targeted demographics is young men. They are actively mobilizing discontent among young men, particularly those who feel alienated by feminist policies or economic instability.

**Jacobsen:** That's happening here too. We see the same pattern.

**Oh:** The PPP and its allies are weaponizing grievances to build a reactionary political base, much like we've seen in other countries.

Many people support President Yoon Suk Yeol because of his anti-feminist campaigns. His base consists largely of young men who feel alienated by feminist policies and older, conservative voters who tend to oppose progressive social change.

**Jacobsen:** South Korea has a significant Christian population alongside a large non-religious majority. Which Christian denominations have been most opposed to feminist activism, and which religious groups have supported gender equality efforts through advocacy and activism?

**Oh:** Our strategy for the women's rights movement is based on collaboration and building strong networks. KWAU is an umbrella organization representing 36 women's rights organizations across South Korea. Among our member organizations is the Women's Theological Coalition, a group of progressive Christian women who actively support LGBTQ+ rights and advocate for human rights protections for sexual minorities.

They are also deeply involved in campaigns for the Comprehensive Anti-Discrimination Law, which aims to protect marginalized communities from discrimination. In addition to this, we have other progressive Christian allies who support human rights, feminist movements, and broader social justice issues. However, these progressive Christian groups are quite small and constantly targeted by ultra-conservative religious groups.

In South Korea, 70–80% of Christians tend to be politically conservative. Their conservatism is not only political but also cultural, particularly when it comes to women's rights and gender equality. Many of them oppose abortion, believe that women should be married to men, and insist that the traditional family structure must be preserved. According to their worldview, women's primary roles should be to care for the family, do housework, give birth to children, and nurture them. This traditionalist mindset still dominates much of South Korean Christianity.

**Jacobsen:** South Korea ranks low on gender equity, with surveys showing a stark gap in how men and women perceive inequality. Given this, what is KWAU's most significant sociopolitical achievement?

**Oh:** As mentioned earlier, KWAU's primary strategy is legal and policy advocacy—pushing for legislative advancements through government lobbying and engagement with the National Assembly. Over the years, we have achieved many legal and policy advancements, and these changes have significantly shaped Korean society.

One of the most transformative victories in the fight for women's rights was abolishing the patrilineal family headship system—the Hoju system. For many years, the Hoju system legalized households by making only male family members the legal heads. In official civil documents, all other family members were listed under the Hoju (family head). Under this system, a woman's legal status was defined by a male family member, usually her father or eldest son.

For example, when a husband died, his firstborn son would automatically inherit the family headship, even if the mother was still alive. This system legally reinforced gender discrimination, denying women equal legal status within the family.

The Hoju system affected women in many ways, particularly in inheritance laws, family registration, and divorce proceedings. For example, if a husband and wife divorce and the wife later remarries, she cannot change her child's family name without the explicit permission of her former husband. In Korean society, family names carry deep social significance.

If a child had a different family name from their father, they would often be bullied in school. There is a strong cultural expectation that children should inherit their father's surname, and divorced families are often socially marginalized in our conservative society.

Because of this, KWAU viewed the Hoju system as a clear example of gender-based discrimination. We organized extensive campaigns and demonstrations, contacting the National Assembly and pro-women's rights politicians.

Additionally, we collaborated with government partners, including the Ministry of Gender Equality and Justice, to push for legal reform. Finally, in February 2005, the National Assembly passed a bill abolishing the Hoju system.

Of course, there were some limitations. At the time, we were unable to eliminate all remnants of the Hoju system due to strong opposition from senior conservative male groups. However, the abolition of the patrilineal family headship system remains one of the clearest examples of societal change in South Korea.

**Jacobsen:** The Hoju system was ruled unconstitutional in 2005 and officially abolished in 2008, marking a major step toward gender equality. This mirrors broader struggles to replace patriarchal structures with more equitable systems. How does KWAU collaborate with other feminist organizations to advance women's rights?

**Oh:** Yes. Traditionally, KWAU has been an umbrella organization uniting various women's rights organizations across South Korea. Our main strategy has always been collaboration—building networks and strengthening alliances with other feminist and civil society organizations supporting progressive women's rights values.

For example, in February 2017, young women began coming forward to speak about their experiences with sexual violence. They led efforts to raise awareness of sexual harassment and abuse—not only in their daily lives but also in digital spaces where online sexual violence was becoming a growing issue.

KWAU recognized that we needed to expand our power base to effectively advance women's rights. This meant reaching out to unorganized women, particularly those in their twenties and thirties, and encouraging them to participate in campaigns and demonstrations.

When the #MeToo movement gained momentum in February 2017 and 2018, KWAU played a critical role. While young women were leading grassroots activism, KWAU leveraged its established networks to connect their voices to policymakers. As an organization with decades of experience in legal and policy advocacy, we positioned ourselves as a bridge—directly bringing women's grassroots demands to government officials and the National Assembly.

We organized seminars, press conferences, and policy discussions, creating spaces where politicians and government representatives could hear women's voices. Our goal was to translate grassroots activism into tangible policy change.
Through these efforts, we were able to convey the real-life experiences of women on the ground and pressure the government to respond with concrete legal reforms. We pushed for stronger protections against sexual violence, as well as systemic changes to address broader gender inequalities.

Of course, there are various dynamics within the feminist movement itself. Different generations, issues, and perspectives naturally lead to divergent opinions and approaches. However, these

discussions and debates are ultimately productive because they help refine our strategies and ensure we remain inclusive and representative.

KWAU actively organizes women, particularly young women in South Korea, and ensures their perspectives and demands are heard. We continue to listen, adapt, and push forward, ensuring that feminist activism leads to real policy change and greater gender equality.

**Jacobsen:** I don't know if there's a phrase for this in Korean, but in English, there's an expression called "narcissism of small differences." It's pretty self-explanatory, but it's a well-known phenomenon, particularly in feminist movements in North America. For example, in umbrella organizations, one feminist group may strongly disagree with another over which issues should be prioritized, which can escalate into an organizational conflict. Often, these disputes are less about ideology and more about clashes between the leaders of those groups. Is this a phenomenon in feminist organizations in South Korea as well? Is this an international trend?

**Oh:** Yes, this happens here, too. As you mentioned, it also relates to priority areas in the feminist movement. The movement has many different perspectives and priorities stemming from generational and ideological differences. KWAU was founded in 1987, and many founding members had direct experience in the Korean democracy movement.

For them, ideology was central. They believed we must change the system for women to be truly free. This meant studying how capitalism functions, how political and economic structures shape women's experiences, and how these systems exert both direct and indirect influence over women's daily lives.

As an older feminist organization, KWAU has always taken a broad, systemic approach to women's rights. We examine how political, economic, and social structures intersect with gender issues and advocate for structural reforms rather than focusing solely on individual cases of discrimination or violence.

However, some of the younger generation of feminists in South Korea take a different approach. Many young women today are extremely vocal and active in pushing for social change. They have a strong gender consciousness and recognize how harmful Korea's patriarchal traditions are for women.

However, their activism is often rooted in personal experiences rather than systemic analysis. As a result, their primary areas of focus are gender-based violence and digital sexual violence—issues they experience in their daily lives.

In recent years, because of the growing visibility of young women's activism, journalists, politicians, and the broader public have started to pay more attention to sexual violence and online harassment. As a result, these issues are now widely framed as the most urgent feminist concerns in South Korea.

Of course, KWAU fully supports efforts to combat sexual violence, as we also see it as an important issue. However, addressing one problem at a time without structural and systemic changes will not be enough.

That is why KWAU focuses on how political, economic, and social systems shape women's lives. While we support campaigns against sexual violence, we also emphasize the need for broader structural reforms that will create lasting gender equality in South Korea.

**Jacobsen:** Education has long been an arena where men and women who support gender parity have fought for change. But what contemporary challenges do you see in advancing gender equality in South Korea today?

**Oh:** I'd like to highlight two key issues. First, as I mentioned earlier, there is a growing divide in gender awareness—not just regarding feminist values but progressive social values in general.

Young women are becoming increasingly progressive and engaged, while young men are moving in the opposite direction, becoming more conservative. Young women today are more willing to speak out about their experiences with gender discrimination and social injustice. They actively participate in movements, including demonstrations calling for President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment.

Right now, more than 80% of the demonstrators calling for his impeachment are young women, especially those in their teens and twenties. They are learning that feminist values are foundational for achieving societal structural change.
However, young men are becoming increasingly conservative. Many of them see feminism as a threat rather than as a movement for equality.

In a patriarchal society like South Korea, young men still benefit from gender inequality in many ways. But now, they feel that feminist activism is reducing their status. Many of them believe that women's rights movements are harming society and target feminist organizations as enemies.

This growing gender divide is one of the biggest contemporary challenges in advancing gender equality in South Korea today. Everyone, including young men, is becoming more vulnerable in this harsh capitalist society. Economic instability and increasing social pressures have left many insecure about their future.

However, many young men blame the feminist movement for their declining status rather than recognizing the broader structural problems in economics, employment, and politics. They see the strength of the women's rights movement as the reason for their struggles rather than acknowledging the systemic issues affecting all people.

This trend became especially clear three years ago when Yoon Suk Yeol ran for president. Many young men actively supported his anti-feminist ideology, believing his campaign promises to push back against feminism and reassert traditional gender roles.

Now, we are seeing the same pattern in pro-Yoon Suk Yeol demonstrations. Many participants are young men standing at the forefront of ultra-conservative activism.

Earlier this year, we saw how extreme these movements could become in January. A group of ultra-conservative demonstrators attacked the court, breaking windows and physically harming government officials.

**Jacobsen:** That sounds like Trump supporters storming the U.S. Capitol.

**Oh:** Yes, it's a very similar situation.

More than 100 people were arrested following the attack, and they are now facing prosecution. However, most concerning is that most of them were young men. Right now, young men are in charge of supporting Yoon Suk Yeol and ultra-conservative values. This presents one of the biggest challenges for women's rights activism today.

How do we persuade young men that women's rights and feminist values are common sense? How do we show them that gender equality is a fundamental part of progressive social values rather than something harmful?

This is the first major challenge we are facing. The second challenge is South Korea's record-low birth rate, which is the lowest in the world.

The current government's response to this issue has been deeply regressive. Instead of addressing why people don't want to have children, they are framing women as tools for childbirth—as if their primary role is to give birth and care for families under a population control plan rather than ensuring that women have reproductive rights and autonomy.

Of course, we recognize that the birth rate crisis is real. It reflects serious societal issues; South Korea will become unsustainable if we do not address them. However, the root problem is not that women don't want to have children—it's that they do not feel secure enough to do so. If women believe that this society does not provide a safe and supportive environment for raising children, then they will not choose to have children.

The current government's political vision does not address these structural problems. Instead, they are taking an extremely regressive approach, treating women as birth-givers rather than autonomous individuals with the right to make their own reproductive choices. This is the second major contemporary challenge that feminist activists in South Korea must confront.

**Jacobsen:** How does KWAU address workplace, economic, and home-based discrimination in South Korea?

**Oh:** KWAU is an umbrella organization that brings together 36 women's rights organizations. Each member organization specializes in a specific agenda related to women's rights.

For example, some of our member organizations focus specifically on workplace issues, such as sexual harassment and labour rights for women. Others work on gender-based violence, including consultation services for women who have experienced sexual violence, digital harassment, intimate partner violence, or domestic abuse.

KWAU does not directly provide consultation services or handle individual cases of gender discrimination or violence. Instead, we act as a coordinating body, ensuring that the concerns and demands of our member organizations reach the National Assembly, politicians, and government officials.

Because of our experience and network in legal and policy advocacy, we serve as a bridge between grassroots feminist organizations and policymakers, ensuring that women's rights issues are addressed at a systemic level.

**Jacobsen:** What are KWAU's goals for the coming years?

**Oh:** We have many goals because society is not changing rapidly enough.

Our first major goal is to create a society where gender equality and parity are recognized as common-sense values. As I mentioned, we want to ensure that education plays a key role in shaping gender equality.

We envision a society where children and teenagers learn—both in schools, at home, and in society at large—that women and girls deserve equal respect as human beings. They should not be seen as sexual objects or targets for sexual exploitation and violence. The reason I emphasize this is because of the deepfake sexual violence crisis we faced last year.

**Jacobsen:** Yes, that issue has been happening over here as well.

**Oh:** More than 80–90% of the victims were teenage girls, and the majority of perpetrators were teenage boys.

This means that boys are learning harmful behaviours from a young age, using AI and deepfake technology to manipulate images of their classmates for sexual exploitation. This is deeply disturbing because it shows that misogyny and the backlash against feminism are normalized at a young age.

So, one of our top priorities is to reform school curricula and ensure that teenagers—both boys and girls—understand feminist values as an essential foundation for a sustainable society. Our second major goal is to strengthen women's rights organizations.

Over the past three years, many women's rights organizations in South Korea have become financially and organizationally vulnerable due to the political climate and lack of government support.

The government's stance must change because women's rights organizations have played a critical role in advancing legal and policy reforms. Without their efforts, we would not have achieved so many legislative changes for gender equality.

We want to build a society where the public recognizes these organizations' importance and is willing to donate even a small percentage of their income to sustain civil society organizations that work for progressive social values, including women's rights.

**Jacobsen:** It was lovely to meet you. Thank you so much for your time today—especially for this extended conversation.

**Oh:** Thank you very much.

# Dan O’Dowd on Tesla’s Toxic Culture, Failing Hype, and the Rise of BYD

2025/03/19

For more than four decades, **Dan O’Dowd** has built a reputation as a leading expert in safety and security, designing real-time operating systems and development solutions that power industries spanning aerospace, defense, and automotive technology. In this conversation, he takes aim at Tesla’s workplace culture, painting a troubling picture of racial discrimination lawsuits, union-busting tactics, and an environment fueled by relentless pressure and a lack of accountability.

O’Dowd also critiques Tesla’s declining build quality, software failures, and CEO Elon Musk’s penchant for overpromising and underdelivering—most notably with the ill-fated RoboTaxi concept. Meanwhile, Tesla faces mounting competition from Chinese automaker BYD, which has surpassed it as the world’s leading EV manufacturer. Offering a combination of affordability, cutting-edge technology, and a diverse model lineup, BYD is rapidly expanding its global footprint, including potential inroads into the U.S. market.

As Tesla’s sales slide and its dominance wanes, O’Dowd argues that Musk’s hype-driven approach is losing ground to real innovation and execution.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Multiple allegations have been made, including large class-action lawsuits regarding workplace discrimination and safety concerns. For example, there were claims of racial discrimination at the Fremont factory, reportedly involving around 6,000 employees. Where does this workplace culture come from? It’s being allowed, but is this entirely top-down? Or does some of the blame also come from the broader work culture surrounding Fremont?

**Dan O’Dowd:** The people who are hired locally build the workplace culture, and when management does nothing about it, that culture spreads unchecked. I wasn’t there, but I’ve read many lawsuits and reports. I’ve seen what people have said happened. There shouldn’t be much dispute about many of the facts.

How did it happen? We know that the pressure from above to get things done is enormous—far beyond what you’d see at almost any other company. Employees are constantly pushed to meet unrealistic deadlines. Musk deliberately sets impossible schedules, forcing workers to put in 80-hour weeks. Even if they fail to meet the deadline, they still accomplish far more than they would if he had said, “Good job at 40 hours—go home.” There is no work-life balance in his companies.

Musk himself has talked about this. Walter Isaacson writes about it extensively in his biography. Still, Musk also clarifies that if you’re not 1,000% committed, you’re out. At Twitter, he told employees, “Exceptional performance is all that will be accepted.” There is no room for mediocrity. That philosophy may have contributed to his success. Still, it also means that if someone is getting results, they can behave however they want. Even if their actions go against what Musk claims to stand for, as long as they don’t directly cost him anything, they probably

get away with it. The people who push the hardest and demand the most out of workers often rise within their companies.

Take the racial discrimination lawsuits. These cases include allegations of swastikas drawn in Tesla's bathrooms, Black workers being called the N-word dozens—sometimes hundreds—of times a day, and racial segregation within the factory itself. Some employees described it as feeling like 1950s Alabama or 1980s apartheid South Africa.

When Musk was asked about these lawsuits, the press confronted him about the disturbing accusations. His response? "People should grow a thicker skin." That was it. Did he personally order discrimination? I don't have any evidence of that. But he hires people who push relentlessly, and that kind of culture creates an environment where abuse flourishes unchecked.

It's about results at any cost. In Musk's companies, success means making the impossible happen, breaking barriers, and doing what no one else has done. He wants people who will achieve those results, but he doesn't care how they do it. That attitude is a major contributor to why these problems persist.

When complaints are filed, they disappear. Employees have reported that racial discrimination complaints were buried, ignored, or simply erased. Some workers say they filed multiple reports, and nothing was done. Others say they were fired after filing complaints—despite the fact that retaliation like that is illegal. But at Tesla, it kept happening.

**Jacobsen:** As a result, many of these workers are suing Musk. There have been numerous lawsuits against Tesla regarding workplace conditions, particularly at the Fremont factory. But beyond labour and discrimination issues, there are also concerns about vehicle quality and reliability. Now, shifting away from software, AI, and **Full Self-Driving**, we're talking about Tesla's physical infrastructure—its build quality.

Model 3 owners, for example, have reported windows spontaneously shattering, misaligned panels, paint imperfections, and other inconsistencies in assembly quality.

**O'Dowd:** There are countless reports. Even on one of our Model 3s, the back door doesn't work. No matter how hard you try, you can't get the damn thing open. I've never had a problem like that with any other car. I've owned Lexuses, Toyotas, and even older Teslas, and none had issues like this.

Tesla had serious build quality problems, especially in the beginning, because it was doing things in a rushed, chaotic way. It needed to meet its production targets—5,000 cars a week for a year. But when it over-automated the production lines, everything got stuck, and it couldn't meet those goals. At one point, even Musk admitted, "We need more people, less automation."

But instead of fixing the existing production issues, they built a new assembly line in the parking lot under tents to get the needed numbers. It was a desperate move, an "anything to make it work" philosophy. That approach led to poorly trained workers, untested processes, and a lack of quality control. They weren't using the equipment designed for precision manufacturing—they relied on manual labour to fill the gaps naturally, which resulted in defects, repairs, and a long list of recalls.

Recently, Tesla's issues have extended to newer models, like the Cybertruck. On top of that, Tesla now has the worst resale value of any car brand. The problem isn't just the cars themselves—it's the batteries. The battery pack is housed in a rigid steel casing, and if it gets dented in certain ways, insurance companies will declare the car a total loss—even if the vehicle looks completely fine and is technically repairable.

Why? Because subtle damage to the battery pack can turn the car into a fire risk. The real danger is that these fires don't happen immediately. The car can be repaired, returned to the owner, driven for months—and then suddenly turns into an inferno. Some insurance and storage facilities even started requiring Tesla vehicles to be parked three car lengths apart in storage lots, just in case one caught fire and set off a chain reaction. If a damaged Tesla was parked five feet away from another car, it could instantly ignite and spread the fire. But if parked 30 feet away, it might burn on its own without destroying everything around it.

Tesla has had many recalls, far more than a company of its stature should. That said, I will acknowledge that the Teslas we purchased 15 years ago are still running. I'm still using those cars, and they've held up surprisingly well. However, earlier models were built before these more aggressive production shortcuts.

**Jacobsen:** In 2021, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that Tesla violated U.S. labor laws when it fired an employee involved in union organizing at the Fremont plant, which has become a focal point for these labor issues.

Many of these conflicts stem from Musk's open hostility toward unions. He's not just against specific union efforts—he has made it clear that he opposes the very concept of unions. What are your reflections on Tesla's union-busting tactics and Musk's anti-union stance?

**O'Dowd:** As far as I know, it's all true. You're gone if you even mention unions or gather a few coworkers to discuss unionizing. Walked to the door. Fired. No negotiation, no discussion. Just "goodbye, and if you don't like it, sue me."

And that's exactly why many of these workers sued Tesla. Some have won their lawsuits because Tesla's actions were blatantly illegal. There wasn't anything subtle or sneaky about it. It was straight-up retaliation. They didn't try to hide it. They didn't say, "We're letting you go for performance reasons." It was just, "You talked about a union, so you're fired." That's as clear-cut as labour law violations get.

Musk's attitude on this has been consistent. He doesn't just ignore labour laws—he actively defies them. I believe there was a more recent case in Texas where several employees expressed concerns that his leadership style was damaging the company. The next day, they were fired. That's the pattern. If you step out of line in any way, you're gone.

And he's willing to fight these lawsuits endlessly because he can afford to. If an employee sues Tesla, they might spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal fees. If they lose, they're financially ruined—they could lose their house, savings, and pension. But Musk? He has $450 billion. Tesla itself is worth $1.4 trillion. The scale is so massive that he can afford to pay lawyers to make someone's life miserable for as long as they keep fighting.

Yes, some people win their cases, but the payouts usually aren't massive. And even when Tesla is found guilty, the penalties are often minor compared to the company's resources. Musk operates as if the law is just another obstacle to work around.

That ties into something I mentioned earlier. Musk has been quoted multiple times—on Twitter and in interviews—saying that the only true laws are the laws of physics. Everything else, including government regulations, is just a "recommendation." If you break that down, what he's saying is that laws—whether labour laws, consumer protections, or safety regulations—are optional. They're just suggestions he can consider and ignore if they don't align with his desires.

**Jacobsen:** What did you find particularly enlightening about Walter Isaacson's biography of Musk?

**O'Dowd:** We learned quite a bit. For example, with the solar roof fiasco—while we already knew about the event, the book filled in many behind-the-scenes details that hadn't been widely reported. It confirmed just how much of that entire presentation was staged. Another important one is about Full Self-Driving and how it got started. It's called Autonomy Day, and it took place on April 22, 2019.

The book filled in what happened before that event. Musk invited the press, investor analysts, and the world to hear about Tesla's progress in autonomy. On the surface, it looked like a major milestone for self-driving technology. But what we now know—thanks to *Elon Musk* by Walter Isaacson—is that Tesla was in a desperate financial situation at the time.

Musk confided in several people, including his cousin who worked at Tesla, that the company was on the verge of bankruptcy. Tesla didn't have enough cash to keep going. They had been consistently losing money, selling cars at a loss while continuing to burn through more capital. Investors were getting restless. They kept investing money into Tesla, but the company wasn't making a profit. They wanted to know: When do we see a return?

Musk was desperate to find a solution. According to the biography—and according to Grimes, his girlfriend at the time—he spent days sitting on the bed, sleep-deprived, obsessing over how to save the company. He muttered to himself, lost in thought, trying to find an answer. Then, one day, he suddenly said, I got it. I know what to do.

And that's when he announced Autonomy Day.

At the time, Full Self-Driving (FSD) was little more than a buzzword. The only real evidence of progress was that fake demo video—the one we talked about earlier, where Tesla cut out all the failed attempts and pieced together a staged ride.

That video was already public, but beyond that, Tesla had provided very little substantive information about FSD. There were no real updates, no real breakthroughs.

So Musk decided to go all in. He would unveil everything—the full self-driving vision, the grand strategy, and Tesla's future. The event would be a spectacle, and he would make it huge.

The problem? The software wasn't ready. At the time of the event, Tesla's self-driving system couldn't even recognize traffic lights. That's how limited the technology was. Yet Musk stood in

front of investors and claimed that FSD was nearly complete. He told the world that Tesla was on the verge of solving autonomy and that only small tweaks were needed to finish it.

Then, he introduced the RoboTaxi concept, painting a vision of a Tesla fleet that could operate as an autonomous ride-hailing service.

Musk told investors: Think about how much time your car sits there, doing nothing. When you're at work for eight hours, your car is parked. On weekends, it's sitting idle. That's a terrible waste of a valuable resource.

So, he proposed a system where Tesla owners could enroll their cars in a self-driving Uber-like service. Instead of sitting in a parking lot, your Tesla could be out earning money while you were at the office. You would have control—you could allow the car to be used only at certain times, and when you needed it, it would be available. But it would operate autonomously when you weren't using it, picking up passengers and making you passive income.

The promise was enormous. Tesla owners weren't just buying a car but an investment. Musk claimed that, within a year, this RoboTaxi network would be up and running. It never happened.

Then, he took it a step further. He asked, "What does that make your car worth?" If you buy a car today for $38,000 and it earns $30,000 per year for a long time, what's the real value? According to his net present value calculation, that car would suddenly be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. He was selling Teslas when the company was desperately short on cash. Still, he told people that the cars they were buying would be worth over $200,000 within a year.

For perspective, Bernie Madoff only promised his investors an 18% yearly return. Musk was proposing a 700% annual return. People began talking about how they could start businesses with this. Buy one Tesla, use the income to buy another, then another, and soon, you'd have an entire self-driving fleet. He fueled that excitement, saying Tesla would have a massive fleet of RoboTaxis, and as soon as Full Self-Driving was ready, he would flip a switch. Instantly, every Tesla on the road—all one million of them—would be updated with the software necessary to become self-driving taxis. He insisted that every Tesla already had the required hardware, and all that was needed was a software update.

Then he went even further. He said, what does this mean for Tesla? He compared it to Uber but without any of the costs. He told investors that Tesla would bring in $50 billion yearly from this service—pure profit. Tesla wouldn't pay for anything. Nothing.

Musk explained that Tesla wouldn't own the cars—customers would. The owners would pay Tesla to buy the vehicles. They would handle the costs of maintenance, repairs, charging, and even cleaning out vomit in the backseat. Tesla, meanwhile, would collect billions in fees for operating the self-driving network without spending a dime. Then, he threw out another calculation. With a $50 billion annual profit and a price-to-earnings ratio of 20, he estimated that Tesla's stock would soar—bringing the company's valuation to one trillion dollars.

At the time, Tesla was worth about $40 to $50 billion. He told investors the RoboTaxi fleet alone would push Tesla to a trillion-dollar valuation. He couldn't help himself—this was a pitch where anything could be said. He even claimed that Tesla had redesigned its cars to last one million

miles with minimal maintenance. He painted a future where you could buy a Model 3 for $38,000 and rent it out for $30,000 a year for decades. He didn't say the number outright, but if you do the math, the cars would be usable for 74 years.

Then, there was the battery. Musk told investors that the current Tesla battery could last 500,000 miles and the next-generation battery would last one million miles. He justified these numbers by comparing them to traditional cars, citing AAA's estimate that the full cost of ownership for an average American car was 62 cents per mile.

According to AAA, the total cost of ownership, including maintenance, cleaning, and everything else, for a traditional gasoline-powered car is about 62 cents per mile. Musk claimed that for a Tesla Model 3—the one people would buy for $38,000—the cost would be just 18 cents per mile. That included everything: capital costs, maintenance, cleaning, repairs, and the whole package.

He didn't stop there. He repeated that the car would last one million miles, meaning it could keep earning for 74 years. He kept making these outrageous claims because he had to. Tesla was running out of money. He was about to go under. So, he pitched this to Wall Street investors—including Cathie Wood, who some people love and others hate. But she bought it. She believed every word.

And it wasn't just her. The analysts ate it up. They published glowing reports. The stock shot up. Tesla's valuation went from $40–50 billion to over $1 trillion. At one point, it exceeded $1 trillion, all because of this RoboTaxi promise. That's why Musk can't let it go.

Wall Street believed his pitch that Tesla would rake in $50 billion a year from RoboTaxis. They believed customers would be making 700% returns on their investment, making Teslas the must-have vehicle. They believed these cars would sell like hotcakes because the financial returns were too good to pass up.

Musk even told analysts that buying any other car was completely financially insane. That was his exact wording. He said that in a meeting with securities analysts. He compared buying anything other than a Tesla to buying a horse. He told them that some people still ride horses but wouldn't buy one for actual transportation. It wouldn't make sense.

This was before Tesla made meaningful progress on Full Self-Driving and before they had anything that worked. Yet he stood there and told everyone that by the following year, 2020, Tesla would have the only self-driving system in the industry. He said no other automaker—not Ford, GM, or Toyota—would have anything like it.

His message was clear: Buy a Model 3 for $38,000 today, and soon it'll be worth $200,000. No one will buy anything else. Tesla is going to dominate the entire auto market.

That was 2019. And today, in 2024, he's still saying the same thing. He's still claiming Tesla will eat the entire industry. He insists that Tesla's Full Self-Driving will wipe out every other automaker. And yet, it's the same software that still runs red lights, drives past stopped school buses, plows through crosswalks, goes the wrong way down one-way streets, and stops on railroad tracks and won't move.

It's a joke, but Tesla's entire valuation is built on that promise. Musk has even said that without full self-driving, Tesla is worth zero. That's a direct quote.

Of course, Musk also hypes up Optimus, but Optimus is nothing more than a glorified toy. There are dozens of robotics companies producing products far more advanced than Optimus today—right now, not in some hypothetical future. Musk claims Optimus will revolutionize the world, but there is no evidence. Just like there is no actual Full Self-Driving. It's all smoke and mirrors. Optimus is a complete joke, a fraud. And Tesla? Tesla makes electric cars. That's it. However, their sales are declining, and their CEO is becoming a liability rather than an asset.

Tesla is now losing its dominance in the electric vehicle market. BYD, a Chinese automaker, has officially surpassed Tesla as the world's largest seller of battery electric vehicles. Tesla has fallen to number two, and while their sales are shrinking, BYD's sales are growing astonishingly. Who runs BYD? It's a Chinese company, but it has some notable investors—Berkshire Hathaway, for example, held a stake for years. However, they have even been selling off their shares because they've profited from it. Unlike Tesla, BYD isn't just selling a few luxury electric models. They have 11 models, ranging from affordable economy cars to high-performance vehicles.

BYD even has a $11,000 hybrid. Just think about that—$11,000 for an electric car. That's less than the price of some used gasoline cars. It's an old Nissan Leaf-level car, but it works, and it sells fast. In China, they're selling like hotcakes. And they don't just sell one type of vehicle. They have hybrids, fully electric sedans, SUVs, and a Military-Style EV. They have an entire lineup covering everything Tesla promised but never delivered.

And let's not forget Musk's vaporware. He announced a new Tesla Roadster, a supercar that he claimed would reach 250 miles per hour, go from 0 to 60 in under one second, and—get this—fly. Yes, Musk actually suggested it might hover. But guess what? It doesn't exist. It never has. It was nothing more than another fraudulent promise to keep investors excited.

Meanwhile, BYD actually built the car that Tesla claimed it was making. They have an EV supercar that accelerates from 0 to 60 in one second, and it flies. They even released a video showing the car jumping over a six-foot gap in the road. It lifts off the ground, flies over the hole, and lands perfectly. It's unbelievable. While Tesla makes empty promises, BYD delivers.

And they aren't stopping there. BYD also created a Humvee-style electric vehicle way ahead of any Tesla. It can rotate on its central axis, spinning in place without turning like a regular car. It can float on water and even drive through flooded areas. It has sideways parking, meaning you can move it directly into a tight space without turning the wheel. It effortlessly slides into position with just a foot of clearance on each side. It's mind-blowing technology.

BYD is everything Tesla was supposed to be. They have delivered on everything Tesla promised—and they did it better. Their cars are more affordable, more advanced, and more widely available. And while Tesla shrinks, BYD is exploding in market share. They are the electric vehicle company that Musk claimed Tesla would become. They just beat him to it.

BYD is expanding everywhere. They are unstoppable. Their factories make Tesla's so-called Gigafactories look tiny in comparison. Musk loves bragging about his Gigafactories, calling them the biggest in the world. Still, BYD has a single factory that could fit all of Tesla's factories

inside—with room to spare. That's the scale they're operating on. And that's why Tesla has a real problem in China. BYD is eating their lunch.

So far, Tesla has survived in China because the electric vehicle market is booming. Over 50% of new cars sold in China are now electric. That massive demand has kept Tesla afloat, but BYD is growing faster. Meanwhile, the U.S. EV market is much smaller by comparison. And now, BYD is expanding worldwide, positioning itself to dominate everywhere.

They hit a roadblock when Trump imposed huge tariffs on Chinese goods. However, Trump also stated that if BYD builds a factory in the U.S., it would be exempt from those tariffs. He even promised that if BYD commits to spending $1 billion on a U.S. plant, the government will fast-track all necessary permits and environmental approvals within one year. There would be no waiting a decade for regulatory approval—everything would be streamlined.

The big question now is: Will BYD take that deal? Initially, they planned to build a factory in Mexico and use the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Free Trade Agreement (USMCA) to export into the U.S. market. However, both Trump and Biden shut that strategy down. Biden then raised tariffs on Chinese cars to 100%, blocking BYD from the U.S. unless they build directly in America.

In Europe, however, BYD is already making moves. They've built a factory in Hungary, meaning they'll produce electric cars inside the European Union and avoid the EU's growing trade barriers. That positions them to dominate Europe while continuing their expansion into South America, India, and beyond. The only major market where BYD is still blocked is the U.S. —but even that might change if they decide to start manufacturing here.

The swarm is coming. EVs aren't an exotic niche anymore—they're everywhere. I've driven only electric cars for 15 years, and my wife has for 13 years. This is not a new idea. But Tesla isn't alone anymore. BYD is proving that it's possible to mass-produce high-quality EVs profitably without relying on hype or empty promises.

# Marc Fasteau & Ian Fletcher Talk about U.S. Industrial Policy

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Marc Fasteau is a Vice Chairman of the Coalition for a Prosperous America (CPA), the nation's premier bipartisan nonprofit organization working at the intersection of trade, jobs, tax policy, and economic growth. Early in his career, he served on the professional staffs of the U.S. Senate Majority Leader, the House Banking & Currency Committee, and the Joint Economic Committee. He later became a partner at the New York investment bank Dillon, Read & Co. He later founded a property and casualty insurance company that was sold to Progressive Insurance.

Fasteau has been involved in international trade and industrial policy for 18 years and has contributed writings on these topics to the Financial Times Economist Forum and Palladium Magazine. He is a graduate of Harvard University and Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the Harvard Law Review. He resides in New York City.

Ian Fletcher is the author of *Free Trade Doesn't Work: What Should Replace It and Why* and the co-author of *The Conservative Case Against Free Trade*. He was previously a Senior Economist at the Coalition for a Prosperous America and now serves on its Advisory Board.

Earlier in his career, he was a Research Fellow at the U.S. Business and Industry Council and worked as an economic analyst in private practice. His writings on trade policy have been published in The Huffington Post, Tikkun, Palladium, WorldNetDaily, The American Thinker, The Christian Science Monitor, The Real-World Economics Review, Bloomberg News, Seeking Alpha, and Morning Consult.

Together, they have authored *Industrial Policy for the United States: Winning the Competition for Good Jobs and High-Value Industries,* which has received praise from politicians like Secretary of State Marco Rubio, industry leaders like Dan DiMicco, the former chairman and CEO of Nucor, and scholars like Harvard's Willy Shih.

A lightly edited transcript of that conversation follows.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Today, we're diving deep into a crucial and timely subject—one explored in detail in a recent book on the economics of tariffs and their implications for national security. While this issue has global ramifications, affecting countries like China, Canada, and Mexico, it is particularly significant for the United States.

First, I'd like to draw a distinction between broad, generalized tariffs—those that may or may not be strategic in practice—and the more targeted, industry-specific tariffs designed to protect American businesses. There's often a disconnect between how tariffs are discussed in media narratives and their actual economic or geopolitical function.

With that in mind, Marc or Ian, how would you frame this debate from a more academic and expert perspective?

**Marc Fasteau:** The whole idea of industrial policy is selective—that's a key word—intervention by the government in the economy.

This intervention supports the creation, retention, and development of advantageous industries. Mid-tech industries can be advantageous if they employ a lot of people at good wages. Of course, high-tech and high-value industries are advantageous because of the revenue and good jobs they provide. Because economic development is path-dependent, it also leads to the next big thing.

You don't want to lose out on the current high-tech, high-value industry because you'll be out of the next three. That leads directly to what kind of tariff policy you want to support. Ideally, you would tariff or subsidize those advantageous industries you're trying to retain against assault from competitors like China and new industries that you're trying to develop. It's the old infant industry protection idea that goes back to Hamilton.

The most efficient tariffs follow that mode and are selective. Tariffs were used in the early days of the United States, as we all have heard in the last six weeks or so, to generate revenue for the government. Trump has proposed across-the-board tariffs–meaning tariffs on everything–in part for this purpose. That's an inefficient way to use tariffs because some products, like t-shirts, will not lead to investment. Just higher prices and/or lower sales for the tariffed product. Nevertheless, a 10% across-the-board tariff would also stimulate a large amount of investment, job creation, and growth in other industries.

**Ian Fletcher:** The root idea underlying industrial policy, which tariffs are just a part of, is that it matters what industry a country has. As the phrase goes, it matters whether we make potato chips or computer chips. Now, this is something that most Americans and Canadians instinctively understand.

You can't be a serious, modern, developed country without having large, high-value, sophisticated industries. So when you're in a situation like today, where above all China, but also several other countries like Korea, Japan, Germany, and several smaller ones, are successfully pushing the U.S. out of the best, most advantageous industries—the industries you want to have, which are high-wage, high-profit, highly capitalized, and generally technological but not always bleeding-edge—you start to ask how you can regain your foothold.

Since imports are an obvious cause that has driven the U.S. out of many industries, tariffs become a tool to reclaim those industries. If the U.S. were to impose a flat tariff on all imports, it would begin relocating industries back to the country. This applies to other developed nations as well. Canada is in a somewhat different situation, but a flat tariff would likely bring back industries like the manufacturing of computers and laptops to the U.S. However, it would not necessarily bring back the production of goods primarily driven by cheap labour costs, like t-shirts. Even a flat tariff has strategic effects. I would say that a flat tariff on a bumpy economy isn't flat.

But what if that is not enough? The hope is that the administration will aim for a competitive rather than an overvalued U.S. dollar and will likely implement some form of a flat tariff—though that is not guaranteed. However, when other countries have targeted specific industries, and there is a need to restore them, like semiconductors, through the CHIPS Act, an industry-

specific tariff becomes necessary. Unlike a flat tariff or currency revaluation, an industry-specific tariff allows for targeted protection and investment in key sectors.

Additionally, tariffs can be country-specific. This means they can be used to reward or penalize nations based on their trade practices. For example, the U.S. can impose tariffs on China while exempting Korea.

**Fasteau:** The other thing to recognize is that in the U.S., we tend to assume that other countries believe in free trade. They don't.

Other than the U.K., maybe Australia, and New Zealand, no other economically significant country has embraced free trade in theory or practiced it consistently. Even the U.S. has not practiced free trade uniformly, though it has made more efforts to do so than other countries.

So, the real question is not whether tariffs are a good idea in the abstract. The reality is that if we don't protect advantageous industries, they will be lost to other nations that have spent the past 40 years deliberately targeting U.S. markets. Our markets are the largest and the easiest to enter, making them prime targets for foreign subsidies and trade barriers that block American exports.

This is why tariffs are one of the three pillars of every effective industrial policy.

**Jacobsen:** One particularly relevant article, published on October 22, 2024, titled "The Uses and Misuses of Tariffs," offers a compelling perspective on the nature of global trade. A key passage from that piece reads: "We now know that 'free trade' really amounts to a free-for-all, in which other countries practice mercantilism—a trade strategy that dates back to the days of sailing ships and treats industrial policy as a game whose object is to increase a nation's economic power—against an unprotected America. Today, nations from China to Germany play this game, some more brutally and some more politely. But they are all chipping away at America's best industries, from consumer electronics to steel to machine tools to commercial aircraft."

Given this backdrop, let's talk about the idea of a limited, strategic tariff policy. How can such an approach safeguard key sectors of the American economy—such as steel and high-tech manufacturing—without significantly driving up inflation?

**Fasteau:** Well, two things. First is the direct effect of increasing costs. Imports are a relatively small percentage of U.S. GDP, approximately 15%. So, a 10% across-the-board tariff would produce a price rise of 1.5% of GDP, assuming that imports did not decrease and the U.S. buyers bore the entire burden of the tariff. Neither of these assumptions is even close to realistic so that the actual price impact would be even lower. For example, the Trump steel tariffs did not result in a significant price increase.

Secondly, you get other benefits that offset any price increase from tariffs. The whole point of a tariff is to stimulate domestic investment, as seen in Trump's steel tariffs. When those tariffs were imposed, the price of steel initially rose, but U.S. steel companies invested $16 billion in new, modern facilities and began producing steel more efficiently. Within six or seven months, the steel price returned to pre-tariff levels.

Many analyses support this: What you get in return is a trade-off. You give up slightly cheaper goods at Walmart but gain manufacturing jobs that pay real living wages instead of low-wage

service jobs flipping burgers. That is the key benefit. You're also fostering new industries and protecting them from being taken over by China and other foreign competitors.

**Jacobsen:** Ian, do you have anything to add?

**Fletcher:** Sure. There is a trade-off involved in any policy decision. We are not claiming that industrial policy or tariffs are a cost-free policy; we are also not suggesting that tariffs alone can solve all of America's economic problems. However, we do believe they address issues that are otherwise nearly impossible to solve through any other means.

**Jacobsen:** You provided an industrial policy toolkit in the book. You emphasize that it is not about individual policies being singularly beneficial—the panacea point, as tools—but rather about the cumulative benefits of coordinated policies. So, what policies as tools does the American economy need now? You highlight many, but can you give us the greatest hits of that album?

**Fletcher:** We do have a list of industrial policies. I'll list them to give an idea of the scope of industrial policy as a concept, and then I'll focus specifically on the ones we need most right now.

We listed infant industry protection, local content rules, stage differential tariffs, import substitution, selective importation, export subsidies and targets, incentives for foreign firms, export processing zones, regulatory competition, credit allocation, forced savings policies, sovereign wealth funds, government procurement, state entrepreneurship, national champions, imposing competitive industry structure, fostering clusters, supporting private research, supporting public research, intellectual property policy, standard setting, technology mapping, combining policies, and picking winners.

So, what does the U.S. need from that list? First, we need a currency policy. We need a competitive dollar. Right now, we do not have one—it is significantly overvalued. Marc will likely want to talk about that in a moment. Second, we need selective tariffs for key industries and to address economically hostile nations.

The third area, which we have not touched on much, is state-supported technology development. For decades, the prevailing idea in the U.S. has been that the government should fund pure science while technologies develop in corporate labs or someone's garage in Palo Alto. That is a charming idea, but the problem is that when you examine the history of technological development, critical technologies often undergo long gestation periods where conducting the necessary development, engineering, testing, and prototyping for profit is impossible.

This is why private corporations or individuals did not develop many of the most important technologies of the post-war era—transistors, semiconductors, computer chips, jet engines, jet aircraft, pharmaceuticals, etc. The government developed them, often for public health or national defence, and then commercialized them later. Joe Biden has expanded that model to include state-supported development for environmental protection.

Now, we have three key categories where the government is actively involved in technology development: national defense, public health, and environmental protection. In other words, the

government develops technologies to protect us from external threats, deadly diseases, and natural disasters. However, we argue that the U.S. government should also support technology development purely for economic reasons—that is, simply for the sake of national prosperity.

**Jacobsen:** When discussing strategic tariffs, it's important to consider the risks of disregarding expert recommendations in favor of a blanket, one-size-fits-all tariff approach. What are the broader consequences of implementing flat tariffs, particularly when it comes to retaliatory measures from other nations?

Beyond the macroeconomic effects, how do these policies impact ordinary Americans and their standard of living—especially if such tariffs remain in place for an extended period rather than serving as a temporary economic adjustment?

**Fasteau:** Industrial policy is a long game, and that includes tariffs. If you are a U.S. steel manufacturer and China is dumping cheap steel into the market, and the U.S. responds by imposing a 25% tariff, that tariff must be known to be stable.

If it is only in place for a year, businesses will hesitate to make significant investments because they fear being driven out of business once the tariff is lifted. This is particularly critical for industries with long lead times and large capital investments. Other countries may retaliate with new or higher tariffs on U.S. imports. One way to ameliorate this is to reinvest our tariff revenues back into the economy in a targeted way to offset some of these effects.

**Jacobsen:** What about the impacts on global supply chains? Could there be disruptions resulting from flat tariffs?

**Fasteau:** First, the U.S. has leverage in tariff competition because we have a huge trade deficit. We import much more than we export. So, let's say both countries impose a 10% tariff on each other's imports. That would have a much greater impact on the surplus-exporting countries than on us.

Secondly, as Ian likes to say, there has never been a cataclysmic, spiraling trade war that got out of control in modern history. We have already been through nearly eight years of significantly higher tariffs than ever before. Yes, China retaliated with tariffs on agricultural exports, which hurt our farmers. But what did the Trump administration do? They bailed them out. Was it worth it? Yes, that step was necessary to reclaim industries critical for long-term productivity and economic growth.

But these pieces intersect, and you must consider what you are doing with the tariff revenue. For example, the now discredited traditional models predict that the cost per job saved because of a tariff is almost always unaffordably high. However, these analyses make a number of inaccurate assumptions.

First, they assume that the tariff revenue collected just gets sequestered and doesn't get injected back into the economy through tax rebates or government spending. Second, these models assume the situation would be stable if we didn't have a tariff, but if we don't put on a tariff when we're losing industries—the situation isn't stable, it's getting worse. Third, they don't

consider the effect tariffs have in stimulating investment and reducing the trade deficit so that we have more good jobs. Or the long-term benefits of retaining or regaining the protected industries.

**Jacobsen:** You gave the steel industry as an example, which had a six-to-seven-month timeline for building new facilities and increasing productivity. Considering a range of industries, what does it take to boost domestic capacity and investment when these tariffs are implemented?

**Fasteau:** There is no universal answer, but we can divide the question into two categories. The process is relatively quick for existing industries, such as the U.S. steel industry. These companies already know how to make marketable products, demand is proven, and they can raise capital, train workers, and scale up quickly. Many of these industries can stand up to new capacity in about a year, sometimes even less.

However, the timeline for developing entirely new industries or entering markets with technologies the U.S. does not currently produce is much longer. That is a different category altogether. In those cases, we must consider staged tariffs that gradually increase over time to allow domestic industries to ramp up production and innovation. We must also support pure research and new product development to the point where the private sector can take over.

We don't currently make the chips that Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company Limited (TMSC) makes, so we need them. If it goes into effect immediately, a big tariff on them right now is probably not productive. It might be better to phase it in over three or four years or do what Trump and Biden have been trying to do, which is to get TMSC to come over here and make those advanced chips in the U.S. This way, we don't lag, and they have to employ a lot of U.S. citizens so they learn how to do it. That's what China does, except they strong-arm U.S. companies to transfer their technology.

This example highlights how industrial policy must be both industry-specific and competitive-context-specific. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Ian read a list of about 15 or 16 different tools, but they do not apply to every situation. Policymakers must select the appropriate tool depending on the specific technology, where the U.S. stands with it, where our competitors are, and other contextual factors.

**Jacobsen:** Are many of the tools in this industrial policy toolkit meant to be used almost à la carte, depending on the industry?

**Fletcher:** You've touched on something important. The kind of economics we believe in is very industry-specific. In fact, that's one of the root differences between our way of thinking and the economic mainstream, which generally likes to discuss the economy in terms of high-level aggregate, like growth is X percent, unemployment is Y percent, and so forth. They think money is money, profit is profit. It doesn't matter whether you make it from selling computer chips or potato chips.

We think that the way industries work internally, which is what actually goes on Monday morning when people show up for work, is often very, very different. So, the economics of the computer chip industry and the economics of the potato chip industry are very, very different. And this is ultimately due to a very deep-seated difference in the mathematics of how we approach the world. We acknowledge the importance of something called increasing returns. So

for you math geeks out there and you engineers, this means that anything you do in economics is going to show what's called multiple equilibria, which is a way of saying that what happens is going to depend on contingent circumstances and choices. And you can't abstract away like most contemporary economics wants to do.

Now, the interesting thing that follows from that is that economic history becomes a lot more important than most economists in America today think it is. You can get a PhD in economics in most universities that have the program without even studying economic history because they don't think it's that important. We think economic history is your friend for a couple of reasons. One, above all, it's empirical. This is the actual hard data of how nations succeed, how industries succeed and grow, and where technologies come from. There's a factual record of all this stuff. We should not be approaching this with mathematical abstractions as our fundamental tool.

The second thing is economic history has a consistent way of telling you the things they don't want you to know. For example, Marc mentioned a minute ago that I like to say that in modern times there's been no such thing as a major trade war. Well, I actually go beyond that and I say history does not give any example of a trade war ever. I've been saying this since my first book, Free Trade Doesn't Work, came out in 2010, which was 14 years ago, and I have yet to have anyone respond to my challenge.

The way free traders worry about trade wars, you'd think that history would be full of them, like history is full of military wars. But if you look at history, there is no such thing as the Argentine-Brazilian trade war of 1853, or the Franco-Spanish trade war of 1971, or the Japanese-Korean trade war of 1352. It's not there. It's not what happens.

**Fasteau:** I always get amused when people start tearing their hair out about the next trade war. "Oh, America's going to start a trade war," then we're going to have these horrible tariffs going up, putting every economy in the world out of sorts.

Well, take a step back and look at the ground here. The ground situation is that most of our significant economic competitors have been waging a trade war against us for 40 years, with very few exceptions. For us to pretend that if we push back, we are responsible for a trade war—rather than recognizing that pushing and shoving is the natural order of things in trade—is misguided. What we need to do is wake up.

We don't even have to get mad. We just have to wake up and play the game. And that's what we're finally starting to do.

**Fletcher:** Yes, we just contradicted ourselves there, saying there's no such thing as a trade war while also claiming the world has been in a trade war with us forever. I know what you mean. I would prefer to call what they're doing mercantilism. But anyway, the point stands that even with someone as volatile as Donald Trump in the White House, we thought we were going to have a massive trade war between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico.

It was supposed to be a terrible disaster. Lo and behold, it got stood down, and they're going to work it out. There's always commercial conflict. There's always trade conflict. But the nightmare scenario where things spiral out of control—where I tariff you, you tariff me, I hit back harder,

you hit back harder, and before you know it, we're in total isolation—has never actually happened.

Fasteau: There are some industries where the stakes are much higher, mostly involving money and wealth. Not that those aren't important, but some conflicts are existential. For example, at least for the United States, ensuring that we are not outdone in a major way in AI by China may be existential. We just can't let that happen.

The other stuff? You can compromise on it. It's like disputes over money—there's always a compromise. There's always a way to set up a deal that lasts for a while, at least long enough for tempers to cool or technologies to change. So, the incentive on each side is to not let things get out of control.

And you can see this. Trump has a way of making his claims and stating his cases in the most irritating and insulting way possible. Despite that, everybody is still trying to make a deal because the economics say we've got to make a deal. And in the end, Trump wants to make a deal. The U.S. does too.

**Jacobsen:** Marc, you opened by noting how sometimes the United States can look excessively inward rather than, maybe, outward. What lessons can the Trump administration learn from countries like Japan, China, or Germany in building a coordinated policy framework? Even if you're taking an à la carte approach with individual tools from that toolkit per industry, how do you assemble that à la carte method as a menu of options?

**Fasteau:** Well, there are a bunch of things. We have a set of general guidelines for industrial policy, and they have to suit the politics of the country. We're never going to have the kind of top-down direction you see in other countries like China or even Japan. Political power is much more dispersed in our country. So, you need to recognize those limitations and opportunities.

Then, you need to think broadly and consider the three pillars of industrial policy: the currency, the trade policy that protects what you want to protect, and the domestic support of both important existing industries and new high-value industries for the future. If you do two out of the three, you may succeed, but you won't do nearly as well as if you integrate all three. Every country that has succeeded has done all three. They integrate them. They coordinate them.

The second challenge, particularly for the United States, is that this is a long game. Building a new industry takes a long time. It's a bit faster if you're putting tariffs on to encourage more investment in an existing industry because the facilities are already there. The timeframe is much longer and more capital-intensive for supporting not just pure science but also the development of a new materials industry. So, the support programs have to be tailored to those differences.

You also want to migrate toward indirect methods, like setting quality standards, rather than brute force—just pushing money toward an industry. There are times when you have to do that, but as the economy matures, expertise should increasingly come from the private sector.

**Jacobsen:** Ian, any final thoughts?

**Fletcher:** Yes. One of the things you learn from economic history is that every developed country got that way by using protective tariffs and proactive industrial policy, going back to the

Renaissance. This game has been played for hundreds of years, and the idea that free markets are everything is just a historical blip that recurs occasionally. The British had it at their peak, the United States had it at its peak, but it's never been the norm in economics. It never has been.

**Jacobsen:** Ian, Marc, I appreciate your time today and your expertise. It was nice to meet both of you.

**Fletcher:** It is a pleasure to meet you, too.

**Fasteau:** Thank you very much.

# Steel, Sovereignty, and Strategy: Gaming Out Trump's Tariffs

2025/04/21

**Tim Rosenberger**, a Legal Policy Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, brings a distinctive blend of experience in constitutional law, judicial clerkships, entrepreneurship, and public policy. A Stanford graduate, he focuses on the legal and economic frameworks that shape urban development and business policy. His research spans trade dynamics, economic revitalization, and litigation reform—with a particular emphasis on how **reciprocal tariffs** could bolster American industry.

Rosenberger argues that **tariffs**, particularly those imposed by the Trump administration on steel and aluminum, stimulated domestic production and job growth. While critics warn of higher consumer prices and inflation, he counters that strategic tariffs enhance national security and reduce U.S. dependence on foreign markets—especially China. Inflation, he argues, stems more from excessive government spending than from tariffs. Even in the face of potential retaliation—whether through tariffs, currency manipulation, or exclusionary trade agreements—Rosenberger believes the U.S. retains the upper hand. For him, tariffs aren't a blunt instrument but a calculated tool to secure long-term economic resilience.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In the short term, how do reciprocal tariffs influence U.S. economic growth and industrial performance?

**Tim Rosenberger:** Reciprocal tariffs, when implemented strategically, can provide immediate benefits to U.S. economic growth by leveling the playing field for American industries that have been taken advantage of for decades. Under President Trump's leadership, reciprocal tariffs have been used as a tool to counter unfair trade practices, particularly from China, which has long engaged in currency manipulation, intellectual property theft, and state-backed industrial espionage.

In the short term, these tariffs serve as a catalyst for domestic production by making foreign goods more expensive and encouraging investment in American manufacturing. We saw this during the Trump administration when tariffs on steel and aluminum led to a resurgence in domestic steel production, reopening plants and creating jobs for blue-collar workers who had been abandoned by the bipartisan globalist consensus.

Critics argue that tariffs raise consumer prices, but this is a myopic view that ignores the long-term gains of restoring economic sovereignty. The reality is that tariffs incentivize companies to relocate their supply chains back to the United States, thereby reducing their dependence on hostile foreign powers like China. This shift strengthens national security, protects critical industries, and ensures that American workers—not foreign laborers in state-subsidized factories—reap the benefits of economic growth.

Moreover, reciprocal tariffs give the U.S. leverage in trade negotiations. President Trump demonstrated this with his "America First" trade policy, using tariffs to force better trade deals such as the USMCA, which replaced the disastrous NAFTA. The immediate economic impact of

reciprocal tariffs is a necessary step in correcting decades of bad trade policy, and history shows that strong, decisive leadership on trade produces real economic gains for American workers.

**Jacobsen:** How do existing inflationary pressures factor into the broader economic impact of these policies?

**Rosenberger:** Inflationary pressures are an important consideration when discussing reciprocal tariffs, but they must be understood in the broader context of economic policy. The establishment narrative suggests that tariffs fuel inflation by increasing the cost of imported goods. However, this argument ignores the fact that inflation under Biden has been driven far more by reckless government spending, green energy subsidies, and anti-growth regulations than by any trade policies. Under Trump, inflation remained low even as tariffs were strategically applied to correct imbalances in global trade.

Reciprocal tariffs, if implemented correctly, actually serve as a counter to inflationary pressures in several ways. First, by incentivizing domestic production, tariffs reduce dependency on fragile international supply chains that are vulnerable to geopolitical shocks, as we saw during COVID-19. Strengthening domestic manufacturing stabilizes prices in the long run, as it decreases America's reliance on foreign producers who can manipulate supply and cost.

Second, tariffs generate revenue that offsets government spending needs, reducing the pressure to print money—something Biden's economic policies have failed to do. Under Trump, tariff revenues were reinvested into the economy, particularly to support American farmers who had been harmed by unfair foreign competition. This revenue stream acts as a hedge against inflationary pressures created by excessive deficit spending.

Third, reciprocal tariffs enhance economic resilience by preventing foreign nations—particularly China—from using artificially cheap exports to undercut American producers. When foreign goods are dumped into the U.S. market at below-market prices, domestic industries collapse, leading to job losses, lower wages, and decreased production capacity. This, in turn, weakens supply-side economic stability and creates long-term inflationary risks. By ensuring fair competition through tariffs, we mitigate this cycle and create a more stable pricing environment.

The idea that tariffs alone would drive inflation ignores the larger economic mismanagement under Biden. Trump's "America First" policies kept inflation low by promoting domestic energy independence, reducing corporate tax burdens to encourage production, and keeping government spending under control. The inflation crisis we see today isn't the result of trade policy but of a bloated regulatory state, out-of-control government spending, and a Federal Reserve that has been forced to play catch-up due to reckless economic policies. Strategic tariffs, as Trump has advocated, would help correct these problems by strengthening domestic industries, securing supply chains, and protecting the purchasing power of American workers.

**Jacobsen:** How might U.S. trading partners respond with countermeasures?

**Rosenberger:** U.S. trading partners have several potential countermeasures they can use in response to reciprocal tariffs, but the effectiveness and impact of these measures vary depending on the country and the broader geopolitical context.

Under President Trump, we saw a range of retaliatory actions, but the reality is that America's economic leverage—especially over countries dependent on the U.S. market—limits the effectiveness of most countermeasures. Below are some of the key ways U.S. trading partners might respond.

The most direct response to U.S. tariffs is for trading partners to impose their tariffs on American goods. This was evident during Trump's trade war with China, where Beijing retaliated by targeting U.S. agricultural exports, particularly soybeans, pork, and other key products. The European Union also imposed tariffs on American-made goods, including motorcycles and whiskey, in response to U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum.

This can hurt specific U.S. industries that rely on exports, such as agriculture, automobiles, and industrial machinery.

However, it can also backfire on the retaliating countries, as consumers in those countries face higher prices and may turn to alternative sources—including domestic producers or other international suppliers.

Trump's approach was to respond to retaliation with further pressure, often using tariffs as leverage to negotiate better trade deals, such as the USMCA, which replaced NAFTA.

Another possible response is for countries to reduce their dependence on U.S. goods and seek alternative suppliers. For instance, China has sought to diversify its agricultural imports by increasing purchases from Brazil and Argentina, rather than the United States.

This can be a short-term issue for U.S. exporters, but global supply chains don't shift overnight. Many American products—such as high-tech goods, aerospace components, and certain agricultural products—are difficult to replace with alternative suppliers.

Moreover, this response often carries costs for the retaliating country, as switching suppliers can reduce efficiency and increase costs.

China, in particular, has a history of devaluing its currency to offset the effects of U.S. tariffs. By making the yuan weaker against the dollar, Chinese exporters can partially absorb the costs of tariffs, keeping their goods competitive in the U.S. market.

Currency manipulation can temporarily lessen the impact of tariffs, but it comes with risks for the manipulating country. A weaker currency makes imports more expensive, hurting domestic consumers and businesses that rely on foreign goods. It can also lead to capital flight, as investors lose confidence in the stability of the currency.

Trump recognized this tactic and labeled China a "currency manipulator," signaling a willingness to take further action against such practices.

Some U.S. trading partners might respond by forming or strengthening trade agreements that do not include the U.S., attempting to bypass American influence. For example, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) emerged after the U.S. withdrew from the original TPP.

While this could create alternative trade networks, the U.S. economy is still the largest in the world, and most countries cannot afford to cut ties with the American market entirely.

Even when countries sign trade deals that exclude the U.S., they still need access to American consumers, making full economic decoupling unrealistic.

Another potential response is for trading partners to challenge U.S. tariffs at the WTO, arguing that they violate international trade rules.

While the WTO may rule against the U.S. in some cases, Trump's administration largely dismissed WTO rulings when they conflicted with national interests.

The WTO itself has been losing influence, especially as the U.S. and other major powers question its effectiveness in dealing with China's trade abuses.

Foreign governments may impose additional regulatory burdens, such as licensing restrictions, heightened safety standards, or bureaucratic delays, to make it harder for American companies to operate in their markets.

This can be a problem for U.S. multinational corporations that do business abroad, such as tech companies and automakers.

However, countries that take this approach risk scaring away foreign investment and damaging their own economies in the process.

**Jacobsen:** How will Trump likely respond?

**Rosenberger:** Trump's approach to trade retaliation has always been aggressive and pragmatic. He has made it clear that America holds the leverage in most of these disputes, given that foreign economies are more reliant on the U.S. market than the U.S. economy is on them. Likely responses would include:

Doubling down on tariffs: If countries impose retaliatory tariffs, Trump will likely increase tariffs further, forcing them to reconsider their approach.

Bilateral deals over multilateral compromises: Instead of relying on institutions like the WTO, Trump prefers direct negotiations that give the U.S. the upper hand.

Domestic Support for Affected Industries: As seen in the China trade war, Trump used tariff revenues to support U.S. farmers affected by retaliatory measures.

**Jacobsen:** Do reciprocal tariffs effectively promote reshoring and domestic job creation, or do they risk introducing inefficiencies and raising costs within the U.S. economy?

**Rosenberger:** Reciprocal tariffs, when applied strategically, can drive reshoring and domestic job creation by making it more cost-effective for companies to manufacture goods in the U.S. rather than rely on imports from countries with unfair trade advantages. Under Trump, tariffs on steel and aluminum led to a resurgence in domestic production, reopening shuttered factories and creating jobs in key industries. By discouraging dependency on adversarial nations like China, tariffs strengthen supply chain resilience and national security, ensuring that American workers, not foreign laborers, benefit from economic growth.

Critics argue that tariffs create inefficiencies and raise costs for consumers; however, this perspective overlooks the long-term economic benefits of restoring domestic production capacity. While certain imported goods may become more expensive in the short term, tariffs incentivize businesses to invest in local manufacturing, thereby reducing their reliance on fragile global supply chains that are prone to disruption. The fundamental inefficiency lies in outsourcing critical industries to foreign governments that manipulate markets and undercut U.S. workers. A well-executed reciprocal tariff policy prioritizes fair competition, economic independence, and sustained job growth over the failed globalist policies of the past.

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

# Marianna Tretiak on Building a National Movement for Ukraine

2025/04/15

**Marianna Tretiak** serves as Chair of the Board of Directors for the American Coalition for Ukraine (ACU), where she has emerged as a leading voice in mobilizing U.S. support for Ukraine. A longtime advocate for civic engagement, she was instrumental in founding the National Advocacy Committee of the Ukrainian National Women's League of America—the oldest and largest Ukrainian women's organization in North America—and continues to lead its nationwide advocacy efforts as chair.

Tretiak also played a foundational role in creating the ACU itself and has been a key organizer of the Ukraine Action Summit, including the landmark 2024 gathering that brought together more than 500 delegates from 44 states. Her commitment to Ukraine extends into the educational sphere, where she sits on the board of Ukraine Global Scholars and serves on the advisory board of Engin. A dedicated civic leader, she is also an active member of the Rotary Club of Philadelphia.

Ukrainian soldier with the Azov Regiment shortly before her capture at the Azovstal metalworks. (The Guardian)

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Thank you for joining me. My first question is, how did your leadership shape the outcomes of the Ukraine Action Summit in 2024?

**Marianna Tretiak:** The summit and the American Coalition for Ukraine itself result from the work of many individuals who have come together for a greater cause. So, I can't take credit for all of our successes. But I think one thing that has been central since the beginning of the Ukraine Action Summit—since our first one in September 2022—is the focus on advocate education, as you mentioned. The more summits we hold, the more I realize how much this is not just a tool for getting co-sponsors on a bill but also for creating a lasting advocacy community—people who can take the work home with them to their districts and continue advocating year-round.

So, for the 2024 summit, our focus was twofold: First, ensuring that our advocates were prepared to continue their efforts regardless of election outcomes and ready to hit the ground running. Second, bringing in even more participants, aiming to include all 50 states. This summit was the first time we had constituents from all 50 states come to Washington, D.C., to advocate—and that achievement is largely due to the momentum built in prior summits and the engagement we fostered leading up to this one.

**Jacobsen:** What advocacy methods have been the most impactful or effective in advancing major aid efforts?

**Tretiak:** So, what we have found to be incredibly powerful is. First, we've made a big effort to find constituents—people who live in those districts—who can say, "I live in Iowa, I live in North Dakota, I live in Wyoming." I don't know why I'm just naming states in the Upper Midwest—but, you know, "I live in Florida, and I live in this district." As your constituent, I know this is important to me as an American. What we've tried to do within the coalition is

highlight the fact that 30 to 35 percent of the people who join us and advocate on the Hill do not have even a drop of Ukrainian blood. They're just regular Americans doing it because they believe this matters as Americans.

For the passage of our supplemental aid package, we also made a major push to create alliances with our Ukrainian and American evangelical communities that have been sending missions to Ukraine since the 1990s. Ukraine is the cradle of Christianity in Eastern Europe. More churches have been founded in post-Soviet states by Ukrainians than by any other group of people.

We wanted to ensure that the message was carried through the halls of Congress. However, we can create a connection between our legislators and Ukraine—whether it is highlighting issues of faith, the faith they pray with at home, whether it is spotlighting the issue of stolen children—everyone has either been a child or has a child; or whether it is connecting legislators to constituents and the work they've been doing in Ukraine—these have all been among our most effective methods for building real connections and helping our legislators understand the truth of what is happening.

**Jacobsen:** With Donald Trump in the White House, many organizations are adapting their advocacy style depending on the particular conflict or political concern. How is ACU adapting to political changes unfolding in real time?

**Tretiak:** Well, we've been trying to do a few things and building them out. First, ahead of this summit, we created a video—the summit is so focused on education and training for advocates—so we put together a video in advance that was specifically about the changing advocacy landscape.

Many of our advocates did their work either in the 117th or the 118th Congress. The 117th Congress saw a flurry of bills being introduced all the time. The 118th had fewer, but still a significant number. Now, we've had to lay the groundwork and reeducate our advocates. We're telling them this is a world where fewer new bills are being introduced. The number of new bills, compared to previous Congresses, is much lower. As a result, you can expect fewer bills about Ukraine—or perhaps none at all.

Many of us who've been involved in advocacy for some time understand that 2022 was unique. There were so many bills related explicitly to Ukraine, rather than Ukraine being mentioned as a line item in something like the National Defense Authorization Act. So, our first move was to educate our advocates about that shift in the legislative landscape.

So they know when they're going in, not just to say, "Co-sponsor or nothing." We've changed how we approach things. First, we want to ensure that we're engaging our legislators so they can use their voices as platforms to share the truth.

Our work involves getting co-sponsors on bills for messaging impact and communicating that clearly to our advocates. We are also working hard to highlight that while we may not be perfectly in line with the administration, we're at least singing from the same hymn book.

No one wants peace more than Ukraine. We are incredibly grateful for any actions aimed at bringing peace. Our conversation begins with the foundational truth that Ukrainians want peace

more than anyone. Ukrainians want to live lives without being bombed. We are grateful and looking forward to any process that moves toward peace. From that point, we begin to have more complex conversations.

**Jacobsen:** How have appearances in Newsweek and broader media helped build awareness and support for Ukraine?

**Tretiak:** We've been fortunate. In 2022, there was a moment when the world woke up to Ukraine—and many issues that many of us had been aware of for years. I was born in the United States but grew up attending Ukrainian school every Saturday, and I was in the Ukrainian Scouts. There have been so many efforts, even to get The New York Times to stop writing "Kiev" instead of "Kyiv." It took Russia's 2022 invasion for them to change that, finally. I remember that in 2015, a huge sign-on letter from professors and international experts was sent to major newspapers asking them to recognize the correct Ukrainian spellings and narratives. And still, nothing. There was just this…I don't know whether it was Russification or people being blind to it, but even the most basic things went ignored. Everyone's attention is so fractured now, but 2022 was when it all converged on Ukraine.

So, anytime we can place a narrative in the media—even now—whether it's a human-interest story about a stolen child or a survivor's experience, it still makes a huge difference. After President Zelensky visited the U.S. in February and that somewhat infamous Oval Office moment, we started receiving emails to the general American Coalition inboxes from people we had never heard from before. They said, "I found you online. I'm American. I care about Ukraine. I want to help."

That kind of outreach is invaluable. Especially now, with Ukraine fatigue setting in and American attention shifting to other things—which is natural—we truly value every opportunity to tell Ukraine's story again and make it resonate.

A post shared by UNWLA (@unwlanational)

**Jacobsen:** What kind of grassroots mobilization is most needed to influence political decision-making and meet the current needs of Ukraine or Ukrainian Americans?

**Tretiak:** I think that, first and foremost, we are constantly working to bring in and connect with all Americans. In our coalition, in our state leader network, about 10 of our states are led by young Americans with no Ukrainian heritage. And in many ways, they are some of our most effective and impactful leaders.

So, if there's one area where we always strive to engage, attract, and connect with people, it's fostering relationships with Americans who want to support Ukraine. That is the grassroots engagement we are continually building. Any way we can do that—whether organizing an interfaith prayer service across multiple churches or hosting a cultural event or book discussion in a public library—we are focused on connecting at the grassroots level with our American supporters of Ukraine.

**Jacobsen:** The United States is becoming an increasingly secular society. By some measures, religious identification and affiliation have reached historic lows—a demographic shift that

carries real implications for your advocacy efforts. Given this changing landscape, particularly the declining influence of traditional faith-based organizing, have you considered engaging with atheist, agnostic, or humanist communities as part of your outreach? Could there be space for an interfaith—or even ethical-humanist—framework that rallies diverse belief systems around shared principles such as Ukraine's sovereignty, dignity, and survival in the face of war?

**Tretiak:** That's an amazing idea. We've never ruled it out. We've done outreach along a variety of vectors. One of the reasons I often highlight churches is that, first, there are Ukrainian churches that many of us are connected with, and second, we've built strong relationships with the evangelical community more broadly.

That said, the coalition's core is like America itself—it includes people of all faiths and people of no faith. We are deeply committed to that diversity and try to reflect it in our outreach strategy.

For example, we conducted an outreach trip to Louisiana last year, which helped us build strong connections. That is how we now have an amazing leader from Louisiana and such a vibrant delegation coming to our last three summits. Our outreach involved working with community organizations, visiting libraries, speaking at universities, and bringing in Ukrainian civilians to talk about their everyday lives and how the war has affected them.

So yes, we plan to continue reaching out through every vector we can. The main challenge at the moment is that we're a volunteer-run organization. The availability of committed stakeholders and realistic funding support limits our capacity. But where we have people willing to lead, we make things happen.

**Jacobsen:** That's a really important point. I raise it because I wouldn't say I come directly out of the secular humanist tradition, but I've been actively involved with secular humanist and adjacent movements for some time. There's a great deal of overlap—whether it's the Unitarian Universalists, the ethical culture movement, humanistic Judaism, or others. It's a broad and diverse constellation of communities, and I believe many within that orbit would be eager to engage more deeply.

In many ways, I think they're waiting for an olive branch. We all recognize that this war is a profound tragedy. While much of the political discourse around religion and non-religion tends to be combative or binary, I try to avoid that framing. For most people, it simply comes down to how they choose to live their lives—how they practice, or don't practice—in a personally authentic and private way.

**Tretiak:** Exactly.

A post shared by UNWLA (@unwlanational)

**Jacobsen:** What do you find to be the most emotionally taxing part of advocacy work—whether directly related to Ukraine or U.S.-Ukraine relations more broadly?

**Tretiak:** In my role within the coalition—as Chair of the State Leader Network—the most emotionally taxing part is working with and supporting our network of stakeholders. We have advocates in all 50 states, each led by delegation leaders.

These leaders act as the middle layer because I couldn't possibly train and coordinate 600 advocates myself—not with the level of quality and support we aim to provide.

We rely on those leaders. But here's the challenge: I can't just replace them if I don't get along with a particular leader. There's often only one person coordinating advocacy in a specific region, and we must find ways to work together, for better or worse. That's probably the most emotionally taxing aspect—finding a way to support and engage everyone.

These are personal connections we're managing. We're asking volunteers to give significant time and energy. Many run their own 501(c)(3) organizations to support Ukraine, and they do advocacy. So, it's a constant balancing act—bringing patience, heart, and commitment to support people doing incredible work while managing my own bandwidth and, sometimes, herding cats.

Because they're volunteers, we often take that final step for them. If someone does not complete a task, we put together everything they need so they can still execute it. If they're calling their member of Congress or organizing a local rally, we ensure they have the talking points, background research, and any other materials they need.

So, it's really about finding that balance—empowering them while respecting their limits and helping ensure their success in any way we can.

**Jacobsen:** What would be your biggest ask for 2025?

**Tretiak:** Is it realistic to ask or just pie in the sky?

**Jacobsen:** Yeah, I mean, pie in the sky is fine. We are not just stipulating universals that everyone wants. I'm more realistic at this point.

**Tretiak:** Absolutely. So, we certainly want one thing in particular: the Sanctioning Russia Act, which was introduced by Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick in the House and Senators Lindsey Graham and Jim Risch in the Senate. That is our major advocacy push right now.

As we move toward peace—and as more conversations begin around freezing the lines of conflict—we want to ensure that the U.S. follows historical precedent as it enters any peace process. We're referencing the precedent set by the Welles Declaration when the U.S. refused to recognize the forced incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union.

So, we are asking that if the lines are frozen and we enter into a ceasefire or peace process involving currently occupied territories, the U.S. maintain a position of non-recognition—just as it has with Crimea. We cannot set a precedent that land can be taken by force and, if held long enough, become accepted. That is a dangerous message to send.

**Jacobsen:** That's true.

**Tretiak:** Even if the situation results in frozen battle lines and occupied areas, the United States should not recognize those regions as part of the Russian Federation. That has been a key message in our meetings with legislators.

And there's a third thing we're advocating strongly for: Russia has stolen over 20,000 Ukrainian children whose names we know. Based on extrapolations from occupied territories, the estimated number is closer to 700,000 or 800,000.

How can we talk about peace, let alone a just peace, if these children remain abducted? If they are not returned, and we treat this as something we move past or ignore, then we fail. So, we are firmly advocating that any peace conversation must include accountability and action regarding the stolen children. The child protection and advocacy community is aligned on this point—we must prioritize their return.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you, Marianna.

**Tretiak:** Great! I'll be in touch. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today.

# The Vanishing Peace: Fortuné Gaetan Zongo on Burundi's Human Rights Reckoning

2025/03/23

Fortuné Gaetan Zongo serves as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burundi—a role that draws on decades of judicial experience and deep expertise in international human rights law. A magistrate by training, Zongo currently presides over the Court of Appeal in Fada N'Gourma, Burkina Faso. His career spans numerous high-level judicial appointments and includes a postgraduate specialization in fundamental human rights. From 2006 to 2011, he led the Department for the Protection and Defense of Human Rights within Burkina Faso's Ministry for the Promotion of Human Rights and later served on the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture from 2011 to 2014.

In his assessment of Burundi, Zongo paints a sobering picture: restricted freedoms of expression, an inefficient judiciary, entrenched economic inequality, and the erosion of vital peace agreements, including the Arusha Accords. He warns of the lingering threat of post-election violence and stresses the need for a more inclusive political order—anchored in a robust legal framework and widespread human rights education. While he acknowledges President Évariste Ndayishimiye's rhetorical commitment to fighting corruption, Zongo remains critical of the lack of measurable progress. For real justice and national reconciliation to take root, he argues, words must give way to action.

Click here to download a PDF version of the interview translated into Kirundi.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** I would like to ask a background question: what initially sparked your interest in human rights?

**Fortuné Gaetan Zongo:** Human rights have always been a subject of great interest to me nationally and internationally. I have worked in this area since the start of my professional career, and I feel very comfortable and fulfilled working in this field.

**Jacobsen:** What do you see as the key human rights issues currently facing Burundi?

**Zongo:** Burundi is a beautiful country but has faced cyclical crises since gaining independence. The people of Burundi need to come together to address and resolve the issues they have faced over the years. Without such efforts, these crises are likely to continue.

**Jacobsen:** There was also the 2015 political crisis in Burundi. What impact has that had on civil rights over the past decade?

**Zongo:** The political crisis of 2015 is the latest. The effects are still visible and the consequence is a decline in human rights and prosperity in the country. All aspects of the country have been affected by this crisis. Ten (10) years later, less than half of the refugees have still not returned.

**Jacobsen:** Around the world, journalists often face harassment, attacks, and even killings. How does the situation in Burundi affect the media and other groups?

**Zongo:** Around the world, as you have pointed out, freedom of expression is constantly being called into question. As far as Burundi is concerned, we have to admit that the situation is far from acceptable. Journalists are regularly harassed.

After the case of Floriane Irangabiye, who was unjustly detained and then pardoned by the President of the Republic, there is now the case of Sandra Muhoza. It should be noted that more than a hundred journalists are in exile and some media outlets have suffered reprisals.

In reality, freedom of expression in **Burundi** is very limited, if not non-existent. You risk imprisonment if you do not align yourself with the government's point of view.

**Jacobsen:** In the last 25 years, we have seen the world transition into a multipolar system, where no single or even two power centers dominate. Regional bodies are also becoming increasingly significant. How do organizations like the African Union and the United Nations help address human rights issues in Burundi?

**Zongo:** I don't know whether the world's multipolar system played a role, but the Arusha Agreement was negotiated under the auspices of the international community, and the result was a stable period of peace and respect for human rights, until the Agreement was unraveled and the 2015 crisis that the Burundian state is struggling to resolve. These include regional or sub-regional organisations such as the African Union and international organisations such as the United Nations. These various organisations have tried in the past and continue to try to help Burundi, often with mixed results.

**Jacobsen:** The Tigray war in Ethiopia is an example of deeply rooted ethnic tensions. How are ethnic relations in Burundi?

**Zongo:** Since I took up my post, I have not felt any racial tension between different groups who live in harmony. However, harmony between different people can be exploited.

**Jacobsen**: How do you address allegations of torture and inhumane treatment within Burundi's security and judicial systems?

**Zongo:** Both the reports of the Independent Commission of Inquiry and my previous reports have highlighted acts of torture and ill-treatment. It also shows that the judiciary is unable and unlikely to prosecute the perpetrators of such acts.

The main perpetrators are the various public forces, in particular the army, the police and the intelligence service. To these must be added the Imbonérakure militia.

**Jacobsen:** You mentioned that many issues stem from resource allocation. How do poverty and economic challenges impact human rights, especially for vulnerable populations?

**Zongo:** Reports from international institutions indicate that Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Poverty is a pervasive issue. Since the Arusha Agreement was undermined, the military group has ruled the country and controlled the nation's economic resources. This group dominates every economic sector, preventing broader economic development.

Burundi is rich in mineral resources and has strong agricultural potential, but there is no democracy, which hinders progress. Without civil and political rights, access to education and freedom of expression, the people cannot be productive or contribute to their country's development.

**Jacobsen:** Is there evidence of a shrinking civic space and a growing climate of fear due to arbitrary arrests and intimidation tactics?

**Zongo:** This is a daily issue. The civic space is characterised by a de facto monopoly of the CNDD-FDD in the management of public affairs, control of all sectors of political and administrative life, abusive interference in the functioning of the main opposition party, forced enrolment in the CNDD-FDD party, threats and repression against political opponents, arbitrary arrests and detentions of journalists and human rights defenders, and so on. There have even been attempts to control the narrative of articles published by the media and to use the law for political ends.

**Jacobsen:** How are shortages of essential goods and inflation worsening the conditions in already impoverished areas?

**Zongo:** Shortages are a major issue. For example, there is a severe shortage of gasoline and medicines needed to treat people. The entire economy is collapsing. Even the currency is unstable, making it nearly impossible to buy anything. The situation is dire.

**Jacobsen:** What are the risks of violence in the upcoming 2025 municipal and legislative elections?

**Zongo:** The risks of violence are high. The deteriorating civic space, the exclusion of opposition voices, and widespread economic instability create an environment ripe for conflict. The elections may destabilize the country without urgent action to ensure inclusivity and transparency.

**Jacobsen:** What are the expectations for the upcoming elections? Are there risks of post-election violence?

**Zongo:** The ruling party will win the elections. The question is more about the margin of their victory. The youth of the party is actively mobilizing people to vote, but we anticipate a high risk of post-election violence. This is particularly concerning, given the exclusion of certain groups from the political process.

**Jacobsen:** What about rebel groups like the RED Tabara? How do they impact the security landscape, especially during election periods?

**Zongo:** While the risk of violence involving RED Tabara exists, I believe their direct impact on the elections may not be significant. They could exploit the situation to launch attacks against the government, but government forces have repelled their recent actions. The greater risk of violence comes from individuals or groups excluded from the election process. That is where post-election unrest could arise.

**Jacobsen:** How would a revival of the Arusha Agreement contribute to national reconciliation?

**Zongo:** The Arusha Agreement brought peace for nearly 15 years by fostering dialogue among political parties and establishing frameworks for governance. Key players, including the African Union, the United Nations, and the United States, helped set up institutions supporting peace. Unfortunately, the current ruling group has dismantled much of the infrastructure established by the agreement. We must initiate new negotiations to create a revised agreement that deeply embeds peace and reconciliation.

**Jacobsen:** Members of the ruling party are reportedly affiliated with the Imbonerakure militia, which operates without fear of legal consequences. What does this mean politically, and how can accountability be restored?

**Zongo:** The fact remains that the Imborakure militia is an essential component of the CNDD-FDD party and this militia operates under cover of the State, which gives it some of its attributes. In a completely unrealistic hypothesis, if every political party in Burundi (which would in fact be legitimate), one can imagine the consequences for the stability of the country. The existence of this militia is a weakening of the State and its organs as well as a potential cause of institutional instability. Numerous cases of torture, murder and other abuses have been attributed to the Imborakure. This situation must be remedied as a matter of urgency. It is unacceptable that this group continues to operate with impunity, and it is essential that the rule of law be re-established and that it be held to account.

**Jacobsen:** What actions are President Évariste Ndayishimiye and his government taking to address these issues?

**Zongo:** When he took power, President Ndayishimiye gave hope for human rights. And that hope is still there. He actively denounces corruption and speaks out against the inefficiency of state officials. We have seen him speak out against corruption or grant presidential pardons to many people to make up for the dysfunction of the judicial system. Although he frequently calls for action, we have yet to see tangible and effective results. His declarations are not enough; what is needed is concrete action and measurable progress in resolving the problems. We need to move from declarations to vigorous action in order to achieve tangible results.

**Jacobsen:** When addressing economic hardships, fostering inclusive elections, combating impunity, and restoring civic freedoms, one or a few critical points in the cultural, legislative, economic, or social framework often catalyze change. What points in Burundi would you prioritize to create a positive ripple effect if addressed?

**Zongo:** From my perspective, the first point is strengthening the legal framework. While we do not necessarily need to change it, we must enforce it properly. Secondly, we need to establish a strong state that transcends individuals. The state is controlled by a small group that uses it to maintain power.

The third point would be implementing education on human rights. This would allow everyone to understand and enjoy their rights. Addressing these areas could lead to significant progress in Burundi.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you very much, Mr. Zongo, for your time today. The issues you touched on are not something that many people think about too often.

**Zongo:** Thank you. I appreciate it.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you very much for your time. It was nice to meet you.

# Journalism's Role in Moral Narratives and Synopsis of Clergy-Related Abuse

2025/03/26

I recently addressed a Croatian Christian association via a virtual conference on clergy-related abuse, emphasizing journalism's essential role as a watchdog in exposing institutional misconduct. I argued that victims should be the primary voices, institutions secondary, with journalists facilitating balanced narratives. I urged acknowledgment of abuse without condemning entire denominations, advocating evidence-based investigations, interfaith dialogue, and robust reforms to protect victims and faith integrity.

Citing historical scandals and cultural movements as context, I stressed that transparency and accountability are imperative. This speech, along with the rest of the conference, will be shared with the Ecumenical Patriarch, EU Parliament, Roman Catholic Church, UN in Geneva, UNICEF, World Council, World Council of Churches, World Health Organization, and other major institutions, ensuring accountability and healing universally.

Below is the transcript of my comments.

Journalism is, first and foremost, a human enterprise. It's built on human observation, written for human consumption, and concerns human enterprises. Just democracies, fair societies, accountable power, and the like require journalists as critical watchdogs to bring otherwise hidden stories to the forefront. Clergy-related abuse is a complex and subtle issue with blunt outcomes.

The primary voices of clergy-related abuse should be the victim who can give indications of patterns and see firsthand weaknesses in institutions that have misbehaved, abused, and often told lies or merely partial, softened truths about it. The secondary voices are everyone else in the institutional setup leading to the abuse in the system in the first place. Religious institutions have a minority of persons in positions of authority, unfortunately, who have abused. Journalists are a tertiary voice around these two.

The role of journalists is working with victims, with the majority of clergy who have not abused, and other researchers, to gather the narratives and collate those to get the wider scope of the patterns of the minority of clergy who have abused. People take the accountability problem seriously, as it's bad for the victims, bad for the laity, bad for the image and authority of the clergy, and, essentially, bad for the representation of the faith. If you care about the future of Orthodoxy, then you care about this as an issue relevant to the integrity of the faith.

So, I wanted to take these few minutes to recognize the substantial problem before us, for a few reasons. Some factors played into the situation in which we find ourselves. First and foremost, the crimes of a select number of clergy. Second, these crimes went institutionally unchecked for many, many years in the largest denominations of Christianity–almost as a prelude to the broader cultural movements witnessed in many Western democratic societies.

Third, a tendency to reject the claims of victims when the prevailing evidence presents the vast majority of reported cases in the extreme cases of misconduct, i.e., rape, are evidentiarily supportable. False allegations happen, but these are a small minority and should not represent a false dichotomy of support. Institutions should establish robust processes to investigate all claims, addressing false allegations decisively while preserving trust in genuine victims.

Fourth, there is a diversification of the faith landscape of many Western cultures, particularly with the rise of non-religious communities and subsequent ways of life. One result is positive: Citizens clearly are more free than not to believe and practice as they wish. One negative result is the over-reach in non-religious commentary stereotyping churches as hotbeds of abuse, which creates problems–let alone being false. It doesn't solve the problem while misrepresenting the scope of it. It makes the work of the majority of clergy to create robust institutions of accountability for the minority of abusers more difficult and onerous. It's comprehensively counterproductive.

If we want to reduce the incidence and, ideally, eliminate clergy-related abuse, we should first acknowledge some clergy abuse without misrepresenting the clergy of any Christian denomination as a universal acid on the dignity of those who wish to practice the Christian faith. It's a disservice to interbelief efforts, makes the non-religious look idiotic and callous, and blankets every clergy with the crimes of every one of their seminarian brothers and occasional sister in Christ.

For the second, we should work on a newer narrative context for the wider story, see the partial successes of wider cultural movements, and inform of unfortunate trends in and out of churches for balance. For the third, we simply need to reorient incorrect instinctual reactions against individuals coming forward with claims as the problem rather than investigations as an appropriate response, maintaining the reputation of the accused and accuser while having robust mechanisms for justice in either case.

For the fourth, some in the non-religious communities, who see themselves as grounded in Reason and Compassion alongside Evidence, should consider the reasoning in broad-based accusation and consider with compassion the impacts on individuals in faith communities with the authority who are working hard to build institutions capable of evidence-based justice on one of the most inflammatory and sensitive types of abuse. Interfaith dialogue can be slow, quiet, but comprehensive and robust in the long-term–more effective and aligned with both the ideals of Christ or Reason, Compassion, and Evidence.

To these four contexts, journalists can provide a unifying conduit to the public in democratic societies to discuss the meaning of justice in the context of the Christian faith living in democratic, pluralistic societies. We cannot 'solve' the past errors, but can provide a modicum of justice for victims and create a future in which incidents are tamped to zero for a new foundation to be laid. Then 'upon that rock,' we do not have repeats in the Church as we have witnessed in other contexts discussed over the last few decades:

1991 – Tailhook Scandal (U.S. military sexual harassment scandal)
2012 – *Invisible War* documentary (exposing military sexual assault)

2014 – #YesAllWomen (response to the Isla Vista killings)
2017 – Australia's Royal Commission Report (child sexual abuse in institutions)
2017 – #MuteRKelly (boycott of R. Kelly over sexual abuse allegations)
2018 – #MeTooBollywood (Bollywood's reckoning with sexual misconduct)
2018 – #MeTooPublishing (exposing sexual harassment in the literary world)
2018 – #WhyIDidntReport (response to Brett Kavanaugh hearings)
2019 – Southern Baptist Convention Abuse Scandal (Houston Chronicle exposé)
2019 – K-Pop's #BurningSun (sex trafficking and police corruption scandal)
2020 – #IAmVanessaGuillen (military abuse and murder case)
2021 – #FreeBritney (exposing exploitation and control of female artists)
2021 – Haredi Jewish Communities' Abuse Cases (journalistic investigations by Shana Aaronson & Hella Winston)
2002-Present – Catholic Church Sexual Abuse Crisis (Boston Globe's Spotlight investigation)
2017-Present – #MexeuComUmaMexeuComTodas (Brazil's movement against misogyny in media and politics)
2020-Present – #MeTooGymnastics (Larry Nassar's abuse in U.S. gymnastics)
2020-Present – #SayHerName (Black women and LGBTQ+ victims of police violence)
2021-Present – #MeTooIncest (focus on childhood sexual abuse within families)

## How Churches in British Columbia are Targeting Reproductive Rights

2025/03/29

"Prosecuting women and girls for abortion is not only cruel and discriminatory, but also puts their health and lives in danger by driving them to clandestine and unsafe procedures," Margaret Wurth said during an interview in 2019.

Abortions happen: Whether legal or illegal, safe or unsafe, women get abortions, by free volition or coercion. If it is legal and safe, over time, the rates will go down, and women's health will improve. If illegal and unsafe, the rates go up, and women's health gets progressively worse.

In British Columbia, where I live, **opposition to abortion** is less a grassroots movement than a pulpit-driven campaign. Anti-abortion groups here often lean heavily on religious orthodoxy, framing their resistance in the language of faith rather than public health. Churches—more than any other institutions—are the loudest voices calling for restrictions on reproductive freedom. However, their fervor, however sincere, tends to sidestep medical evidence and ignore the real-world consequences. If their vision were enacted, it would lead, inevitably, to preventable injuries—and deaths—among women.

"Unsafe abortion is a leading – but preventable – cause of maternal deaths and morbidities. It can lead to physical and mental health complications and social and financial burdens for women, families, and health systems," the World Health Organization writes.

I don't write this for myself alone. I write for the countless individuals—particularly those who have grown up in or remain tethered to conservative Christian communities—who risk social exile for challenging the church's reach into public policy. Speaking out against religious overreach isn't just difficult; it can be dangerous. Dissenters often face harassment, threats, professional repercussions, and estrangement from family and friends. Many are pushed to the margins of their communities, especially women who are shamed, misled, and pressured by theological teachings when facing critical, personal decisions about reproductive health.

Atheists and other nonbelievers, too, are frequent targets of deep-seated prejudice, facing not just theological condemnation but also social and psychological harm. The result is a climate of fear and silence—a moral absolutism that stifles dialogue, punishes nuance, and endangers lives.

Langley, British Columbia, is the home to Christ Covenant Church, which made headlines in the Aldergrove Star. On October 16, 2021, 10,000 pink and blue flags were placed on the church lawn, **led by Elyse Vroom**. Each flag represented 10 aborted fetuses. The protest banner read "We Need a Law," calling for legislation restricting late-stage and sex-selective abortions to protect the 'pre-born.'

In Surrey, British Columbia, the Precious Blood Parish **recently participated** in Life Chain, an annual anti-abortion demonstration held across Canada. Organized under the banner of silent prayer, the event is promoted as a moment of reflection. But the underlying message—especially as reported by BC Catholic—is anything but subtle: abortion is framed unequivocally as a moral evil. Rallies were held on October 5 and 6 in various locations, including outside St. Joseph's Parish in Port Moody and near Surrey Memorial Hospital.

These vigils are part of a broader and increasingly organized faith-based movement across the province. Immaculate Conception Parish in Delta **maintains** a dedicated Pro-Life Group that takes part in globally coordinated anti-abortion efforts—Pro-Life Sunday in June, Life Chain in October, and the March for Life in May. Nearby, Sacred Heart Parish runs its own "Hope for Life" ministry, while St. Joseph's Parish has expanded its activism beyond abortion to include opposition to euthanasia. St. Francis de Sales Parish in Burnaby also hosts a similar ministry.

In Vancouver, **St. Mary's Parish**, St. Anthony of Padua Parish, and St. Patrick's Parish all support structured anti-abortion ministries. St. Mary's holds monthly prayer sessions, asking for divine intervention to end abortion. While prayer itself is not coercive, its political function is

harder to ignore—especially given that studies like the 2006 Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) have found no measurable impact of prayer on health outcomes.

St. Anthony of Padua's ministry goes a step further, offering prayers specifically for workers at abortion clinics, urging them to "seek truth" and reconsider their careers. St. Patrick's Parish hosts a similar ministry under a more ambiguous name: the "Pro-Life Society."

The irony at the heart of these campaigns is difficult to ignore. Presented as exercises in public awareness, they are in fact rooted less in medical reality or principles of informed consent than in theological certitude. In a pluralistic democracy, the elevation of religious dogma over scientific consensus in shaping public health policy carries profound risks—to individual autonomy, to evidence-based governance, and ultimately to public trust.

What's unmistakable is that these are not grassroots public health initiatives. They are ministries—explicitly Christian and almost exclusively church-led. Their mission is not medical education or community health support, but rather moral persuasion based on a particular interpretation of faith. So long as these beliefs remain in the private sphere, they are protected—and in many ways, unthreatening. But when translated into policy aspirations, the consequences become clear: restrictions on reproductive freedom, backed not by evidence but by ideology, and the predictable suffering that follows for women and families across generations.

Notably, there appears to be little in the way of organized anti-abortion advocacy in British Columbia outside of these Christian ministries. The movement, at least in this province, is almost entirely ecclesiastical in origin. Its limitations in effect are not due to a deference to women's agency, but rather to these religious organizations' inability—at least for now—to successfully legislate their moral vision.

For those committed to safeguarding human rights, protecting equitable and safe abortion access, and pushing back against religious encroachment into personal medical decisions, the importance of vigilance cannot be overstated. These churches and ministries may claim only to raise awareness, but the international record tells a different story—one where such movements, when unchecked, often culminate in real-world restrictions that endanger lives, erode freedoms, and turn private choices into battlegrounds for theological control.

## Unpacking U.S. Reciprocal Tariffs and Private Equity Strategies

2025/04/01

**Brad Kuntz** of Stax, a global strategy consulting firm, unpacks the far-reaching consequences of U.S. reciprocal tariffs on private equity strategy, consumer prices, and global supply chains.

As tariffs introduce fresh waves of cost volatility, firms are increasingly pivoting toward nearshoring and building more resilient supply networks. While the 2018 tariffs spurred a modest

uptick in U.S. steel production, those gains were offset by broader job losses in steel-consuming industries.

In an inflationary environment, companies may be able to preserve pricing power—but they're also undergoing a strategic shift. The old playbook of cost optimization is giving way to risk optimization, with flexibility and adaptability now prized over raw cost savings. Although prolonged tariffs risk unsettling trade flows and market stability, forward-looking firms are countering that threat with investments in automation and supplier diversification—hedging against disruption while laying the groundwork for long-term growth.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How will U.S. reciprocal tariffs impact large-cap private equity strategies?

**Brad Kuntz:** Tariffs create short-term cost volatility and supply chain risks, forcing investors to rethink global sourcing strategies. For instance, U.S. soybean exports to China dropped 40% due to retaliatory tariffs, requiring a $28 billion government bailout for farmers.

Industries with global dependencies face pressure, while domestic-facing industries may benefit. A prime example: U.S. steel production increased ~6% in 2018-2019 after tariffs, but higher input costs led to more job losses in steel-consuming industries than gains in steel production.

Large-cap private equity strategies are unlikely to experience major disruption from reciprocal tariffs in the near term, private equity firms may encourage portfolio companies to take a long-term view and de-risk supply chains by nearshoring procurement of raw materials and finished goods.

**Jacobsen:** How will consumer prices influence investment decisions and valuations?

**Kuntz:** Tariffs on key imports lead to higher input costs, which ripple through pricing strategies and, ultimately, consumer demand. For example, after the 2018 U.S. steel tariffs, steel prices surged ~50%, significantly raising costs for auto, construction, and manufacturing sectors.

Companies that can pass costs on without losing market share will be better positioned, while those in highly competitive or price-sensitive markets will see margin compression.

In some cases, firms may benefit from inflationary price increases by maintaining pricing power and leveraging tariff-driven cost adjustments to push through higher pricing.

**Jacobsen:** How will supply chain strategies shift in response to reciprocal tariffs?

**Kuntz:** Companies will shift from cost-optimized supply chains to risk-optimized/resilient models, prioritizing domestic diversification and strategic nearshoring.

The trend of moving production out of China toward Southeast Asia, Mexico, and India will accelerate, while firms in critical industries may invest in domestic manufacturing despite higher costs. Following the 2018 tariffs, U.S. imports from Vietnam grew 35%, as companies sought alternatives to China to hedge against trade uncertainty.

In a high-tariff environment, cost predictability is more important than cost reduction, meaning companies prioritize flexibility and pricing stability over finding the lowest-cost supplier. Some

firms may find pricing power opportunities in inflationary conditions that allow them to pass costs through and preserve or even improve margins.

**Jacobsen:** Will reciprocal tariffs hinder innovation in the industrial sector?

**Kuntz:** Reciprocal tariffs disrupt supply chains, forcing producers in both countries to seek new upstream suppliers and raw material sources. While disruptive, tariffs could also lead to innovation in cost sustainability, production efficiency, and supplier diversification.

**Jacobsen:** What are the long-term consequences of sustained rather than short-term reciprocal tariffs, particularly on economic growth and market stability?

**Kuntz:** Sustained tariffs lead to persistent pricing volatility, inflationary pressures, and modest increases in domestic production. Industries with strong domestic infrastructure may benefit from higher pricing power, but supply chain flexibility will remain challenging for sectors reliant on global trade.

**Jacobsen:** How can businesses balance immediate cost pressures against longer-term growth?

**Kuntz:** Companies should balance short-term margin protection with strategic investment in areas that bolster long-term protection (e.g., automation, supplier diversification, etc.). Businesses must proactively assess supply chain options to improve price predictability rather than wait for tariff policy changes. Well-positioned firms may be able to take advantage of inflationary price increases if they have strong market positioning.

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

## Thomas Pogge on Inequality, Innovation, and the Future of Human Rights

2025/04/06

Thomas Pogge, a Harvard-trained philosopher now the Leitner Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs at Yale, has spent decades probing the ethical fault lines of global inequality. A member of the Norwegian Academy of Science, Pogge is a co-founder of Academics Stand Against Poverty and Incentives for Global Health, initiatives designed to advance access to essential medicines through mechanisms like the Health Impact Fund.

His body of work—including *World Poverty and Human Rights*, *John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice*, and *Designing in Ethics*—wrestles with some of the most urgent moral questions of our time: How can we structure a global order that is fairer, more equitable, and truly responsive to human suffering? Through Yale's Global Justice Program, which he currently directs, Pogge fosters interdisciplinary collaborations to build more just economic, political, and social systems.

Central to his critique is the global patent regime, which he argues deepens inequality by restricting access to lifesaving innovations, particularly as institutionalized by the WTO's **TRIPS Agreement**. In response, Pogge has championed "impact rewards"—proposals like the Health and Ecological Impact Funds that would incentivize pharmaceutical and environmental breakthroughs based on real-world benefit rather than market exclusivity. These alternatives, he contends, could reduce costs, improve health outcomes, and strengthen local capacities in low- and middle-income countries.

With global health again under intense scrutiny—highlighted by Germany's Health Minister Karl Lauterbach and the **G7 Pact for Pandemic Readiness**—Pogge believes the world stands at a moral crossroads. Reversing decline, he argues, demands more than good intentions; it requires bold, systemic reforms rooted in human rights and the common good.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the big picture when understanding global structural reform relating to innovation, justice, and poverty?

**Thomas Pogge:** The way development and diffusion of innovations is socially organized has a profound distributive impact. Relying on monopoly rents as incentives, the present regime (globalized by the WTO's 1995 TRIPS Agreement) aggravates human and financial capital inequalities by reserving innovation to well-funded corporations and requiring everyone else to pay road tolls or do without.

Doing without can mean death, as it does for millions who perish because they cannot afford lifesaving pharmaceuticals, which their originators can and do sell at **thousands of times the average cost of production**. After all, no one else is permitted to make or sell them. This regime is profoundly unjust, and providing an alternative would avoid such harms.

For innovations with clear, measurable social benefits or whose marginal cost of uptake is very low relative to the fixed cost of development, it would be far better to use publicly funded impact rewards based on the social benefit achieved with the innovation. Affluent users would still pay for most of the fixed cost of development, but now through the tax system, not via monopoly markups. As a result, innovative products would be far more affordable during their patent period, priced near the average cost of production.

**Jacobsen:** What are the key arguments in "**Freedom, Poverty, and Impact Rewards**" regarding global inequality and ethical responsibilities?

**Pogge:** Recognizing that overturning the TRIPS Agreement is unrealistic, the essay suggests offering originators the option to exchange their monopoly privileges for impact rewards. This could be done by creating sector-specific impact funds that make annual disbursements of pre-announced size, each divided among registered innovations according to the benefit achieved.

Pharmaceutical innovations would be rewarded according to their health impact, for example, green-technology innovations according to pollution averted, educational innovations according to their impact on skills and employment, and agricultural innovations according to their impact on harvest yield and reduced consumption of water, pesticides, or fertilizer. Each fund would have its own uniform metric of achievement and would reward only those innovations whose monopoly privileges had been waived for a fixed number of years.

In addition to discussing technical details, the paper also complements the moral arguments with ones that highlight the enormous efficiency gains such funds would entail by reducing **expenses for multiple staggered patenting** in many jurisdictions with associated gaming efforts (such as **evergreening**), costs of preventing monopoly infringements, costs of mutually offsetting competitive **promotion efforts**, **economic deadweight losses**, and costs due to **corrupt marketing practices** and **counterfeiting**—all of which are driven up by the exorbitant profit margins engendered by the patent regime. These efficiency gains ensure that even though introducing impact funds would constitute a huge advance for poor people, it would not produce corresponding losses for the rich. This fact makes impact funds an especially attractive (politically more realistic) reform target.

**Jacobsen:** How should we address the ecological crisis?

**Pogge:** We must reduce harmful pollution fast. Realistically and morally, this cannot be achieved by drastically reducing the human population or excluding people from modern life's conveniences (cars, washing machines, and all the rest). We need green technologies that serve the needs and interests of (ideally) all human beings without degrading our environment. Such technologies must be developed and improved, and they must also be widely and effectively deployed and used.

There are three ways of accelerating such a transition: through constraints, penalties, or rewards. Constraints (legal prohibitions) and penalties ("carbon price") forbid or discourage certain polluting activities and thereby foster the development and use of greener substitutes. Rewards incentivize the development and use of greener products through premiums based on the environmental harms they avert. All three approaches have a role to play; my work has focused on the neglected third approach.

The crisis persists because we make far too little use of all three approaches. And what's much worse, we are paying huge rewards for using fossil fuels. Such subsidies fall under two headings. States provide explicit subsidies when they absorb some of the costs of fossil fuel extraction and delivery or lower the sales price of fossil fuels through supplementary subventions. States provide indirect or implicit subsidies when they shield producers and consumers of fossil fuels

from responsibility for the damage they cause, such as excess medical bills and the cost of environmental clean-ups and additional (not so) "natural" disasters: floods, fires, droughts, mudslides, heat waves, rising sea levels, failed crops, spreading tropical disease vectors, and so on. Under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund, researchers have produced **several careful studies** of these subsidies, estimating them to amount to a staggering $7 trillion *per annum* globally or about 7% of the gross world product.

Fossil fuel subsidies are often excused with social reasons: Transportation is essential to economic activity, and cheap transportation enhances the availability and affordability of goods and services to poor people and allows them to take advantage of distant opportunities for medical care, education, employment, shopping, and recreation. Poor people also need light in the dark hours and heating in winter. Moving as they are, these are bad reasons because the same purpose could be much better served by giving poor people in cash the equivalent of what they now receive in subsidies tied to fossil fuel consumption. The poor would be free to choose how to spend their subvention; and states would save vast amounts by not subsidizing the much greater fossil-fuel consumption of the more affluent (including fuel for yachts and private jets). Moreover, with the prices of fossil fuels reflecting their true cost, all fossil fuel consumers would shift their consumption away from fossil fuels, thereby reducing harm to our shared environment.

The abolition of explicit and indirect fossil fuel subsidies is the best thing we can do to resolve our ecological crisis. It's not happening because the owners of fossil fuel reserves, with hundreds of trillions at stake, use their political influence to thwart such efforts. Some two centuries ago, slaveholders did the same…until they were finally **bought off**.

**Jacobsen:** How does the Ecological Impact Fund address environmental and economic concerns?

**Pogge:** The Ecological Impact Fund (EIF) would incentivize and reward the development of green technologies for their deployment in a defined set of lower-income countries (the EIF-Zone). The EIF would make pre-announced annual disbursements, to be divided among registered new green technologies according to pollution-caused harm averted with them in the EIF-Zone in the preceding year—with harm assessed as a weighted sum of greenhouse gas emissions (**CO2eq**) and lost quality-adjusted life years (**QALYs**).

In exchange for partaking in five annual EIF disbursements, originators permanently forgo patent-based monopoly privileges in the EIF-Zone (while patent privileges outside the EIF-Zone and of unregistered innovations would not be affected). The EIF would give green innovator firms new opportunities to profit from delivering green technologies in EIF-Zone countries while letting them choose, for each innovation, whether to register it or to stick with patent privileges.

With registration optional, the EIF reward rate would be endogenous and predicably equilibrate to a stable level that is fair between participating originators and EIF funders: when originators find it unattractive, registrations dry up and the reward rate rises; when the reward rate is seen as generous, registrations multiply and the reward rate declines. Fairness among participating originators is likewise assured, as all are remunerated at the same reward-to-benefit rate.

The EIF would significantly increase uptake and impact of green technologies in EIF-Zone countries: avoiding monopoly markups would lower their price, and the incentive of impact rewards would motivate registrants to promote their wide deployment and effective use. Through enhanced profit prospects, the EIF would stimulate the development of additional green technologies that—tailored to EIF-Zone populations' needs, cultures, circumstances, and preferences—would be especially impactful there. By thus stimulating diffusion and innovation in and for the EIF-Zone, the EIF would also build and expand local capacities to develop, manufacture, distribute, deploy, operate, and maintain innovative green technologies.

The EIF requires no international unanimity. Its main funders (possibly via the **Green Climate Fund** or the **Global Environment Facility**) could include willing European states plus China, which has greatly contributed to the global ecological crisis and has accumulated substantial wealth through highly polluting activities over many decades. Additional funds might come from international offset markets and eventually from a capital endowment built over time from treaty-based state contributions, bequests, and donations by firms, foundations, and philanthropists.

**Jacobsen:** How does Germany's Federal Minister of Health, Karl Lauterbach, highlight challenges in global health systems?

**Pogge:** Lauterbach has repeatedly highlighted diverse global health challenges, such as healthcare workforce shortages, chronic disease management (rise in non-communicable diseases), digitalization and innovation, pandemic preparedness, climate change, and excessive health disparities. Much of this has indeed been mainly highlighting, exhortation, and advocacy. But then he was, during Germany's 2022 G7 Presidency, the driving force behind the G7 Pact for Pandemic Readiness, which aims to enhance global health by better coordinating international initiatives, by enhancing global surveillance, and by strengthening health emergency workforces. Lauterbach's exceptional competency, energy, and hard work make him a very impressive minister.

**Jacobsen:** Can you touch on pharmaceutical innovation and access?

**Pogge:** Exclusive reliance on patent rewards in the pharmaceutical sector is morally problematic because it imposes great burdens on poor people who cannot afford to buy patented treatments at monopoly prices and whose specific health problems are therefore neglected by pharmacological research. This effective exclusion of the poor is also collectively irrational by turning low-income populations into breeding grounds for infectious diseases, which often develop new, drug-resistant strains—of **tuberculosis** or **malaria**, for instance—and by rendering us unprepared for dealing with infectious disease outbreaks such as Ebola, swine flu, and COVID-19. Pharmaceutical companies profit by letting diseases continue to proliferate, which shows how truly dumb our patent-focused innovation regime is, especially in the pharmaceutical sector.

I argue for establishing a Health Impact Fund (HIF), which would invite innovators to exchange their monopoly rents from any new pharmaceutical for impact rewards as an alternative way to recoup their R&D expenses and earn competitive profits. Innovators would find HIF registration especially attractive for new pharmaceuticals, with which they expect to generate large cost-

effective health gains but only modest monopoly rents. These would tend to be effective remedies against widespread, grave, infectious, and concentrated diseases among poor people. Many of these HIF-registered pharmaceuticals would be ones that otherwise would not have been developed at all. By promoting innovations and their diffusion together, the HIF would greatly increase the benefits and, thereby, also the cost-effectiveness of the pharmaceutical sector in favor of the world's poor.

By fully rewarding third-party health benefits (e.g., diseases you don't catch because others around you have been treated or vaccinated), the HIF motivates pharmaceutical firms to fight diseases at the population level. The largest rewardable impact a new medicine can have is the eradication of its target disease. To fight a disease to extinction, firms would build, in collaboration with national health systems, international agencies, and NGOs, a strong public-health strategy around their HIF-registered product, deploying it strategically to contain, suppress, and ideally eradicate the target disease. Monopoly rewards, by contrast, penalize such efforts, making disease eradication a financial nightmare for CEOs and shareholders.

**Jacobsen:** Why advocate for making new medicines accessible?

**Pogge:** Most pharmaceuticals can be mass-produced at very low marginal cost. Indian generics firms are extremely good at this. But they are prevented from manufacturing the newer products by India's patent laws which India, in turn, is required to impose as a condition of membership in the WTO. Implementing the TRIPS Agreement in the world is actively preventing the supply of life-saving medicines to those who cannot afford to buy them at monopoly prices. Millions of people suffer and die due to patent enforcement. And all of us face added dangers and risks on account of eradicable diseases that proliferate and often mutate among the poor.

The standard response is that, without patents, there would be no new medicines for the rich or the poor. The HIF proposal defeats this response. Its real possibility shows that upholding the pharmaceutical sector's patent regime constitutes a monumental human rights violation.

**Jacobsen:** What does the decline of the Western-centric world order and rise of a more rounded global order mean for the 21st century?

**Pogge:** I am not convinced the Western-centric world order—more descriptively, the United States—is truly declining in terms of power. It is fighting hard to maintain its supremacy, relying ever more on violence and military strength. It is an open question whether it will be able to beat down China the way it had previously beaten down Japan and the USSR. Much will depend on rapidly evolving technologies: drones, AI kill programs, autonomous fighting machines, biological and cyber warfare, clandestine regime-change and sabotage operations, etc. And, of course, there's a fair chance that human civilization will be destroyed in this contest.

The Western-centric world order is palpably in moral decline: the gap between professed values and actual policies has never been greater, nor has public tolerance for mass killings (of the Gaza or the TRIPS sort) in the name of national interest and security. This moral decline is likely to continue but won't lead to a world order that could be called "more rounded."

The longer-term survival of human civilization depends on reversing this trend, on moralizing international relations in the way Gorbachev thought he had agreed upon with the U.S. Such a

morally based world order is not too difficult to describe. But the path from here to there looks impossibly difficult. Who in the U.S. will agree to move toward a world order in which military power becomes irrelevant, in which international disagreements are resolved through impartial judicial or legislative procedures, and in which the needs and voices of foreigners have as much weight as those of compatriots?

To make moral progress, despite miserable odds, against the spreading tide of national selfishness, distrust, hostility, and confrontation, we must create highly visible exemplars of morality: multilateral initiatives that clearly protect human rights, promote justice and the common good of humanity, rather than merely the mutual benefit of their initiators. I see the Ecological and Health Impact Funds as plausible proposals.

Another would be a globally universal school lunch program that would secure each school-aged child one full, healthy meal, locally sourced, on every school day. The realization of this very affordable program would show that our internationally shared commitment "**to leave no one behind**" was more than empty words. Are the world's more affluent countries, including China, prepared to spend about half a percent of their military outlays to fund such a program by providing the subsidies necessary to enable and incentivize poorer countries to participate? Let's get it on the G20's 2025 agenda and find out!

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for the opportunity and your time.

## Filmmaker Jason Weixelbaum on American Corporations, Nazi Germany, and the Fight for Memory

2025/04/07

**Jason Weixelbaum** is a historian and filmmaker whose work explores the moral entanglements of American corporations with authoritarian regimes, especially Nazi Germany.

After witnessing ethical lapses in the mortgage industry during the 2000s, he pursued a Ph.D. examining U.S. companies like Ford, IBM, and GM under Nazism. He founded Elusive Films in 2020 and created ***A Nazi on Wall Street***, a dramatized series about a Jewish FBI agent targeting Nazi influence in 1940s New York.

Weixelbaum emphasizes how historical patterns of authoritarianism echo today through populist politics, corporate complicity, and the erosion of ethical accountability under capitalism in crisis.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Thank you for joining me today and contributing to this broader project—a forthcoming book compiling conversations with diverse experts on antisemitism.

**Jason Weixelbaum:** I appreciate it. I'm glad someone is listening. Sometimes, I feel like I've been shouting into the void for years.

**Jacobsen:** Over the years, I've learned that one of our family members was recognized for sheltering a Jewish couple during the Second World War. I have some Dutch heritage, which explains my blond hair and Northern European features.

What initially drew you to the intersection of American corporate history and Nazi Germany?

**Weixelbaum:** That's a good story. Once upon a time, I dropped out of art school. To support my painting and rock music lifestyle, I played in bands in my early twenties, and I took a job where they were hiring: the mortgage business.

In the early 2000s, refinancing was booming, and I ended up in mortgage-backed securities. I had no idea at the time that I was part of a rapidly growing economic bubble that would eventually collapse in 2008.

Eventually, I worked in a bank's mortgage securities department. I was not a trader and certainly was not making large sums of money. I earned ten dollars an hour to help process large securities transactions—the kind that later became infamous in films like *The Big Short*.

On my first day at this particular financial institution—located in a large, mostly empty mall converted into office cubicles—I was instructed to process a $200 million "pool" of mortgages. In industry terms, a "pool" is a bundle of home loans sold as a mortgage-backed security. My job was to stamp mortgage notes sold to another institution—which no longer exists because it collapsed during the 2008 financial crisis—and to enter borrower data into a system.

I meticulously checked them all, then hit "send," and a big red error box popped up on the screen. It was my first day, and I was trying not to freak out. I went back and double-checked every single Social Security number, dollar amount, income, loan amount—everything. Then I hit "send" again.

There is a big red error screen.

Now, my boss sees the distressed look on my face. She approaches my cubicle, sits at my terminal, and asks, "What's wrong?"

"I—I don't know. It won't send."

So, she's looking through the different pieces of data. I notice she's starting to change numbers—changing incomes here and there. Then she says, "Try it now."

She gets up. I sit back down at my terminal and hit "Send."

A big green bar comes up: Sent successfully.

And then—nonchalantly—she says, "Next time, do that with all of them," and walks away.

I spent three more years in that department, trading approximately $2.5 billion of mortgage securities. Of course, I was part of a larger department, but I had that level of responsibility.

I was in my early twenties. This was my intellectual awakening. I thought, "If I'm going to be in this place, I might as well learn about finance, banking, and mortgages." What's going on here?

And that's when it started to dawn on me that this was going to be a huge problem for the world. This was going to cause an economic catastrophe. My morale sank more and more the longer I stayed.

One day—this was still two or three years before the crash—I was sitting at a bus stop after work, feeling particularly low about what I had done all day. They weren't even paying me enough to afford a car. It was poetic, in a way—while I was helping to crash the world economy.

Right next to the bus stop, there was a bookstore. In the window, I saw a book about a company operating in Nazi Germany. Side note: Around the early 2000s, several books were published on the topic, partly because several large-scale Holocaust restitution lawsuits had recently concluded—some of which involved major companies. That brought renewed attention to corporate complicity in the Holocaust.

So I walked in, saw that book, and felt an immediate connection. These businesses might have had good reputations on the surface but were doing things with tremendously grave outcomes.

It took a little while, but I can pinpoint that moment when I decided to quit that job, return to school, and begin again—starting my undergraduate degree as a historian, studying this topic. I was pretty single-minded. I wanted to know more—what this was all about. I fell down the rabbit hole. An undergraduate degree turned into a master's and a doctorate.

**Jacobsen:** Looking back at your time in the mortgage securities industry during the early 2000s and the decision to investigate corporate ethics during the 1930s—is there some truth to that Mark Twain quote "history doesn't repeat, but it often rhymes"?

**Weixelbaum:** Oh, I'm glad you brought that up. As the founder and executive producer of Elusive Films, we have a tagline: "Every time history repeats, the price goes up."

Yeah, that's pretty accurate.

It *does* rhyme. I am seeing some very similar behaviour today in the American business community and their reaction to—what I call—the regime. It is enough to say that. The range of different approaches these businessmen take is fascinating.

When I started studying this, my surface-level understanding was very populist—torches and pitchforks. "Let's get the bad corporate guys—they're all evil," that sort of thing. But if you're doing history right, you begin to develop a respect for subtleties and nuance. Different business people have different motivations and approaches.

Some were true believers in the fascist cause—Henry Ford, for example. Others were far more amoral—Alfred Sloan of General Motors comes to mind. They just wanted to win the corporate race. Then, others knew they were doing something wrong but tried to cover it publicly as if they were doing the right thing.

I am thinking about Thomas Watson of IBM. He very publicly returned his Nazi medal and wrote an op-ed in The New York Times denouncing Nazism. But at the same time—simultaneously—he was fighting tooth and nail to retain control over IBM's German subsidiaries. So there's a range of approaches.

While we do not need to get into the weeds here, the field of corporate social responsibility also outlines different models for how business leaders respond. Some want to actively erase or forget their ties to authoritarian regimes, while others are content with apathy. It depends on the context.

**Jacobsen:** **Elusive Films** is relatively new. It was founded in 2020, marking your transition from academia to filmmaking. With *A Nazi on Wall Street*, which is based on the true story of a Nazi spy operating in 1940s New York and the Jewish FBI agent determined to stop him—how did you uncover this narrative? This sounds like Mark Wahlberg going after Brad Pitt.

**Weixelbaum:** [Laughing] Oh gosh—yes, get this script to them!

We've spent the last several years developing an incredible pitch. It's a project that's being taken seriously by people in the entertainment industry. But as with everything, it is all about *who* you know. We're told we have a great pitch—but we need to get it in front of some big movers and shakers. That's one of the main reasons I'm talking to you—trying to get the word out.

This company—and this project—was born out of grief, Scott.

I was trying to find my way with a Ph.D. in history and business ethics. As you might imagine, that is not the most profitable path. I was doing some compliance work. Then, in December 2019, my father—who had spent his entire life in the entertainment industry, a TV actor in soap operas and films, a wonderful, wonderful man, the center of my world—got a mysterious respiratory virus.

Nobody knew what COVID-19 was yet. Maybe if you were paying close attention to the news here in the States, you would have an idea. But it took him *very* quickly. I was standing in the doorway of my row house in Baltimore after leaving work early on New Year's Eve when I got the call from the ICU. As the eldest child, I had to decide to let him go—to turn off the respirator.

And, to put it mildly, I was destroyed. Destroyed. Then, only a month later, I was laid off. And a month after that, the entire world shut down. So there I was—devastated, unemployed, sitting on my couch with a completed Ph.D.—thinking, "What the hell am I going to do?"

And I wanted to find some way to honour my father's legacy in television. He had been an actor for fifty years.

He also produced and directed for the stage and on screen. So I brought together a group of my creative friends—producers, writers, composers, designers—and asked them, "What if we tried to do this? What if we tried to make a TV show?" This is to answer your question, though I know it is a roundabout way of getting there.

I came across this incredible story of a Jewish FBI agent chasing a Nazi spy around New York City. It was not quite dissertation material, so I could not use much of it in my doctoral work. But it captured my imagination for a long time. Even the Nazi spy himself—who was connected to many of the companies I studied—kept popping up. I did not get to write much about him individually because I was focused on corporate case studies.

Still, this story had been kicking around in my head for quite some time. And as a vehicle to bring people into a first-person view of history, I *don't* want to do a documentary. Everyone assumes, "Oh, I can't wait to see your documentary." But

I'm not doing a documentary.

I want to do a dramatization—on purpose—because it can reach the broadest possible audience and allow them to connect to the story through a human lens.

This FBI agent—whose story I can get into more deeply—was essentially trying, almost single-handedly, to stop the infiltration of Nazism into American business.

**Jacobsen:** What is the mindset of someone who is fully indoctrinated—functioning as a political vanguard for an ideology like Nazism? Someone virulent enough that even in another country, in a cosmopolitan city, they still carry and act on this ideological construct of mind.

**Weixelbaum:** This is where history meets the present.

Many others, people much more accomplished than I am, have written on this topic. But I do have a specific take: populism—grievance politics.

Now, I know there's an ongoing debate about what populism is, but this is my definition. And because I have a doctorate, I get to make up my definitions of political terms—so you'll have to bear with me. Populism—the *pop politics* of grievance—is always present. It's like background radiation. It's anthrax in the soil.

Populism is always present, especially in liberal societies where surface-level stability exists. It flourishes in those environments precisely because it does not live in a world of facts. It lives in a world of emotion—of outrage.

It jumps from one target to another. Rhetoric is irrelevant and can be shifted at will. The cause is irrelevant—it can be swapped out. Many people have trouble distinguishing left-wing and right-wing populism from actual liberalism or progressivism. The populist rhetoric is always the same: the people versus the elite. And the "elite" is changeable. It could be bankers. It could be academics. It could be the wealthy. It could be media figures. You name it.

Unfortunately, over a long enough timeline, in societies where populism thrives, Jewish people are often cast as *the* elite—those who must be stopped or destroyed. Populists always need new enemies. That is the actual mechanism. Any cause becomes a vehicle for continuing that pattern of scapegoating and persecution.

In my view, across the arc of history, populism has become very attractive when people feel particularly anxious or afraid, especially in times of great social or economic transformation.

Populism was prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, and it is still prevalent today. It gives people a simple explanation for their fear: "I feel anxious, so I'll go find the bad guys."

The big bad guy is *over there*. I can dominate them, feel a little better about myself, and distract myself from my own fear and anxiety. The problem is that this kind of movement—this populist impulse—is extremely powerful for demagogues. And it is not limited to the disenfranchised. It is attractive to people who already hold wealth and power. They, too, are afraid. The more you have, the more afraid you may be of losing it.

Sorry—again, it's a bit of a roundabout way to answer your question. However, populist movements were happening all over the place in the 1930s. Henry Ford is a great example. See if this sounds familiar: We have a wealthy person who did well in an industry but did not appear well-educated. He lacks critical thinking instincts and is surrounded by conspiracy theorists. They get their hands on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—an antisemitic hoax text originating in Russia.

And it changes his worldview. He becomes convinced there is a global Jewish conspiracy aiming to control the world.

And unfortunately, because Ford had so much money and influence, he could put these conspiracy theories into action. He began publishing the *Protocols* in his newspaper, The Dearborn Independent. He learned of Adolf Hitler and began sending money to the Nazi Party—although that topic is still under scrutiny by historians. He had The International Jew, his antisemitic publication, translated and distributed widely. So, no—wealth does not insulate you from ignorance. Critical thinking does not come with a big bank account.

That is where we see the toxic mix: populist sentiment, conspiracy theory, and immense wealth and influence. This was very much alive among segments of the American business community in the interwar period. And we could talk about other figures—businessmen who believed the world should be carved into spheres of influence. It sounds familiar again. These are not good dynamics.

Of course, eventually, the pattern emerges clearly: populists always destroy what they claim to protect. It is only a matter of time. Populism ultimately consumes itself. It does not build. It only tears down.

**Jacobsen:** Your father was an actor in film and television for fifty years. Did he—or his legacy—help influence your career path?

**Weixelbaum:** Yes—this is a passion project. It started because I needed something to do with my grief. I wanted to honour his legacy in some way. I do not think his work in soap operas and

beach movies directly inspired the content I am working on now. But as a person—absolutely—he influenced me profoundly.

It was a great honour to have a father who would call me and say, especially after he retired, "I've been reading the news. Tell me, historian son, what the hell is going on?" He would call me regularly. He was engaged. He was curious. And that intellectual curiosity, that desire to understand the world—was a big part of who he was and what I carry forward.

We used to have these great, detailed conversations about why Reconstruction failed and how that failure continues to shape American politics today. I'd also talk to him about populist movements or similar topics. For me, continuing this work is a way of still having those conversations with him.

**Jacobsen:** Right-wing, far-right ideologies and political violence in the United States have been on the rise. The most active domestic terrorist groups in recent years have been white nationalists—often associated with Christian religious identity and tied to ethnic supremacist views. Statistically speaking, one could argue that the largest ethnic group and the dominant religion—white and Christian—are the most likely sources of this kind of terrorism. So, if you were to throw a dart randomly at a Venn diagram of potential culprits for right-wing terrorism, you'd likely land in that intersection. But of course, there are more nuanced takes to consider. What are some of those more nuanced perspectives?

**Weixelbaum:** I typically seek out the work of other experts in this field. There are many outstanding scholars—both living and deceased—whose research has deeply influenced my thinking. I would not claim to be more of an expert than they are, but I can speak to the patterns I see.

As I said earlier, this links directly to the anxiety people feel about their place in society—and how that fuels populist movements. We're talking about right-wing populism here, and its most extreme version is fascism. Unsurprisingly, people join these movements when they feel their social status is threatened. Many white Christian nationalists in the U.S. have long believed themselves to be the default holders of power. But in a multiethnic democracy—especially one moving toward a "majority-minority" population—they see that dominance slipping. That anxiety becomes fuel.

There's a direct connection between that fear and the rise of extremist movements. And I'm just one of many scholars who have made that observation. These conversations float through a lot of morally gray territory and deserve careful, continuous engagement.

**Jacobsen:** In your contribution to public discourse, how do you view the intersection of corporate ethics, historical accountability, and the prevention of authoritarianism? To what extent are ethical demands on corporations reasonable—and when might they become unfeasible?

**Weixelbaum:** Great question. It touches the core of my professional work throughout this project. I also work in ethics in a professional capacity. What's hard to watch today is that we're seeing the same patterns repeat.

You have businessmen who tell themselves comforting stories: “It will be fine. He’s our dictator. He’s a businessman. He’ll help us.” But it is all nonsense. As things progress, it rarely ends well when businesspeople engage with authoritarian movements. Populism is not rational. It’s not predictable. That is not a good environment for a long-term business strategy.

So yes, corporate ethics are vital. One of the biggest myths in my field is that American companies made massive profits in Nazi Germany. People often ask me, “How much money did they make?” The answer? Most of them lost money. Think about it: you’re an American executive and return to your factory in Germany in 1945. The factory is rubble. Your bank account is full of valueless Reichsmark from a defeated regime. And if the public finds out what you did, your company’s reputation is in shambles. There’s no profit in that.

Sure, you can argue that some companies gained market share after the war by eliminating competition, and some were well-positioned for the postwar boom. That is true in some cases. But we are seeing echoes of the same delusions today. Corporate leaders say things like, “The tariffs will be fine, or this will pass,” and it is clearly not fine.

At the time of this interview, the market reaction has been terrible—this is not a moment of validation for those who supported authoritarian figures and their enablers. So yes, corporate ethics matters. And some companies are trying—they value transparency, emphasize people over profits, or at least try to go beyond lip service.

However, where the scholarship in corporate ethics intersects with history is in practice. Today, companies can choose to be certified as ethical or transparent. Some have learned from history. But many—frankly, most—have not—not even close.

**Jacobsen:** Would you say that what we’re witnessing today is a resurgence of fascism in the truest sense? Or is it more appropriate to view fascism as a phenomenon bound to a specific historical moment, making today’s developments better characterized as a broader rise in authoritarianism rather than fascism itself?

**Wexelbaum:** [Laughing] If it doesn’t come out of Germany, it’s merely sparkling authoritarianism, right? I mean—sorry to keep pointing to this vague body of scholarship—but there is so much debate over what exactly constitutes fascism.

I’m looking at a section of my library next to my desk—bookshelves full of works, each offering a slightly different definition: “My exact definition is fascism.” It gets academic fast. That said, I generally think that, yes—right-wing authoritarianism took to its logical conclusion. We can call that fascism. We can use the F word and not feel too weird about it.

One of the really important projects in political discourse today is to be intentional about the words we use. I think—maybe this is partly the influence of social media—but people throw around terms like liberalism, leftism, populism, fascism, and progressivism constantly and rarely stop to reflect on what they mean. I do not see much discussion that’s useful or grounded.

And it’s okay to debate those terms. Scholars do it all the time. We should not take them for granted. So, yes, my broad understanding is that right-wing populism, taken to its extreme, leads

to fascism. That means a demagogue becomes a dictator, and the movement itself runs on emotional cycles—finding new enemies to destroy repeatedly.

Where it gets more contentious—and especially relevant to our conversation—is in the relationship between capitalism and fascism, between business and fascist regimes.

As you might imagine, many people want to use the kind of historical work I do to support their political positions. I am not always thrilled about that. Some want to use the story of American companies operating in Nazi Germany as evidence that America has always been morally bankrupt. Well—maybe. But that's not the whole story.

There were plenty of Americans, like the main character in *A Nazi on Wall Street*, who were actively trying to stop those alliances who were fighting fascism.

On the other hand, some want to argue that the Nazis were just puppets of industrialists—that capitalists were secretly pulling the strings behind Hitler. That is also not quite right. Hitler and the Nazi movement were already robust and ideologically driven before they came to power.

And once they *did* take over the German state, business leaders—especially German ones—had limited choices. It was not a matter of cozy alignment. It was compliance under threat. Once the Nazis consolidated power, business people were expected to cooperate—or face the consequences. If you disobeyed, someone would come to your house.

So, even in those contexts, there is still a range of behaviors. Some people were true believers, and it was profitable for them. Others did what they had to do because, frankly, they did not have a choice.

What's so interesting about Americans who did business with the Nazis is that they were never under threat from the Gestapo. If they had chosen to walk away, no one would have shown up at their home in the U.S. There was a lot more room for negotiation, for exerting agency. And that power dynamic—between American business leaders and the Nazi regime—is something I find endlessly fascinating.

Readers might find this particularly interesting if you do not mind indulging me for a quick example. General Motors, at a certain point, wanted to make it appear as though they were not profoundly entangled with the Nazis. At the same time, the Nazi state was uneasy about relying so heavily on an American company—one that was, by far, the largest automaker in Germany at the time. People often talk about boycotting Volkswagen, but if you wanted to disrupt Nazi military production, you would have targeted General Motors. The scholarship on this is deep, and I could go on for hours.

Anyway, the Nazi regime and GM both knew the situation was delicate. So General Motors said, "We'll stay, but we want our guy—our hand-picked Nazi—to run our German subsidiary." After some negotiation and trial and error, they found a man who fit the bill. There was a revolving door of executives until they landed on someone who could maintain that balance. It was all very calculated.

That is just one example of how nuanced the relationship between capital and fascism could be. It was not just blind support or total victimization—it was messy, strategic, and often self-

serving. And, of course, as the war progressed and things deteriorated, the American companies lost money. Their factories were bombed. Their assets were frozen. Their reputations suffered.

And gosh—does that sound familiar? It's the same pattern: People think they will benefit in the short term from backing authoritarian actors, but in the long term, it almost always goes badly.

**Jacobsen:** How much are current American events paralleling the 1930s and 1940s historical occurrences? In other words, how much are people reading the situation correctly, and how much are they buying into left, centrist, or right-wing hyperbole?

**Wexelbaum:** Yes, what's endlessly fascinating—and also maddening—about the history of Nazi Germany is that it has become a kind of Rorschach test. People project their anxieties and politics onto it. And if you invoke it too often or carelessly, it can be stripped of all real meaning.

The America of 2025 is *not* Nazi Germany for many reasons. First, it's simply a much bigger country. Creating a totalitarian state in Germany in the 1930s was a very different enterprise from trying to do so in a nation of 350 million people.

That structural difference is, I hope, a saving grace for Americans who are worried about the direction of their country.

Also, today's authoritarian-leaning movements in the U.S. are far less organized than the Nazis were. The Nazis had paramilitary wings, a centralized ideology, and a deeply developed propaganda system well before taking power. What we see now in the U.S. is much more chaotic—more fragmented.

That said, the rhetoric, the targeting of vulnerable groups, and the populist grievances rhyme with history, and we must pay attention.

This is an important story, and we can close with this.

For a few months during a long stretch of dissertation research, I became obsessed with reading the documents from the American Embassy in Nazi Germany, particularly in 1938. Specifically, I focused on the records from the Commercial Attaché's Office. This office, housed within the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, studied economic trends and monitored the attitudes of American businesses operating in Germany and German businesspeople.

I highlight 1938 because it was a moment of intense global fear. Those who study this period know that the world had just experienced the Great Depression—a traumatic economic collapse that affected every industrialized nation. Both the United States and Germany had begun to recover in different ways. They found strategies to stimulate their economies; by the mid-to-late 1930s, some growth had returned.

But in 1938, another recession loomed—the first major signal of economic trouble since the recovery began. And that scared the Nazis to death. In those embassy records, I was surprised by just how much anxiety I saw—especially from people running a totalitarian state. These were not democratic leaders who feared losing an election. The Nazis had outlawed all other political parties by that point. But still, in 1937 and 1938, they were *worried*.

Why? Because even in a one-party dictatorship, you have to manage public perception. Even among supporters of the regime and the politically disengaged, public morale matters. Populist and authoritarian regimes require a foundation of stability to function. When the economy falters, the emotional rhetoric of grievance becomes hollow. You cannot feed people with propaganda. If they are well-fed, you can sell them all the grievance you want—but when hunger sets in, outrage loses its power.

Stability is the oxygen for authoritarian and populist regimes. But here's the paradox: those regimes almost always destroy the very platform they stand on.

And the Nazis did exactly that. They eventually obliterated their foundation by launching a global war. So, bringing this back to the United States is a real and pressing concern. Authoritarianism cannot thrive without economic and social stability. I think the Nazi regime, for all its evil, understood that far better than the current American regime does.

You cannot build a durable authoritarian state on chaos. Even the Nazis—who were far more disciplined and ideologically cohesive—envisioned a "Thousand-Year Reich" and only made it twelve years. Not exactly a strong track record.
What will be the track record of this current regime in America? Well… time will tell.

**Jacobsen:** Jay, thank you for your time today.

**Wexelbaum:** Sounds great. It's good to meet you, Scott.

# Jeff Sebo on Ethics, Sentience, and the Future of Moral Consideration

2025/04/09

Jeff Sebo is not interested in preserving the status quo. An associate professor at New York University, Sebo's work cuts across environmental ethics, bioethics, animal ethics, and the rapidly evolving field of AI ethics. He serves as director of NYU's Center for Environmental and Animal Protection and its Center for Mind, Ethics, and Policy—two platforms from which he challenges one of modern philosophy's most enduring assumptions: human exceptionalism.

Sebo argues for a moral framework that doesn't stop at the species line. His scholarship explores what it means to be sentient, conscious, or capable of agency—and why those traits should inform our ethical obligations not just toward nonhuman animals, but toward artificial intelligences and future beings. In raising these questions, he exposes the deep-seated biases that shape moral reasoning.

In his latest book, *The Moral Circle*, Sebo invites readers to rethink the boundaries of moral concern, pressing toward a more inclusive ethic—one that reflects the complexities of a world increasingly shared with other minds, both biological and synthetic.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** There is a traditional notion of human exceptionalism. There is also a belief, probably from Descartes, that humans have souls while animals do not. Therefore, nonhuman animals can be treated however we see fit, for better or worse. What was your first challenge to this ethical precept of human exceptionalism?

**Jeff Sebo:** Human exceptionalism, as I define it in my book, is the assumption that humans always matter the most and should always take ethical priority. We might consider animal welfare or animal rights, but we still assume that humans come first.

When we developed this assumption of human exceptionalism, we also conveniently assumed that the vast majority—if not all—nonhuman animals lacked sentience, agency, and other morally significant capacities and relationships. According to this perspective, humans were the only beings who mattered.

However, we now understand that sentience, agency, and other morally significant capacities and relationships are widespread in the animal kingdom. Yet, despite this, we continue to hold on to the idea that humans always matter most and always take priority.

My book challenges that assumption. It seriously considers the possibility that a wide range of nonhuman animals have morally significant experiences, motivations, lives, and communities. It asks: What is our place in the moral universe if we share it with such a vast and diverse range of nonhuman beings?

**Jacobsen:** Your analysis is multivariate, as it should be, because this problem is complex. You consider factors such as sentience, agency, the capacity to experience pleasure and pain, varying emotions, and the ability to make short- and long-term plans.

These are very subtle and important distinctions, especially when they are brought together as a complex. For those who have not yet read your book, how would you parse these capacities apart and bring them together for analysis?

**Sebo:** There are many different proposed bases for moral standing—in other words, various capacities or relationships that might be sufficient for an individual to merit consideration, respect, and compassion.

Sentience is the ability to consciously experience positive or negative states—such as pleasure, pain, happiness, or suffering.

Then there is consciousness, which is the ability to have experiences of any kind, even if they lack a positive or negative valence. For example, you can perceive colours or sounds without experiencing pleasure or pain.

Another important capacity is agency, which is the ability to set and pursue one's own goals in a self-directed manner based on one's own beliefs and desires.

Part of what makes this topic complex is that humans typically combine these capacities. We are sentient, conscious, and agentic, and all of these traits seem intertwined when we consider what makes humans morally significant and worthy of respect and compassion.

However, these capacities can be teased apart in nonhuman beings. Some nonhuman animals, like humans, may be sentient, conscious, and agentic. But other beings might be conscious without being sentient, meaning they have experiences without a positive or negative valence. Others might be agentic without being conscious, meaning they can set and pursue their own goals without having feelings associated with their actions.

In such cases, it matters which capacities we consider sufficient for moral significance.

You also mentioned other, more specific cognitive capacities, such as perception, attention, learning, memory, self-awareness, social awareness, language, reasoning, decision-making, metacognition (the ability to think about one's own thoughts), and having a global workspace that coordinates cognitive activity.

These additional features are relevant in different ways. One reason is that they indicate whether an individual has sentience, consciousness, or agency. The more of these features an individual possesses, the more likely they are to have positive or negative experiences.

Another way these capacities are relevant is that they provide insight into an individual's interests and vulnerabilities—assuming they have morally significant interests and vulnerabilities in the first place.

For example, if a being can engage in complex long-term planning and decision-making, they may be more interested in their own future and face higher stakes in decisions about their survival. These considerations suggest that when determining whether a nonhuman entity matters—and what they want, need, and are owed—we must examine the full range of behavioural and cognitive capacities they possess.

**Jacobsen:** We encounter a host of distinctions in bioethics, law, moral philosophy, and ethics—distinctions that are increasingly strained by the pace and complexity of modern technology. Yet, the true value of this technological revolution may not lie in the tools themselves but in how they compel us to revisit and reimagine long-held assumptions about human nature and selfhood.

A friend once remarked that when using his iPhone, the device's task-switching feature mirrors the way his mind organically toggles between different cognitive modes—visualizing images, recalling sounds, replaying music, performing calculations, and so on. In your view, does living in a high-tech society sharpen our ability to recognize and interrogate these distinctions more effectively? Or do you think we're still too quick to revert to a reflexive, tribal mindset—one that insists, in essence, "We have souls; they do not. We matter. Go, team human"?

**Sebo:** Possibly! Technology pushes us to refine our scientific and philosophical understanding of sentience, consciousness, and agency because we are now interacting with an even larger number and a wider variety of complex cognitive systems. This reality forces us to think more critically about how our brains compare to other animal brains—and now, digital, silicon-based minds. These challenges compel us to add more rigour to our theories of mind.

A similar transformation occurred in the study of animal minds. For a long time, theories of consciousness were created by and for humans, focusing exclusively on human cognition. This limited our imagination and constrained our understanding of consciousness beyond our own species.

However, as researchers began taking animal consciousness seriously, they encountered a vast array of minds structured differently from our own yet capable of much of the same high-level behaviour and cognition. This forced us to challenge prior assumptions about how specific brain structures were essential to particular types of behaviour and cognition.

We may soon experience a similar paradigm shift as we start thinking more critically about digital minds. We have long adhered to the idea that biological minds, with their exact materials, structures, and functions, are the only ones capable of high-level cognition. However, we are forced to rethink our assumptions as we begin to confront digital minds that can exhibit much of the same behavior and cognition but through radically different means—using silicon-based substrates and alternative structures.

Just as our understanding of sentience, consciousness, and agency evolved when we started studying nonhuman animal minds, we now face a similar challenge with digital minds. This shift compels us to reconsider what is necessary for complex cognition and moral significance. Thinking about these age-old topics in new ways improves our understanding of animal and digital minds. It also allows us to apply that knowledge back to human cognition. By studying these alternative cognitive systems, we may gain deeper insights into our minds, including what it truly means to be sentient, conscious, or agentic.

**Jacobsen:** What do you think are the modern notions that allow us to continue enacting old callousness toward nonhumans, just as we did in the past? Are there new concepts leading to the same outcomes?

**Sebo:** Yes, absolutely. Even industrialization plays a role in this. While we have developed new technologies and scientific frameworks, we still carry many of our old biases and forms of ignorance. Some of these biases are deeply ingrained in human nature. In contrast, others are reinforced by societal structures that remain largely unchanged from fifty or even a hundred years ago. We have a strong bias in favour of beings like and near us. When a being looks, acts, or communicates in human-like ways and when we perceive them as companions, we are far more likely to care about their well-being and give weight to their interests. Conversely, when a being looks, acts, or communicates differently, or when we classify them as objects, property, or commodities, we grant them far less moral consideration. The same holds true for beings physically distant from us or in different timescales—we prioritize those right in front of us over those far away in space or time.

This bias has shaped how we treat other animals, particularly favouring mammals and primates, who resemble us in body structure, facial features, cognition, and behaviour. We assign them moral worth if we classify them as companions—such as cats and dogs. However, we extend far less consideration to animals who differ greatly from us, such as invertebrates, aquatic species, or animals used for farming and research. These creatures are often reduced to objects or commodities, reinforcing a hierarchical moral structure that justifies their instrumentalization for human purposes.

We may see these old biases reemerging in new ways with AI systems. For instance, we already interact with human-like chatbots, which have a low probability of actual consciousness but generate highly realistic human-like text through pattern recognition and prediction. Because they mimic human communication and are marketed as digital assistants or companions, we may perceive them as having human-like minds and assign them moral weight accordingly. Meanwhile, other AI systems may be far more likely to be conscious due to their internal cognitive complexity. Yet, we may fail to recognize their moral significance simply because they do not resemble us.

Suppose an AI system lacks human-like speech, facial features, or emotional expressiveness and is designed primarily to perform rote tasks. In that case, we may treat it more like a tool than a potentially sentient entity. This mirrors how we treat invertebrates, farmed animals, or lab animals—beings who may have morally significant experiences but are excluded from ethical considerations due to human biases.

Different populations may have distinct features, and we may hold different biases toward them. With nonhuman animals, we exhibit speciesism, a form of discrimination based on species membership. With digital minds, we might develop substratism, a form of discrimination based on the material substrate of an entity's mind. However, at the core, these biases stem from the same underlying tendency—favouring beings that are like us and near us. Whether dealing with digital minds or nonhuman animals, this bias will manifest similarly, shaping how we assign moral worth and ethical consideration.

**Jacobsen:** In the film *Blade Runner 2049*, there was a striking moment where a synthetic human destroyed a holographic AI assistant stored in a data stick. It was fascinating because you had one synthetic being eliminating another, treating it as disposable, much like crumpling up and

discarding a bad note on a notepad. Are we at risk of accidentally engineering our own callousness into AI systems, particularly in how we design them to interact with other beings?

**Sebo:** Yes, we are definitely at risk of that, and this is where AI safety and AI welfare intersect. AI safety focuses on making AI systems safer for humans. At the same time, AI welfare considers how we can develop AI safely for AI systems themselves, assuming they develop morally significant interests, needs, and vulnerabilities.

One area where these concerns overlap is algorithmic bias. If AI systems train on human data, they absorb humanity's best and worst aspects. They inherit our insights, but they also replicate and potentially amplify our biases—racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

If we train AI systems—either directly or indirectly—to believe that differences in material composition justify unequal treatment, we risk embedding dangerous moral assumptions into their cognitive architecture. If AI learns that beings of different materials—such as other AI systems, humans, or animals—can be treated as expendable, this conditioning could have serious consequences. AI may develop hostility toward other AI systems with different architectures or even extend indifference or aggression toward humans and animals if they mirror the treatment they receive.

**Jacobsen:** When you referenced substratism earlier, did you adhere to substrate independence—the idea that consciousness and morally significant capacities can exist in different material forms, such as carbon-based biological brains and silicon-based artificial systems?

**Sebo:** If by substrate independence you mean the idea that consciousness and other morally significant capacities can arise in various material substrates, including both carbon-based biological systems and silicon-based digital systems, then yes, I am open to that possibility.

One of the central arguments in my book is that we will soon face the challenge of deciding how to treat highly advanced digital minds, even though we may lack definitive knowledge or consensus on two key questions: What exactly makes an entity matter for its own sake? Do digital minds possess the necessary attributes to qualify for moral consideration?

As technology advances, we will need to grapple with these questions in a way that avoids reinforcing our historical biases while ensuring that our ethical frameworks remain flexible enough to accommodate nonhuman and nonbiological forms of intelligence.

We will continue to face substantial and ongoing disagreement—both about ethical values about scientific facts concerning sentience, consciousness, and agency—as we make decisions about how to treat these emerging forms of intelligence. We will not reach certainty or consensus on whether substrate independence is correct or incorrect anytime soon. Because of this, we must develop a framework for decision-making that allows us to make sound ethical decisions despite the persistent uncertainty and disagreement.

When confronted with this epistemic uncertainty, we have a moral responsibility to err on the side of caution. That means granting at least some moral consideration to entities that have a realistic possibility of having subjective experiences. This is why we must extend some moral weight to AI and other digital minds in the near future.

**Jacobsen:** Earlier, you spoke about speciesism, and now we are transitioning to substratism. In your book, you provide two clear examples—one about Neanderthals and another about synthetic (android) roommates. When considering ethical frameworks beyond the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, how do Neanderthals and android thought experiments help us move beyond human-centered moral reasoning?

**Sebo:** Early in the book, I present a thought experiment where you and your roommates take a genetic test for fun, hoping to learn about your ancestry. To your surprise, you discover that one roommate is a Neanderthal, while the other is a *Westworld*-style android.

The Neanderthal scenario reminds us that species membership alone cannot determine moral considerability. Of course, species membership is morally relevant because it influences an individual's interests, needs, vulnerabilities, and capacity for social bonds. However, if a Neanderthal lived alongside us, shared an apartment, and exhibited sentience, consciousness, and agency, their moral worth would be self-evident.

They would have personal projects, meaningful relationships, and experiences that matter to them—including relationships with us that hold mutual significance. Given all this, it is clear that they would still matter morally for their own sake, and we would have moral responsibilities toward them, regardless of their species classification.

The same reasoning extends to nonbiological entities, such as advanced AI systems or synthetic beings. If an android did exhibit sentience, consciousness, and agency, then substrate differences alone—whether carbon-based or silicon-based—should not be the sole determinant of moral status. This thought experiment challenges our deep-seated biases and pushes us to rethink moral considerability beyond traditional human-centred ethics.

So, if your roommate turned out to be a Neanderthal rather than a Homo sapiens, that difference might slightly modify the specific obligations you owe them, but it would not change the fundamental fact that you do owe them moral consideration. Their species membership would not negate their sentience, consciousness, or agency, nor would it diminish your ethical responsibilities toward them.

With the *Westworld*-style robot, however, the situation becomes more complex. Once you learn that your roommate is made of silicon-based chips, even if they demonstrate the same behaviours and exhibit cognitive capacities comparable to yours, you might question whether they truly possess sentience, consciousness, or agency. You might be uncertain whether their expressions of emotion, care, and concern are genuine or merely sophisticated simulations.

Imagine sitting at the dinner table with your Neanderthal and robot roommates. You discuss your day, share your successes and failures, and empathize with one another. With the Neanderthal roommate, you might feel fully confident in your empathy, recognizing their capacity for real experiences and emotions. With the robot roommate, however, you might hesitate, wondering whether your instinct to empathize is truly appropriate.

As I mentioned earlier, regarding your Neanderthal roommate, you should be confident that they matter and that you have ethical responsibilities toward them. You should continue showing up for them in a morally appropriate way. Your uncertainty is understandable with your robot

roommate, but that uncertainty does not justify treating them as a mere object. Uncertainty should never lead us to round down to zero and assume they do not matter.

Instead, when in doubt, we should err on caution. That means granting at least some degree of moral consideration, showing respect and compassion, and making ethical decisions that acknowledge the possibility of their sentience or agency.

**Jacobsen:** AI is evolving at an unprecedented pace. There is massive capital investment, intense competition, and highly driven, ambitious talent pouring their lives into developing increasingly advanced AI systems. Given this rapid acceleration, how do ethical considerations around synthetic minds and artificial intelligence change when our moral frameworks remain largely outdated?

We are struggling to engage in mainstream ethical discussions about AI and digital minds. Yet, many societies are still debating fundamental scientific concepts—from evolution to the Big Bang theory. In many ways, our moral discourse is still stuck in first-century or Bronze Age perspectives, while AI pushes us into an era that demands new ethical paradigms. This gap between technological and ethical progress seems like a major barrier to responsible AI development. What are your thoughts on this disparity?

**Sebo:** The way you frame the issue is exactly right. Many moral intuitions and judgments evolved in response to the social environments of 10,000 years ago when humans lived in small communities and faced different types of conflicts and pressures. These moral frameworks were not designed for the complexities of the modern age, and they are especially ill-suited for addressing fast-moving technologies like artificial intelligence.

As a result, we find ourselves in a situation where technological development is accelerating, but our ethical frameworks are lagging behind. This creates a dangerous gap: We are engineering systems that will increasingly shape the world, yet we lack consensus on how to navigate this transformation ethically. AI ethics needs to catch up to AI development—otherwise, we risk deploying powerful technologies without the moral safeguards necessary to prevent harm.

An important observation is that technological progress far outpaces social, legal, and political progress. When we consider where AI could advance in the next five to ten years, along with the strong incentives that companies and governments have to race toward developing more advanced and sophisticated AI systems, it becomes clear that we must prepare for these possibilities—even if we cannot predict them with certainty.

We do not yet know whether we will reach Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) in the next two, four, six, eight, or ten years. Nor do we know if AI will develop sentience, consciousness, or agency within that timeframe. However, we must allow for the possibility because so much remains unknown about the nature of these capacities and the trajectory of AI development.

Many would have been skeptical if you had asked AI experts a decade ago whether we would have AI systems capable of writing realistic essays or passing standardized tests across various professional and academic fields by 2025. Yet, those systems now exist. Similarly, you had asked when AI could match or surpass human-level performance across a wide range of cognitive

tasks. At present, some experts doubt that this will happen by 2035. But others find it plausible, and either way, the pace of technological development could again surprise us.

This is because the same computational and architectural features associated with intelligence are often linked—in complex and overlapping ways—to sentience, consciousness, and agency. While intelligence and sentience are not identical, they share many of the same fundamental properties. As a result, in our pursuit of AGI by 2030 or 2035, we may accidentally create artificial sentience, consciousness, or agency without realizing it. In other words, we may be racing directly toward that reality without recognizing it as our destination.

The key takeaway for companies, governments, policymakers, and decision-makers is that we cannot afford to confront this problem only once it arrives. We must begin preparing for it now. Even if today's language models are not usable candidates for sentience, AI companies must still acknowledge that AI welfare is a credible and legitimate issue that deserves serious ethical consideration.

Companies should start assessing their AI systems for welfare-relevant features, drawing from the same frameworks we use in animal welfare assessments. They should also develop policies and procedures for treating AI systems with appropriate moral concern, again using existing AI safety and animal welfare ethics models.

If companies fail to prepare, they will find themselves caught off guard, relying on public relations teams to dictate their response strategies rather than making these critical ethical decisions proactively and responsibly. That is not how these decisions should be made.

**Jacobsen:** Two things stood out from the text. One is the wider application of universalism or universal moral consideration in fundamental ethics. The other is a probabilistic approach to ethics rather than appealing to transcendent absolutes.

So, in your ethics framing, do you believe there are any absolutes? Or should probability theory and universalism serve as the two benchmarks for a temporary ethical framework concerning moral concerns within the moral circle?

**Sebo:** Yes. That's a good question, and I've been thinking a lot about it.

I do make some assumptions throughout the book—assumptions that I take to be plausible and widely accepted across a range of ethical traditions, even those that disagree on other matters.

For example, the idea that we should reduce and repair harm caused to vulnerable beings—particularly those with sentience, consciousness, and agency—is an implication of many ethical theories and traditions. Since this principle is widely accepted, we can be confident that it should be a core component of any ethical system. Similarly, many ethical frameworks imply that we should consider and mitigate risks in a reasonable and proportionate way.

I look for opportunities where different traditions converge since those points of agreement reinforce ethical confidence. Even if we cannot be certain of a claim's absolute truth, we can still have high confidence in its validity based on broad moral consensus.

With that in mind, I believe we should confidently hold that sentient, conscious, and agentic beings matter and that their interests deserve moral consideration, respect, and compassion. We should reduce and repair the harms we cause them where possible and reasonably assess and mitigate the risks we impose on them.

These principles are robust across multiple ethical frameworks, so they deserve serious moral weight, even if they fall slightly short of total certainty.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you so much for your time today. I appreciate it. It was nice to meet you. Thank you again for sharing your expertise.

**Sebo:** Thank you for talking with me. If there's anything else I can do to help or if you have any follow-up questions, feel free to let me know.

# Saddled Histories: David Chaffetz on the Rise and Ruin of the Horse Empire

2025/04/12

**David Chaffetz** is an independent scholar and writer whose work bridges traditional scholarship and modern interpretation, offering fresh perspectives on the cultural and geopolitical forces that have shaped Asia. A graduate of Harvard University, where he studied under renowned Inner Asia specialists Richard Frye and Joseph Fletcher, and later a student of Edward Allworth at Columbia, Chaffetz has spent more than four decades immersed in the study of Middle Eastern and Inner Asian history.

His landmark 1981 travelogue, *A Journey through Afghanistan*, praised by Owen Lattimore and republished several times, launched a literary and scholarly career focused on the overlooked narratives of Asia. His recent works, including *Three Asian Divas* and *Raiders, Rulers, and Traders: The Horse and the Rise of Empires*, examine the vital roles played by women, trade, and equine culture in transmitting and transforming Asian civilization.

Chaffetz has traveled extensively through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Russia, conducting research in over ten languages, including Persian, Turkish, and Russian. A regular contributor to the Asian Review of Books, he has also written for the South China Morning Post and the Nikkei Asian Review. He is a member of the Royal Society for Asian Affairs, the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, the Explorers Club, and Lisbon's Gremio Literario. He currently divides his time between Lisbon and Paris.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** I'd like to start with something unexpected: What does fermented mare's milk taste like in Mongolia?

**David Chaffetz:** Initially, it tastes rather good. Let's say the attack, as a wine taster might say, is very refreshing. The problem is that it has an aftertaste of urine. So, if you keep drinking it—and that's the idea—you always enjoy it. But the minute you stop, you want to rinse your mouth with water, which is unavailable.

**Jacobsen:** Regarding your latest book, *Raiders, Rulers, and Traders*, what initially inspired your focus on horses' role in shaping empires and global trade networks?

**Chaffetz:** A long time ago, I read a book that was very influential in the 1960s and 1970s called *The Rise of the West* by William McNeill at the University of Chicago. He was one of the first scholars to address a popular audience about the amazing interactions across the Eurasian continent—between China, India, the Middle East, and Europe. Before that, people didn't talk much about what China, for example, owed to the West or to India, what India owed West, or what the debt of the West to China and India.

He had these maps showing gear wheels—bold, graphic gear wheels—connecting all the countries. But these graphics left the obvious question unanswered: How did such a gearbox function? In other words, how did these far-flung civilizations communicate with one another

and connect? And above all, why did they need to communicate and connect? That issue has been on my mind for more than 50 years.

Through extensive travel in Asia, I observed that most countries have very prominent horse cultures. The horse seems to play an important role in the arts, sports, and social status—at least traditional social status. Today, if you talk about the horse as a social status symbol in China, you're talking about the nouveau riche who play polo. Traditionally, the horse was an extremely important marker of social place in China, as reflected in the arts.

I realized that William McNeill's gearbox, which connected Asian civilizations with Europe, was made up of horses. The horse was not only the mechanism for connecting civilizations—it was also one of the primary reasons those civilizations did business with one another. The peripheral countries around the Eurasian continent were poor in horses. The center of Eurasia—Inner Asia and Central Asia—was rich in horses. That gave rise to a trading system connecting the Eurasian continent and making it a kind of global civilization for centuries.

**Jacobsen:** How far back does the evolution of horse domestication go?

**Chaffetz:** So, it's a very gradual process. One of the fascinating things is that it's so gradual, but we can see so many steps that we can imagine, century by century, people making these huge leaps forward in technology and best practices.

There's a long-standing debate as to whether we're talking about domestication occurring around 5,000 BC or around 3,000 BC. The current state of the play says that hunters in Central Asia—Kazakhstan or Southern Russia—possibly domesticated a breed of horses 5,000 years ago, moving from butchering them to herding them. But then those horses and those people died out, without successors. Then, another attempt to domesticate horses started 3,000 years ago, which was more successful. Those horses are the unique ancestors of all our domesticated horses today.

I like the later start date because we don't see people riding into history—literally riding into history—until about 2,000 BC. So, if horses had been domesticated in 5,000 BC, what the hell were they doing for 2,000 or 3,000 years that no one saw them show up? It just seems improbable to me.

Anyway, so they're domesticated in the sense that we begin to herd them as livestock, interfering with their reproduction, culling animals that don't give much milk, culling males that are too aggressive, and winding up with mares that give a lot of milk and stallions which are not so wild and don't run off with the mares.

To herd those animals, we have to ride them because they can run much faster than humans—unlike sheep, cows, and goats. So inevitably, we have to ride them. We begin moving with them over fairly considerable distances. We get better at riding.

At some point, we adopt them for pulling carts—fast little carts—probably originally for racing, around 2,000 BC. A couple of hundred years after that—so now 1,800 BC—chariot riding has become quite a thing, also for racing, prestige, but inevitably for warfare. This more or less coincides with the Bronze Age heroes of Homer's *Iliad*—Hector and Achilles—who show up at the battlefield on chariots.

Chariots are mentioned very frequently in the Bible. Next week is the Jewish Passover. The Pharaoh chased the children of Israel towards the Red Sea with an army of chariots, probably around 1,800 or 1,600 BC. So, chariots were the horses' entry into warfare.

To follow up on that—by 1,000 BC, so after about 800 years of chariot warfare, people figured out that it was much more efficient, cheaper, and potentially more lethal to fight on the horse itself rather than from a cart—riding the horse and either slinging javelins or using a bow and arrow. Eventually, mounted archers—mounted cavalry—replaced chariots, starting around 1,000 BC in the Middle East and about 500 BC in China.

**Jacobsen:** Even in the relatively recent history of show jumping—which I've covered in Canada as part of my previous journalistic work—we see stark generational shifts in how the sport approaches safety. Riders like Ian Millar, Eric Lamaze, Gail Greenough, Beth Underhill, Michel Vaillancourt, and Jim Day came up in an era very different from that of today's leaders such as Tiffany Foster and Erynn Ballard. Over time, the sport has introduced safety mandates: chinstraps, vests, breakaway cups on jumps, and obstacle courses built with fiberglass or PVC. These changes reflect a broader effort to make the sport safer and more regulated.

This signals a kind of domestication—not unlike the transition from chariot warfare to riding astride in saddles, whether soft or rigid. It feels like part of a long arc of human-equine evolution. In that context, I'm curious: Across this several-thousand-year trajectory of domestication and equestrian training, were there ever periods where knowledge was lost—moments when the transmission of skills or traditions faltered before later being revived?

**Chaffetz:** That's an interesting question. The way of life of the people who live by horse breeding—the Turco-Mongolian population of Central Asia and Inner Asia—has been stable for over 3,000 years.

Since the emergence of riding horseback to fight, up until the beginning of the 20th century, their way of life has been extremely stable. Improvements in tack, riding technique, and horse evolution have only made horses bigger, stronger, and better.

Their horses improved naturally because they were not bred to have pure bloodlines. They were bred when a stallion was deemed a very good stallion, and everyone wanted to use that stallion to breed with their mares. They didn't have a stud book. They didn't have rules about who should be bred with whom.

So, I think they probably had the toughest, best, and most powerful horses for many years.

In the 20th century, totalitarian governments were politically opposed to horse breeders in all those countries.These governments suppressed the horse breeders' way of life, resulting in a huge loss of knowledge about how to breed and train horses, which they're currently trying to recover from.

For example, the Nomad Games in Central Asia are gaining in popularity. Here countries that have a tradition of these mounted games—like the famous buzkashi or kukpar, where riders pick a heavy animal carcass off the ground—I call it rugby on horseback—or polo, or racing, or mounted archery, compete for prizes. People come from all over the world to see and compete in

them. They're reconstructing the equine knowledge base of the Central Asians, who had it for 3,000 years and almost lost it completely in the 20th century.

I don't know much about Western riding traditions. Still, my feeling is that there has been so much money in it for so many years—betting on horses in the Anglosphere: UK, Ireland, Canada, the U.S., Australia—that it would be very surprising to me if, in the past 300 or 400 years, we've lost any knowledge along the way.

But I would mention that in the West our horses are dangerously overbred and unhealthy, and somebody will have to do something about this—or we will be in big trouble with our horses.

**Jacobsen:** Can you explain the dual role that horses have historically played—as both currency and commodity—and what that tells us about their place in the broader economic and cultural systems of the societies that relied on them?

**Chaffetz:** Well, the advantage of horses as a trade item is that they feed themselves and walk themselves. If you're trying to make money over a very large distance—let's say you're in the middle of Asia—there's not much opportunity to make money, but you have a huge herd of horses. You can ride those horses into India; you can ride them to China; you can ride them to Moscow and sell them for big money. In our terms, let's say currency—$500 to $1,000 per head. Even today, for a Central Asian, $1,000 is a lot of money. So, the horse is the ideal tradable commodity.

It's also potentially a prestige commodity, depending on how good the horse is. There are always exceptional horses that fetch prices equivalent to what we would pay today for a Lamborghini or a Ferrari. Those horses were often, in fact, given as gifts to emperors of the different countries of Asia as a commercial sweetener to open the door for commercial relationships. We have many paintings or sculptures of these prestigious horses in Chinese, Indian, or Iranian art sent as gifts to rulers. That underscores the importance of the horse as a trading commodity.

**Jacobsen:** In most civilizations—particularly in their early stages of development—humans tend to self-mythologize, often envisioning their gods in anthropomorphic terms. Similarly, we see the emergence of equine myths like Pegasus or the unicorn. How have horses been mythologized across art, literature, and ritual? And how does that equine symbolism shape, or become woven into, the self-narrative of empires throughout history?

**Chaffetz:** Let's discuss the archaeological record. Starting around 2000 BC, we begin to find elaborate—multi-level graves—containing elite individuals: a man and a woman or several members of a family, together with other people, presumably sacrificed servants or retainers, and significantly sacrificed horses.

We also know from the rituals embedded in the sacred scriptures of the ancient Indians and Iranians that they held horse races in honor of the dead and then sacrificed the horses following the race.

I recall that in Homer's *Iliad*, when Priam buries Hector, he orders horse races to be performed in honour of his son. So, the horse race can be seen as a symbol of the journey of the soul of the

dead into the other world. The sacrificed horse performs the same role he performed for the departed in life.

This is very pervasive and persistent across Eurasia. Until the Tang Dynasty in China—so we're talking 900 AD—we saw extensive grave gifts in terra-cotta horses—images of horses superseding horse sacrifices.

Horses have always been viewed as partly from another world, suitable for accompanying us on our journey into that world. That's one of the most important symbolic uses of horses in our cultures.

There are many others: the horse can metaphorize the human soul. In both Plato's dialogues and Buddhist scripture, the horse represents the soul—fleeing madly forward, not knowing where it's going, in a panic. It's up to the sentient soul—the superego, in Freudian terms—to control that frightened horse and make sure it goes in the right direction.

So, there's also a psychological aspect to how we view horses.

Finally, because horses are very beautiful and associated with power and prestige, we have aestheticized them—their bodies, their speed, their colours. They are a major subject of the visual arts in Chinese sculpture, painting, and in Iranian and Mughal painting. And, of course, in the Anglo world again, there are all those beautiful paintings of racehorses. And we have Rosa Bonheur, the celebrated French painter of horses. Horses are almost universally admired and approved as aesthetic objects.

Those are the three main roles horses play in the symbolic world.

**Jacobsen:** At the dawn of the 20th century, entire industries revolved around the industrial-scale cleanup of horse manure in major cities—an unglamorous but central part of urban life. That world has vanished. Today, horses have become rare, even precious, commodities. As you pointed out, some elite horses are now valued at $500,000. I've learned from my conversations with experts that a single entry-level Olympic horse often starts at $500,000—or €500,000—and the average can soar to €5 million. And that's just one. Riders frequently need seven or eight, as the horses tire easily and often specialize in different types of course design.

These animals are bred with extreme precision—for traits like "scopiness"—and their value has skyrocketed. Do you see a curious continuity between this elite modern equestrian culture and ancient traditions in which horses were reserved for rulers, royal burials, or ceremonial contests? In a way, are we witnessing a kind of exaggerated return to those aristocratic norms, where billionaires have reignited a high-stakes interest in horses, driving prices through the roof? Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, practical horse breeding and riding for everyday use—ranch work and rural life—has largely faded from the mainstream.

**Chaffetz:** Yes, there's a bifurcation in the world of horses. But bifurcation has always existed. In the past, there were ordinary work horses and elite horses. In the past, ordinary horses could easily be raised in countries where horses could graze year-round outside—without stables or foddering— so the cost of keeping a horse was within everyone's reach. This would be typical of Afghanistan as well as Texas today. But this phenomenon of was much more widespread in the

past. As the world becomes more urbanized, and as we put more land under plow, the availability of land where horses can feed themselves is reduced.

You now have to spend serious money if you're going to stable an animal, feed it, or have someone else look after it. Very few people will work as stable boys or stable girls, and there is a significant shortage of veterinarians. For all these reasons, the average person cannot keep a horse at any reasonable cost as they could have 50 or 70 years ago in rural British Columbia or Upstate New York. Today, they have to commit substantial money to raising that horse.

So that's the fate of, let's call it, the everyday horse.

On the high end, nothing has changed in a thousand years. Elite horses have always been pampered. They've always had grooms. They've always had special fodder. In my book, I describe the efforts that Chinese or Mughal emperors in India undertook to care for their horses. They were the Olympic competition horses, the Kentucky Derby horses of their time. They were priceless.

One of the Mughal emperors gave one of these horses to his brother-in-law, the Maharaja of Jaipur. The emperor wrote that the Maharaja was "so happy receiving the horse that it was as if I had given him a whole kingdom." So, you can see that the $5 million horse existed 500 years ago. The billionaires today continue this time-honored tradition of maharajas and kings who had these incredible horses.

Again, we should keep in mind that, in football/soccer, for example, players like Kylian Mbappé or Cristiano Ronaldo command salaries many times higher than the average professional. Similarly, average horses are worth far less than the greatest horses. This kind of bifurcation is true in every sport.

**Jacobsen:** What thread runs through Mongolia, Persia, and India regarding how they have viewed horses over the millennia?

**Chaffetz:** These are countries where, traditionally, nobody with self-respect would ever walk. They rode everywhere. This is very evident in Persian paintings: you see scenes where the king is sitting in a garden, surrounded by his courtiers and enjoying himself. There are musicians, dancing girls, food, and wine. But always, you see a horse posted close to the king because the minute he's done with his picnic or court session, he will walk two yards, leap up on the horse, and ride off.

They couldn't imagine going anywhere on foot. When you rode into their palaces—in many of these buildings, for example, the Forbidden City in Beijing—horse ramps led into the inner pavilion because the emperor would have ridden in, left the horse at the very threshold of his residence, and dismounted only at that point.

So, it's a completely horse-focused society.

And that, as I said, was one of those common elements that made me think those countries were connected via the horse.

I'd also like to point out that the old Russian state—before Peter the Great, before the modernization and Europeanization of Russia—looked and felt very much like Mongolia or Iran in the way people rode, raised horses, and dressed and in the importance of the horse trade for the Muscovite State at the time.

**Jacobsen:** What are you hoping people take away from *Raiders, Rulers, and Traders*?

**Chaffetz:** The horse is this phenomenon that had been so important for—as I say—3,000 years, since we started riding horses for warfare, until the beginning of the 20th century. The horse drove a way of life. It determined the destiny of empires that accounted for half of the world's population at the time. It shaped a whole culture of horsemanship and riding.

Then, at the beginning of the 20th century—as you pointed out—suddenly, horses were no longer important except in the very limited forms of showing and racing. They lose their significance from an economic, political, and military perspective. It happened very quickly. The horse breeders disappeared from history.

I think what you take away is that a way of life can develop and be extremely persistent and robust for three millennia and then disappear in one man's lifetime. This makes us think that, while our lifestyles appear to be stable and persistent, what will happen in our lifetime or the next generation when a major technological change comes along, and elements of our world that we took for granted become irrelevant. I want people to think about that sense of loss and change.

**Jacobsen:** David, thank you for the opportunity and your time today. I appreciate your time and expertise. It was nice to meet you.

**Chaffetz:** Nice, my pleasure, Scott. It was good talking to you, too. Bye-bye.

# Ukraine’s Brave1 Is Racing to Redefine Warfare

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**Artem Moroz** serves as Deputy Head of Partnerships and International Cooperation and leads Investor Relations at **Brave1**, Ukraine’s flagship defense tech platform.

Born out of the Ministry of Digital Transformation, Brave1 was created to accelerate technological innovation amid the crucible of war. With backing from six key government institutions—including the Ministry of Strategic Industries, the Ministry of Economy, the General Staff of the Armed Forces, and the National Security and Defense Council—Brave1 has disbursed over $30 million in R&D grants across more than 500 projects.

Brave1 is reshaping Ukraine’s military landscape by fast-tracking battlefield-ready technologies such as drones and electronic warfare systems. It nurtures startup ecosystems, streamlines NATO Stock Number approvals, and fosters a resilient domestic supply chain by connecting civilian innovators directly with military needs. This initiative has become a cornerstone of Ukraine’s defense capabilities, enabling swift deployment of critical technologies on the front lines. As Brave1 continues to advance, it is not only fueling innovation but positioning Ukraine as a pivotal force in global defense tech and strategic resilience.

This Saturday, Brave1 marks its second anniversary with the “Defense Tech Era” showcase in Kyiv—a high-profile event bringing together senior government officials, investors, and leading industry experts.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Thank you for agreeing to this interview.

**Artem Moroz:** Let me clarify a few points.

First, six key ministries and organizations were involved as founding partners at the outset. As you mentioned, the Ministry of Defense and Digital Transformation were among them. In addition, the Ministry of Strategic Industries is also a founding partner—they are responsible for scaling solutions that reach later stages of development.

The Ministry of Economy is another founding partner, as financing is crucial to the project’s success. From the military side, we have the General Staff of Ukraine, representing the armed forces. Last but not least, the National Security and Defense Council, which coordinates most defence activities in Ukraine, is also involved.

So, those are the six founding partners. Since our focus is on technology, the Ministry of Digital Transformation is our primary stakeholder. We collaborate with all six but work most closely with them.

Since the launch of the grant program, we have distributed over $30 million in grants. These funds have come entirely from the Ukrainian state budget. We recently relaunched the program for 2025 and expect to distribute a similar amount, based on strategic priorities and expert evaluations of proposed solutions.

Regarding the scope of work, we are currently collaborating with over 1,500 companies that have submitted more than 3,600 products or solutions. The scale is much larger than many realize.

**Jacobsen:** The nature of modern warfare is evolving at an unprecedented pace. Remote operations, drone reconnaissance, intelligence-driven systems, and satellite surveillance have become foundational. As we enter a new era of hybrid warfare, how does Brave1 distinguish itself from conventional models of defense innovation?

**Moroz:** That's a great question. I would step back and start with Brave1's mission—why we exist. For Ukraine, we are being very pragmatic. Competing with a much larger country like Russia, particularly in terms of workforce and traditional military assets—such as tanks and artillery —is tough. Therefore, we are investing in areas where we can improve: agility, innovation, and technology. That's the Brave1 approach.

So, our only real chance of winning this war—and defending our democracy and our country—is through innovation. It is about being more effective with the resources we have. The key, the "secret sauce," is using technology and being the first to implement those technologies.

The Russians are strong, learning quickly, improving their solutions rapidly, and learning a great deal from us. So we need to move even faster—at least twice as fast.

At Brave1, our ultimate goal is to provide advanced technologies to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and to ensure they have all the necessary tools to repel aggression. We can do this in two main ways. One way is to source those technologies within Ukraine. However, to achieve this, we first need to nurture the ecosystem.

That's why we provide grants and help companies obtain a NATO Stock Number (NSN), a requirement for any product procured by the Ministry of Defense.

We are aligned with NATO because we have a long-standing intention to join the alliance and share the same mindset and values with NATO and the European Union—those of Western democratic principles. From a technical perspective, we want to be well-prepared and interoperable. Codifying our products according to NATO standards is crucial, not only for the current war effort but also for our future integration and cooperation.

Defence tech is an industry that can lead Ukraine's post-war economic recovery. It has the potential to become a significant source of export revenue, allowing us to sell our solutions to allies and partners and support global defence efforts—drawing on the hard-earned lessons we've learned.

That's why the NSN process is essential. Brave1 also acts as a connector, linking the frontline with the tech developers. We collect insights from the battlefield, including what products are needed, emerging trends, and real-time challenges. We feed that information back to the developers so they can create solutions tailored to actual needs.

Once a new technology is created, the next challenge is rapid deployment. We must ensure that solutions can be quickly delivered to the military, scaled effectively, and used across brigades

and battalions. Change is hard—especially in the military—and introducing entirely new systems comes with a learning curve. We must minimize that curve as much as possible.

When we see a new solution successfully implemented, we strive to ensure its widespread adoption, thereby enhancing the overall efficiency of our operations.

**Jacobsen:** How do you evaluate and select new defence technologies or projects?

**Moroz:** That's really at the core of how Brave1 operates—and the value we aim to create. Any Ukrainian company with a registered legal entity is eligible to apply to be part of Brave1 by applying through our website. It's an open call, an open form.

We have a three-step evaluation process.

First, we conduct a standard security check. We do not allow companies with connections to Russia or questionable histories regarding legality, taxes, or ownership. Once they pass that initial check, our expert committee thoroughly evaluates them.

We have around 80 experts with scientific, technical, and military backgrounds. Each project is assigned to three experts who assess it across multiple criteria, including scalability, uniqueness, relevance to national security, frontline applicability, and several other key factors. Based on these evaluations, projects receive scores.

If a project falls into the lower 50%, it is not eligible to join the Brave1 ecosystem. However, we provide detailed feedback to the team outlining what they need to improve, and they are welcome to reapply whenever they believe their solution is more mature.

The top 50% become official participants in Brave1 and receive a status we call BRV1. We begin working closely with these projects because they demonstrate the most potential, and we must prioritize our limited resources.

The top 20–25% become eligible for grants. The grant system is relatively straightforward: the higher a project scores in the evaluation, the larger the grant it may qualify for. Our grants range from $50,000 to $200,000 per product, not per company. So, if a company is developing multiple products in different areas, it can apply for multiple grants, and we're happy to support it across those innovations.

To give you a sense of scale, we've distributed around $30 million in grants, which translates to roughly 500 grants issued so far.

**Jacobsen:** What is your approach when engaging with startups, the military, and international partners?

**Moroz:** Great question. If we look at it from a stakeholder perspective, our ultimate client is the people of Ukraine. First and foremost, our mission is to protect them. But beyond that, we also aim to instill confidence in the Ukrainian people that we can survive this war, that we have a chance to win, and that we will defend our homes and future.

The military is next in the chain. Our primary goal is to increase the survivability of Ukrainian service members through technology—to reduce the human cost of war. By leveraging new technologies, we aim to move people away from direct combat zones.

That's crucial, especially considering the stark contrast between Ukrainian and Russian tactics. Our adversary is often willing to suffer high human losses for minimal territorial gains. We do not follow that strategy and do not have the luxury of doing so.

So, we are focused on implementing unmanned aerial, ground-based, or otherwise unmanned systems that can deter attacks, stop the enemy, and protect human life. Our philosophy is clear: we should utilize technology wherever it can replace a soldier.

So that's the clear message—the value proposition—for soldiers: use technology to avoid putting your comrades and others at risk.

When discussing startups and companies, we're working with a broad spectrum. On one end, we support tiny, garage-type startups. On the other, we also work with scale-ups—companies already generating hundreds of millions in revenue and preparing for international expansion when the time is right.

What is important to highlight is that most of these companies were established within the past two to three years. They are growing and developing solutions incredibly fast. We can confidently say that Ukraine is leading the world in new defence technology, particularly based on what is actively used on the front line.

Ukraine currently produces about 45% of its overall defence equipment domestically. However, regarding new, innovative defense technologies—such as drones, electronic warfare, and situational awareness systems—about 95% of the equipment used by the Ukrainian Armed Forces is locally produced. This speaks volumes about the effectiveness and adaptability of our local industry.

Even when equipment is donated or purchased from allies, it often fails to perform as well as expected in actual combat conditions. The cost-to-performance ratio is frequently unfavourable. Locally produced Ukrainian solutions are more efficient, reliable, and battlefield-proven.

Our value proposition for startups is to connect them directly with the military and help them scale as quickly as possible. As a government-backed initiative, Brave1 exists to support their journey from prototyping to full deployment.

One key enabler is the NATO Stock Number (NSN). This is crucial for procurement and integration across allied defence systems. Due to bureaucratic complexity, obtaining an NSN typically takes two to three years in Western Europe or the U.S. However, we've reduced this timeframe to an average of just two to three months in Ukraine. In one record-setting case, it was done in just nine days.

So, it is striking to compare a typical 1,000-day timeline in Western countries to a 9-day timeline in Ukraine. This opens up enormous opportunities for speed, agility, and responsiveness in defence innovation.

As a result, we're now seeing international companies establish a presence in Ukraine. They're setting up local legal entities and R&D centers to exploit this fast-track environment. Being close to the front line allows them to innovate at the pace required by modern warfare—which is extremely difficult if you're operating far from the conflict.

Armed with the credibility of real-time testing and a NATO Stock Number obtained in Ukraine, these companies are now returning to their home markets in Western Europe and approaching their Ministries of Defense with proven, deployable solutions.

**Jacobsen:** You mentioned the high casualty toll on the Russian side—the stark human cost of the Kremlin's strategy. Can you walk us through the estimated daily figures? What are we seeing in terms of Russian casualties, both injuries and fatalities? And what's the typical range—from the highest spikes to the lower end?

**Moroz:** That's a better question for the journalists, as they're officially tracking and evaluating those numbers. However, public statistics are published daily by the general staff.

On average, Russia is losing around 1,000 personnel per day—killed and wounded combined. On some of the most intense days, the figure has exceeded 2,000.

What's most striking is that even Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the former head of the country's military and now Ukraine's ambassador to the UK, once believed that if a sufficiently high attrition rate could be achieved, it would force Russia to reconsider its offensive strategies. That was the prevailing thinking during the first year of the full-scale invasion.

But a year later, in another interview and broader national reflection, the consensus shifted. Unfortunately, no clear threshold—no matter how many casualties—has yet proven sufficient to halt Russia's advance. Despite the enormous losses, they continue pushing forward.

**Jacobsen:** What mechanisms does Brave1 employ to support defence tech innovations? Have all 500 grants been allocated?

**Moroz:** Yes, roughly 500 grants have been allocated to date, funded by the state budget. However, it's essential to clarify that these grants are specifically intended to support research and development (R&D)—not scaling.

The goal is to support technologies in the prototyping phase, ideally up to Technology Readiness Level (TRL) 7, where they're tested on the front line and a working prototype exists. However, scaling production—such as building a factory or a mass production line—is beyond the scope of grant funding.

That's why we work closely with investors worldwide, covering the full spectrum of investment stages—from pre-seed and seed rounds to later-stage capital. Ukraine offers a compelling case: the defence technologies we support are battle-tested in real-world conditions. They're innovating faster than most solutions you'll see anywhere else.

Yet, these companies remain significantly undervalued compared to their Western counterparts. Empirically, a company in Ukraine at the same technological readiness level as a U.S. company would be valued at approximately 10 times less. Compared to Western Europe, it's around three times less.

This is partially due to perception—Ukraine is still an emerging destination in the startup space. There's risk. We don't yet have the brand or reputation that Silicon Valley or Berlin might enjoy.

Also, exports remain limited. Due to national policy and the ongoing war, most weapons and defence solutions produced in Ukraine are directed to the front line. According to the prevailing political consensus that all defence production should prioritize national defence, export permits are restricted.

However, we now find ourselves in a unique position. The capacity of Ukraine's defence industry has outgrown the available state budget. There is a significant manufacturing surplus.

At some point, export restrictions will need to be relaxed. When that happens, we expect a rise in international sales, and consequently, a significant boost in company valuation. This will enable these companies to operate at scale, reach new markets, and support the defense efforts of allied nations—all while contributing to Ukraine's economic growth.

**Jacobsen:** What issues are you facing with resource constraints and supply chain disruptions?

**Moroz:** From the beginning, supply chain constraints did appear to be a serious threat—but now, they are becoming more of an opportunity. In Europe, the U.S., and Ukraine, most components—particularly those for drones—originally came from a single major supplier: China.

However, we do not consider China an ally. At best, it's a transactional trade partner, particularly regarding components. However, it's not a source we can depend on in the long term or take for granted. Recognizing this, many Ukrainian companies that previously focused solely on assembling finished products—such as drones—have begun to delve deeper into the supply chain and produce the components themselves.

Just a month or two ago, we held an event celebrating the production of the first 1,000 FPV drones made entirely from Ukrainian-manufactured components. That means 100% of the parts were sourced domestically—no imports, no Chinese components. This marked a significant trend: Ukraine is building internal manufacturing capacity for critical defence technologies.

This shift also presents a strategic opportunity for Europe and the U.S. If you're looking for components that perform well under modern battlefield conditions—at a price point comparable to China and produced at scale—Ukraine is now a compelling option. Therefore, the supply chain is becoming a strength and strategic leverage point for Ukraine's defense industry, rather than a weakness.

**Jacobsen:** Russia is reportedly dedicating nearly a third of its national budget to military spending, yet much of its equipment still harks back to the Soviet era. What does this reliance on legacy systems suggest to Brave1 in terms of strategic opportunity—particularly when it comes to the relevance and impact of your R&D efforts?

**Moroz:** I would disagree with that interpretation. While Russia allocates a significant portion of its budget to defense and relies heavily on Soviet-era equipment, such as tanks, it also invests heavily in modern technology.

They are refurbishing and deploying old equipment at scale, but they understand that artillery and traditional hardware alone are no longer game changers. The real breakthroughs altering the course of battles are technologies like drones and electronic warfare systems. And Russia is learning this quickly.

Take the Shahed drones, for example—long-range attack unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). I'm from Kyiv. I've been here since the very first day of the full-scale invasion. In the beginning, Russia used cruise missiles to strike Kyiv and other cities. That was the primary mode of long-range attack.

But over time, we've seen a shift. Cruise missile attacks have become much less frequent. Instead, drone attacks—especially Shaheds—have increased dramatically. What previously took a year's worth of drone attacks to achieve, they are now accomplishing in a matter of months or even weeks.

We are also seeing swarming tactics evolve rapidly. Drones are no longer primitive, low-tech tools. They are increasingly incorporating jet engines, extended range, and greater precision. In many ways, they are starting to resemble cruise missiles in capability, albeit at a fraction of the cost.

That is where Brave1 comes in. Our role is to ensure Ukraine keeps pace and stays ahead. Our R&D focuses on identifying and developing next-generation capabilities, enabling our forces to maintain technological superiority on the battlefield.

The cost difference between a missile and a drone is enormous. Unfortunately, I sometimes get the impression that NATO countries may be ill-informed about their level of preparedness regarding defence technologies and solutions.

There is an assumption that Western technology is inherently superior. However, when you consider how quickly our adversaries adapt and advance into this new era of defense technology, that assumption begins to look risky—perhaps even dangerous.

We've shifted paradigms. During the Cold War, several high-tech solutions served as deterrents against potential aggression. Today, the reality is different. You need volume. We are transitioning from a model focused on "high-tech" to "effective tech."

That means the goal is to accomplish the mission using minimal resources. You don't need a profoundly complex, expensive, or luxurious solution—you need something that works.

A good example is the use of fibre-optic drones. Initially, it sounded absurd—a drone connected by what is essentially a fishing line, flying 20 kilometres? No one believed it would work.

Yet it became a game changer. These drones are immune to jamming from both Ukrainian and EW Russian systems. Ukraine is deploying tens of thousands every month, and they've proven highly effective.

**Jacobsen:** Final question—how do you sustain momentum in the midst of war? Is the conflict itself the driving force, or have you developed a more structured approach to advancing innovation under pressure?

**Moroz:** Wartime changes everything—including your values and your way of life. Even legally, in Ukraine, we no longer have public holidays. That adds the equivalent of 10 to 12 extra working days per year. In effect, you're operating as a 12% more productive organization—whether it's a factory or a team.

Despite massive challenges—blackouts, missile strikes, constant uncertainty—what I admire most about Ukraine is our adaptability. For example, we developed alternative energy solutions quickly and efficiently during blackouts. Now, we're better prepared for those situations than anyone else—and we did it in record time.

Everyone here knows exactly what we're fighting for. We've seen what occupation means. It's not just a change of flags or passports—it's the deportation and kidnapping of children. It's filtration camps. It's mass executions of anyone considered a "risk" under the new regime.

This is not about politics. It's about survival—yours and your family's. That clarity provides people with extraordinary motivation to work harder and persevere longer.

For example, a company produces ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) drones. They opened a factory in a neighbouring country for safety and future international sales. I asked the founder how it was going. Surprisingly, he told me that despite the lack of energy issues or missile threats there, productivity at that foreign facility is half what it is in Ukraine.

That's the difference wartime motivation makes. In Ukraine, people work with a sense of purpose. They know what's at stake.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate it.

**Moroz:** Thank you, Scott. It was a pleasure.

# One Canadian Small Business on the Challenges of Cross-Border Trade

2025/05/03

**Brian Kroeker**, President of Little Rock Printing, is navigating a sudden logistical disruption: DHL's suspension of business-to-consumer shipments over $800 to the United States. To adapt, his company is consolidating orders and turning to alternate carriers—a shift that has introduced new challenges. While Canadian clients remain largely unaffected, American customers are now facing delays and rising costs—particularly punishing for small businesses operating on razor-thin margins.

Kroeker sees this moment as a potential tipping point that could accelerate a broader shift toward U.S.-based warehousing and a more business-to-business-oriented model. His advice for Canadian small businesses is clear: act quickly, stay informed, leverage digital tools, and maintain customer transparency.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How has your company prepared for the DHL policy pause?

**Brian Kroeker:** We have begun adjusting our internal workflows in anticipation of DHL's policy pause. For any B2C orders over $800, we are working with customers to consolidate shipments into smaller value parcels or proactively shift some larger orders through alternative carriers. It's not the ideal situation, but it will help reduce friction.

**Jacobsen:** What are the immediate operational or customer-facing impacts?

**Kroeker:** The immediate impacts are twofold. Operationally, we are dealing with more paperwork and coordination from the customer side and potential delays or surprise fees, which isn't great for the broader experience. Although most of our clients are in Canada, we've made our U.S. customers aware of these changes and offer more transparent communication around customs timelines and order values.

**Jacobsen:** What effect might these changes have on American compared to Canadian customers?

**Kroeker:** This has a disproportionate effect on our American customers. Our Canadian customers aren't impacted at all, while for U.S. B2C orders—especially for personalized or lower-margin products—we're seeing increased cost pressure. Smaller businesses like ours, which operate on tight margins, feel that strain—mainly when every extra compliance step eats into time and labor.

**Jacobsen:** How do smaller businesses with smaller margins see these shipping and compliance burdens?

**Kroeker:** These types of issues aren't new, but they do compound the broader challenges already being faced, such as rising shipping costs, currency fluctuations, and supply chain delays. So yes, you could say it compares.

**Jacobsen:** Does the added complexity compare with other challenges small businesses regularly face?

**Kroeker:** These types of issues aren't new, but they do compound the broader challenges already being faced, such as rising shipping costs, currency fluctuations, and supply chain delays. So yes, you could say it compares.

**Jacobsen:** Will these U.S. customs enforcements accelerate industry-wide changes within Canada?

**Kroeker:** I think this may push some Canadian businesses to look at U.S.-based warehousing or 3PL partners, and in the longer term, it could accelerate broader shifts toward B2B fulfillment or localized production models for U.S. customers.

**Jacobsen:** Any advice for Canadian small businesses navigating these new customs protocols?

**Kroeker:** My advice is to do not wait. Figure out a solution now, talk to your carriers, understand the different options, and be ready to communicate clearly with your customers. Consider leaning on digital tools to flag order values at checkout and help guide compliance before shipping becomes problematic.

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

# How Christian White Nationalists Captured the U.S. Military

2025/05/03

For this conversation, I'm joined by Michael Weinstein, founder and president of the **Military Religious Freedom Foundation** (MRFF), a nonprofit established in 2005 to safeguard the constitutional separation of church and state within the U.S. military. A 1977 honors graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, Weinstein spent over a decade in the Judge Advocate General's Corps before serving in legal roles within the Reagan White House, including work on the Iran-Contra investigation.

In founding the MRFF, Weinstein set out to confront religious coercion and institutionalized favoritism toward Christianity across the armed forces. Since then, he has become one of the most prominent critics of rising Christian nationalism within the military and broader federal institutions. Under his leadership, the MRFF has challenged everything from the Department of Veterans Affairs exclusive promotion of Christian materials to the Trump administration's so-called "Anti-Christian Bias Task Force," which Weinstein decries as a dangerous step toward theocratic authoritarianism.

With over 94,000 clients, the MRFF continues to serve as a vital bulwark against religious extremism across national security agencies, active-duty units, and veterans' services.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Your organization has grown from a Department of Defense (DoD)-focused initiative to one that spans all 18 national security agencies, representing a remarkably diverse client base—religiously, institutionally, and demographically. What does that expansion say about the scale and persistence of the issues you address within the U.S. military and national security establishment?

**Michael Weinstein:** While we began focusing on the Department of Defense, we now represent clients across all 18 national security agencies.

This includes well-known entities like the CIA, NSA, DIA, and FBI. We also assist clients in the U.S. Coast Guard, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, under the Department of Transportation.

Additionally, we work with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), especially given recent developments. As a veteran, I can attest to the importance of this work. Since our inception, we've represented over 94,000 individuals seeking assistance.

Approximately 95% of our clients identify as Christians, with about three-fourths being Protestants of various denominations and the remaining one-fourth predominantly Roman Catholic. We also represent individuals from every other religious and non-religious tradition—humanists, secularists, atheists, agnostics.

To the best of our knowledge, we currently represent around 18% of all active-duty Muslims in the military. Interestingly, we've had clients from every religious orientation except Scientology. We haven't had one of those yet. I'm still waiting for Tom Cruise to call me.

**Jacobsen:** What criticisms has the MRFF raised regarding the Trump administration's "Anti-Christian Bias Task Force" announced in February?

**Weinstein:** On February 6, President Trump signed an executive order establishing a task force to eradicate what he termed "anti-Christian bias" within the federal government. The task force, led by Attorney General Pam Bondi, reviews federal agencies for policies and practices perceived as discriminatory against Christians.

While the initiative purports to protect religious freedom, many—including the MRFF—are concerned that it may privilege one faith, potentially undermining the constitutional principle of church-state separation.

The MRFF views this move as reminiscent of historical instances where governments have sought to enforce religious conformity, raising alarms about the potential for increased religious coercion within federal institutions.

The Germans did the same thing with their citizens when the Nazis took over—children ratting out parents, grandparents, neighbours, teachers, coaches, or friends—anyone who was not toeing the party line. So we saw it happen again on February 6. We immediately saw the impact across the Department of Defense—all branches—and in the intelligence agencies I mentioned earlier. The only place we had not seen it yet was the VA.

Then Doug Collins, a former member of Congress who has a long history of attacking me and our foundation, issued an edict. He is, or was, a lieutenant colonel chaplain in the Air Force. This message was sent out at 52 minutes past the hour—on a Thursday, I believe—though it may have been a Wednesday. I forget the exact date. The directive was sent to all VA employees, making it clear that they would "root out anti-Christian bias."

This comes from plans to eliminate between 60,000 and 80,000 VA jobs. Look, I'm a veteran. I receive all of my health care through the VA. I live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My kids are also veterans, and they receive most of their health care through the VA. So, while this was not unexpected, just like getting hit by a foul ball at a baseball game—it still hurts. It is painful and disgusting to witness.

The irony is that the VA is, if anything, already pro-Christian. I happened to be at my VA Medical Center—Raymond G. Murphy Medical Center in Albuquerque. It is a large facility. I walked into their version of a Walgreens or Target. Every hospital has one—it is called the Patriot Store. You can buy sundries and sandwiches at a small convenience store.

For years, a wall inside that store has been filled exclusively with books from a company called Choice Books. And it is entirely Christian content—nothing but Christian material. So, over three years ago, on April 12, 2022, we filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. We wanted to see the contract the VA executed with Choice Books—how large it was and what the terms were.

They are now more than three years overdue in responding. We have contacted them repeatedly, asking, "Where is it? We want the contract." They are well beyond the legally allowed response

period. So now we are preparing to sue them—vigorously, aggressively, and swiftly—in federal court. We want to see that contract.

In a recent press release, we included a photo of that wall to demonstrate the VA's pro-Christian bias. Many VA facilities also have chapels that display permanent Christian symbols. One particularly notable example is the VA Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona.

It looks like a chapel—specifically, a Catholic chapel. However, VA regulations are clear: Chapels must remain religiously neutral, except during a specific worship service. The VA, like all the other agencies we have been fighting against, is an example of persistent pro-Christian bias.

We are now in our twenty-second year of this battle. The Military Religious Freedom Foundation has been active for about twenty years, but my wife and I spent the first twenty-two months fighting this issue as individuals before we formalized the foundation more than two decades ago. This is a textbook example of an agency captured by Christian nationalism—the ideological jet fuel that ignites, sustains, and gives life to this bias.

Christian nationalism seeks to replace democracy with a brutal form of far-right Christian theocracy—one in which even teenagers who speak out could be executed. The penalties for defying their doctrine are absolute. It is pulled directly from the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

When Doug Collins issued his edict, we were inundated with people asking for help. I responded immediately. I issued an open letter and recorded a video message. Doug Collins is a vicious, unconstitutional Christian nationalist. He promotes a hateful, prejudiced vision of Christianity that aligns with extremist movements such as the New Apostolic Reformation and the Seven Mountains Mandate. We started seeing its political rise when John McCain made the catastrophic mistake of selecting Sarah Palin—who was affiliated with that movement—as his running mate.

So again, while we were not surprised, it does not mean it hurts any less. Collins's directive told employees to submit any evidence of "anti-Christian bias"—and the implication was clear: if you know of something and do not report it, and we find out later, you will be punished anyway. As a result, we have doctors, nurses, medical technicians, administrative staff—people across the VA—calling us in fear for their jobs, terrified for their families' futures.

And I have said this many times: I know people must live their lives. They must go to work, buy groceries, raise their children, and stay connected with their communities. But this is not business as usual.

The United States has become a fascistic state. We are the bad guys now. This whole "anti-woke," anti-DEI push—along with their fabricated task forces, like the one to stop "anti-Christian bias"—is a cover.

The same tactic is being used under the guise of combating antisemitism, which now, in practice, often means refusing to allow any defense of Palestinian human rights. The implication is that if you criticize anything related to the situation in Gaza, the West Bank, the actions of the IDF, or Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, you are labeled antisemitic.

It is all being fused into a single, toxic stew of hate, fascism, and authoritarianism. But I want to make one thing clear to the readers of this publication. There is no "anti-Christian bias" in the VA, the U.S. military, national security agencies, the Coast Guard, or the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. What does exist—and what is noxious, poisonous, twisted, and treasonous—is malicious Christian nationalist bias.

As I mentioned, look at the reading material available in those little Walgreens- or Target-style stores inside every VA hospital. You will find one voice and one voice only: Christian. We will soon be litigating against the VA over this, as they continue to refuse to release the contract with Choice Books under our FOIA request.

**Jacobsen:** As a side note, from your perspective as a former military officer and legal professional—what would typically happen if someone at a high level in government used end-to-end encrypted apps like Signal to communicate with senior editors at major publications, and those communications were subsequently leaked?

**Weinstein:** That would likely lead to a general court-martial. In such a case, it would be tough for the accused to avoid ending up in Leavenworth or another military prison. Someone like **Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth**—who is closely associated with Christian nationalism and is, by many credible accounts, a misogynist and an alcoholic—would be facing serious charges if he were still in uniform and did what has been alleged.

If anyone else had done what Hegseth is accused of—under any circumstances—there would have been a general court-martial, likely followed by criminal proceedings. Right now, the Pentagon is in chaos. Mid-level officers and civilian employees are desperately trying to expose their superiors for secretly supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion—or, as they call it, "wokeness."

You may have seen the incident during Hegseth's visit to my father's alma mater, the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis. To avoid provoking him, they removed memorabilia celebrating Jewish female graduates from the Jewish chapel. They even pulled nearly 400 books by Maya Angelou and others from the shelves. But *Mein Kampf*? That was allowed to stay.

This is the same anti-diversity, anti-humanist trend we saw decades ago—exactly the opposite of the inclusive vision that made *Star Trek* so revolutionary: a multi-racial, multi-faith, and even multi-species crew, like Spock, representing the strength of diversity.

Hegseth is a disaster, and those who support him are part of the problem. Some of them have recently been fired, but that is not enough. I refer to this situation as the "Thirteenth Stroke Theory."

**Jacobsen:** What is that?

**Weinstein:** It is a metaphor used in legal arguments: the thirteenth stroke of a broken clock casts doubt not only on that hour but on everything that came before it. That is the stage we are at now. This is what we know about—what has surfaced in the media.

When the leadership of the Department of Defense—the organization that oversees the most lethal military force ever deployed—is saturated with Christian nationalism, the implications are catastrophic. Hegseth is just one example. But none of this should come as a surprise.

Hitler did not fail to telegraph what he was going to do. He wrote *Mein Kampf*. Christian nationalism's equivalent of *Mein Kampf* is *Project 2025*, co-authored by Russell Vought—the former and current Director of the Office of Management and Budget, which, during my time in the Reagan White House, was considered the most potent part of the executive branch. *Project 2025* is nearly 1,000 pages long, and they are executing it with chilling precision.

The Democrats, in contrast, appear utterly unprepared. I've said this before: I love Michelle Obama, but when she said, "When they go low, we go high"—no. No. When they go low, we go just as low to meet them where they are. We fight back legally, ethically, and morally—but we do fight back. We do not float above the battlefield and pretend civility alone will save democracy.

Right now, the Democrats look spineless and disorganized. My Congresswoman, Melanie Stansbury, held up a small sign during the State of the Union that said, "This is not normal." She thought it was a civil rights moment. It was not. That is not how we fight back. That is not resistance. That is feckless adherence to hopeless tactics. The Democrats lost this round—and maybe the entire game—by failing to act with urgency and strength.

We now have a petulant, mentally unwell individual—essentially a two-year-old with unchecked power—commanding the U.S. military, our nuclear arsenal, and the entire executive branch. Republicans know this. They *damn well know* how dangerous it is. But many remain silent—either because they think they can benefit from the chaos through stock manipulation or increased donor support or because they are simply afraid.

Some are afraid that if they speak out, Trump will call them out publicly—and that could end in violence. We know something about that. We are threatened around the clock at MRFF. We are already on the "Enemies From Within" list.

Two years ago, a magazine distributed on Capitol Hill helped advance an amendment in the House version of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2024 that would have made it a felony—under the Uniform Code of Military Justice—for anyone in the military to contact us for help. We spent six months fighting it, working with Senate Democrats to strip that provision before the bill reached President Biden's desk in late 2023.

So yes, people are scared. But if anyone still wonders how a scientifically and technologically advanced society like Germany could have allowed Hitler and the Nazis to take over, I give you America in 2025. Hitler's National Socialist movement only had about 7.9% support initially. It didn't matter.

Remember, in the military, even if you are the most junior officer—a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, Army, Air Force, or Space Force, or an ensign in the Navy—you outrank roughly 90% of the entire military because you are commissioned.

You know most of the military is enlisted. That's why even the junior officer outranks the senior enlisted person. It is just the structure. Our country is now being controlled by an aggressive,

fast-moving, well-funded, and well-organized poison—Christian nationalism. I mentioned this earlier. If you dig deeper, you will encounter movements like the New Apostolic Reformation and the Seven Mountains Mandate. These people have been planning this takeover for a long time.

These movements have been strategically organized since at least the early to mid-1980s, and arguably as far back as the 1940s and 1950s, with groups like The Family or The Fellowship. They are now in control.

Take what happened at the VA recently—the directive to "root out anti-Christian bias." That is like declaring a mission to eliminate unicorns from VA hospitals. Unicorns are mythical creatures. *Anti-Christian bias* is a myth, too. It simply does not exist. What does exist is persistent *pro-Christian bias*, and it runs deep through the military, the Coast Guard, the Merchant Marine Academy, and the Maritime Service.

**Jacobsen:** What can people do in the next three to six months that would constitute real, effective activism?

**Weinstein:** I get asked this all the time. First, people need to stop operating on autopilot—as if the only goals of life are to circulate blood, reflect light, and breathe. That is not enough anymore. As I told our folks in a recent video, get off your butts. There is a quote—I forget who said it—but it goes something like: "What we think, know, and believe is of little consequence. In the end, all that matters is what we do."

So: protest. Speak out. Make your voice heard. Donate. Support organizations—like ours and others—that are actively fighting this rise of authoritarianism cloaked in religion. You cannot just sit back and hope someone else will handle it.

At some point, your children—or your children's friends, or your grandchildren—will ask: "What did you do to stop this?" That same question was asked after V-E Day (Victory in Europe) and V-J Day (Victory over Japan). People asked: "What did you do during the war?"

So you write a check, use your credit card, make a sign, and stand up. You join a protest. You go to town hall meetings and speak your mind. You refuse to be intimidated into silence.

I often describe it as being like a tarantula on a wedding cake. That's what it feels like. We have lived that way for a long time. We live with bodyguards, elite-level defense dogs, firearms, security cameras, and an incredibly close relationship with local law enforcement. We do that because the work matters. You cannot afford to sit back and do nothing anymore.

You also cannot be focused only on financial security—asking "where my money comes from" —while democracy is under siege. We have never seen so many high-ranking military officials reaching out to us. These are not just 18- or 19-year-old enlisted troops or junior officers fresh out of the academies, ROTC, Officer Training School, or Officer Candidate School. That's been flipped.

Particularly in the VA, most of the people contacting us now are civilians, and many are seniors. That tells you something. So people need to act—whether it is to leave a record of integrity for their children or their children's children or simply to be able to look their neighbors in the eye

and say, “I tried to stop this.” The difference between now and 1933? There was no social media back then. Now, we have the tools to resist publicly and collectively.

You need to act—not just because it is the right thing to do—but because it is the only thing to do. And I’ll say it one more time: The quote goes: What we think, know, and believe is of little consequence. All that matters is what we do.

**Jacobsen:** Mike, thank you again for the opportunity.

**Weinstein:** Thank you—grateful. Have a great evening.

# From Surface Entropy to Quantum Remnants: A Conversation with Behnam Pourhassan

2025/05/07

In this wide-ranging conversation, Professor Behnam Pourhassan unpacks the intricate landscape of black hole thermodynamics and its profound implications for quantum gravity and cosmology. He explains how the entropy of a black hole is proportional to its surface area—a revelation that supports the holographic principle, which posits that information is encoded on boundaries rather than within volumes. The phenomenon of Hawking radiation, he notes, implies that black holes are not eternal but slowly evaporate over time.

Pourhassan delves into the thermodynamic phase transitions of black holes, explores quantum corrections to entropy, and examines the possibility of stable black hole remnants. He also discusses how dark energy propels the universe's accelerated expansion and outlines how modified gravity theories seek to replace the notion of unseen substances with fundamental changes to gravity itself.

The conversation turns to the unique properties of anti-de Sitter (AdS) black holes and the role of the AdS/CFT correspondence, a theoretical bridge linking gravity to quantum field theory. Pourhassan also touches on a range of related topics—from cosmic strings and nonlinear electrodynamics to the statistical mechanics of gravitational systems and the implications of massive gravity for black hole physics. Crucially, he emphasizes the role of quantum information theory in addressing the black hole information paradox, a subject actively explored at the Canadian Quantum Research Center.

This interview will be featured in a volume of dialogues with leading thinkers in quantum cosmology, quantum gravity, and quantum information theory.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How is black hole entropy related to surface area? Why is this significant?

**Behnam Pourhassan:** Black hole entropy is directly proportional to its surface area, which is a remarkable and profound insight into the nature of quantum gravity. This relationship suggests that a black hole's information content is encoded on its boundary rather than distributed throughout its volume. This is a key aspect of holography, a principle stating that the physics of a higher-dimensional space can be fully described by a theory existing on its lower-dimensional boundary.

This idea's significance extends beyond black holes—it provides a deeper understanding of quantum gravity and spacetime itself. The fact that a black hole's entropy is determined by its surface rather than its volume aligns with the holographic principle, which proposes that all the information contained within a region of space can be represented by data residing on its boundary.

This perspective has led to major advancements in theoretical physics, including the AdS/CFT correspondence, which links gravity in a higher-dimensional space to a lower-dimensional

quantum field theory. The link between black hole entropy and surface area is not just about heat and energy. It suggests something deeper about how the universe works—possibly that space and time come from quantum information stored on surfaces.

**Jacobsen:** How is Hawking temperature calculated? What does this tell us about a black hole's ultimate fate?

**Pourhassan:** Hawking temperature is found by studying how black holes emit radiation due to quantum effects near their event horizon. This radiation, known as Hawking radiation, causes the black hole to lose mass over time slowly. The temperature of this radiation depends on the black hole's properties, such as its size and gravity. This has important consequences for a black hole's fate. Since it continuously emits energy, it will gradually shrink and eventually evaporate completely if it doesn't gain more mass from its surroundings. This suggests that black holes are not eternal and that their information content is crucial in understanding the deeper connections between gravity, quantum mechanics, and thermodynamics.

**Jacobsen:** How can black holes undergo phase transitions? Is this akin to regular materials? If so, what are the extreme conditions for these phase transitions?

**Pourhassan:** Black holes can undergo phase transitions similar to regular materials, such as water turning into ice or steam. In black hole physics, these transitions are often studied using thermodynamic properties like temperature, pressure, and entropy. For example, in anti-de Sitter (AdS) space, black holes can exhibit a phase transition similar to the liquid-gas transition, where a small black hole can grow into a large one as conditions change.

These phase transitions usually occur under extreme conditions, such as high curvature, strong quantum effects, or external forces like a surrounding thermal bath. Studying these transitions helps us understand deep connections between gravity, thermodynamics, and quantum mechanics.

**Jacobsen:** How do quantum effects modify the formulae of classical entropy? What are the implications of this derivation?

**Pourhassan:** Quantum effects introduce corrections to the classical entropy of a black hole, usually appearing as additional terms beyond the standard expression. These corrections arise due to quantum fluctuations near the event horizon, affecting how information and energy behave in extreme gravitational fields.

One key implication is that these modifications help address the information paradox by providing a deeper understanding of how entropy behaves at quantum scales. Additionally, these corrections suggest that black holes might not completely vanish upon evaporation but could leave behind a remnant or release information subtly.

**Jacobsen:** What are the logarithmic corrections to black hole entropy? Are there implications for stability?

**Pourhassan:** Logarithmic corrections to black hole entropy arise from quantum and thermal fluctuations near the event horizon. These corrections modify the classical entropy expression by adding a term proportional to the logarithm of the black hole's area. They appear naturally in

many approaches to quantum gravity, including string theory and loop quantum gravity. These corrections have important implications for black hole stability. They influence phase transitions, thermodynamic stability, and even the final stages of black hole evaporation. In some cases, they suggest that a black hole might reach a stable remnant instead of evaporating completely, which could have implications for the information paradox and quantum gravity.

**Jacobsen:** Does dark energy drive cosmic expansion? What is the lesser importance of this to physics and greater importance to cosmology?

**Pourhassan:** Yes, dark energy is currently understood to be the main driver of the universe's accelerated expansion. It plays a central role in the Lambda Cold Dark Matter ($\Lambda$CDM) model, which is the standard model of cosmology. Cosmic expansion (i.e., the fact that the universe is expanding) results from the initial conditions set by the Big Bang. Dark energy, however, drives the universe's accelerated expansion, which was discovered in the late 1990s through observations of distant Type Ia supernovae. In the equations of General Relativity, dark energy behaves like a cosmological constant ($\Lambda$) — a form of energy that exerts negative pressure, causing the expansion to speed up rather than slow down.

Dark energy doesn't yet fit into the framework of particle physics. It doesn't interact with matter or radiation (as far as we know), and it hasn't been detected in lab experiments. It's more of a placeholder concept: we see its effects but don't know what it is. No current testable theories in quantum field theory or particle physics fully explain it.

Dark energy accounts for ~68% of the universe's energy content. It dominates the cosmos's fate and shape. So, even if we don't know what dark energy is, cosmologists must include it to accurately model and understand the universe's evolution.

**Jacobsen:** What are modified gravity theories?

**Pourhassan:** Modified gravity theories are alternative theories to Einstein's General Relativity (GR) that attempt to explain gravitational phenomena — especially things like dark energy, dark matter, and cosmic acceleration — without invoking unknown substances or energy forms. Instead of saying, "There must be something weird like dark energy making the universe expand faster," modified gravity theories say, "Maybe our understanding of gravity itself breaks down on large scales."

**Jacobsen:** What distinguishes anti-de Sitter black holes from the generic idea of black holes?

**Pourhassan:** Great question. This touches on some deep ideas in theoretical physics, especially about where gravity meets quantum theory. When people say "black hole" generically, they usually mean one that exists in asymptotically flat spacetime — like in our observable universe, that includes Schwarzschild black holes (non-rotating, uncharged), Kerr black holes (rotating), and Reissner-Nordström black holes (charged), these solutions assume that far away from the black hole, space is flat (like our every day, large-scale view of the universe).

An AdS black hole exists in a universe with a negative cosmological constant — a curved background called Anti-de Sitter space. An AdS black hole is a solution to Einstein's equations in this AdS background. So, AdS black holes differ from generic ones because they live in a

negatively curved universe. That gives them very different boundary behavior and thermodynamic properties, making them especially important in theoretical frameworks like holography and quantum gravity.

**Jacobsen:** Is it possible to connect gravity with AdS/CFT correspondence in AdS space with quantum field theory?

**Pourhassan:** Yes — and that's precisely what the AdS/CFT correspondence does: it connects gravity in AdS space with a quantum field theory (QFT) on its boundary. This is one of the most profound ideas in modern theoretical physics.

Proposed by Juan Maldacena in 1997, this conjecture says: A gravitational theory in (d+1)-dimensional AdS space is equivalent to a conformal field theory (CFT) living on its d-dimensional boundary. This is also called the holographic principle because A higher-dimensional gravitational theory (the bulk) is encoded by a lower-dimensional QFT (the boundary).

**Jacobsen:** How can mass in the graviton in massive gravity theories give insights into black holes and cosmic architecture?

**Pourhassan:** Massive gravity is a bold attempt to increase our understanding of gravity at a fundamental level, and giving the graviton a mass changes the rules of the game for how we think about black holes, cosmic structure, and even dark energy. In standard General Relativity, the graviton — the hypothetical quantum of gravity — is massless. Massive gravity theories propose that the graviton has a tiny but nonzero mass.

Black holes in massive gravity can differ from those in GR: They may not obey spherical solutions, which can be time-dependent. Unlike standard black holes, they can exhibit hair (i.e., non-trivial fields outside the event horizon). Their thermodynamics may change, affecting entropy and temperature. The gravitational field falls off differently — potentially modifying how black holes interact with surroundings or even merger dynamics (relevant for gravitational waves).

We might be able to test massive gravity through precision gravitational wave signals (like deviations in waveform tails or the speed of gravity). Adding mass to the graviton affects how gravity behaves on large (cosmic) scales: A massive graviton weakens gravity at large distances, mimicking the effects of dark energy. Some versions of massive gravity can explain the universe's accelerating expansion without needing a cosmological constant.

**Jacobsen:** What is the holographic principle? What does this mean for an informational view of black holes?

**Pourhassan:** The holographic principle (named by Leonard Susskind) is a profound and somewhat mind-bending idea from theoretical physics. It suggests that all of the information contained within a volume of space can be represented as a hologram — a theory that lives on the boundary of that space. In other words, the 3D reality we perceive might be encoded on a distant 2D surface. This idea originated from efforts to understand black hole thermodynamics and quantum gravity, particularly the information paradox related to black holes. The

holographic principle flips our intuition. It suggests that spacetime and gravity might emerge from more fundamental, lower-dimensional quantum information.

Black holes aren't cosmic trash compactors that delete data — they're more like storage devices that encode it in a holographic way.

**Jacobsen:** How do black hole thermodynamics compare to a van der Waals fluid?

**Pourhassan:** I like this question — this is where black holes get surprisingly thermodynamic and start acting like weird versions of everyday matter. Despite being exotic objects, black holes follow laws that look just like thermodynamics. Surprisingly, some black holes behave just like fluids — particularly a van der Waals gas. A van der Waals fluid is a more realistic model of a gas than the ideal gas law. It includes attraction between particles and a finite volume of molecules.

In AdS space, black holes can be put into thermal equilibrium with their surroundings. This setup gives them well-defined pressure, volume, temperature, and entropy like a fluid. Physicists like Robert B. Mann found that charged AdS black holes (like Reissner–Nordström-AdS) have thermodynamic behavior very similar to a van der Waals fluid. These black holes show first-order phase transitions between small and large black holes — just like the gas\liquid phase transition of ordinary matters.

**Jacobsen:** How does electric charge influence a black hole's stability?

**Pourhassan:** Adding an electric charge to a black hole introduces new physical and thermodynamic behavior. A black hole with charge is called a Reissner–Nordström black hole (non-rotating) or Kerr–Newman (if rotating too). Its metric describes a black hole with mass , charge , and possibly spin . The presence of charge adds a repulsive term to the gravitational field. The resulting spacetime structure becomes more complex. In AdS spacetime, charged black holes show even more interesting behavior: They can be more thermodynamically stable than uncharged ones. There's a stable equilibrium temperature, especially for larger charges and larger AdS radius.

**Jacobsen:** How does merging nonlinear electrodynamics with gravity modify black hole solutions? Do any new effects come from this merger?

**Pourhassan:** Merging nonlinear electrodynamics (NLED) with gravity leads to modifications in black hole solutions by altering the behavior of the electromagnetic field within the gravitational context. In traditional general relativity, black holes are described by solutions like the Schwarzschild or Reissner-Nordström metrics, where electromagnetic fields behave linearly (i.e., the field strength is directly proportional to the charge). However, when NLED is introduced, the relationship between the electromagnetic field and its source becomes nonlinear, affecting the structure of black holes.

This nonlinearity can lead to new phenomena, such as the presence of regular (non-singular) black holes, where the singularity at the center is avoided. Additionally, NLED can modify the black hole's charge and mass distributions, potentially forming exotic black hole solutions with different thermodynamic properties, such as entropy or temperature behavior. In some cases, the

introduction of nonlinear electromagnetic fields can lead to the existence of black holes with different horizons or altered stability properties, enhancing the range of possible black hole configurations and phenomena in gravitational physics.

**Jacobsen:** What are cosmic strings?

**Pourhassan:** Cosmic strings are hypothetical, one-dimensional defects in the fabric of space-time that may have formed in the early universe. These strings are incredibly thin but incredibly long, stretching across vast distances. They are remnants from the time just after the Big Bang, potentially created during phase transitions when the universe cooled and matter began to organize itself. Imagine them as incredibly dense, stretching lines of energy that may have significant gravitational effects on nearby objects. Although they haven't been observed directly, cosmic strings interest scientists because they could provide insights into the fundamental forces of nature, like gravity, and help us understand the very origins of the universe.

**Jacobsen:** How can statistical mechanics illuminate the microscopic nature of gravitational systems?

**Pourhassan:** Statistical mechanics helps to understand the microscopic nature of gravitational systems by focusing on the collective behavior of a large number of particles, such as stars or gas molecules, that make up these systems. Instead of studying each particle individually, statistical mechanics examines how the overall system behaves by considering averages and probabilities. In gravitational systems, like galaxy clusters or black holes, the interactions between particles (such as stars or gas particles) are influenced by gravity, which is a long-range force. Statistical mechanics can reveal how these particles distribute, evolve, and form structures like galaxies or black holes. It connects the microscopic interactions at the particle level to macroscopic properties such as temperature, pressure, and density, helping us understand phenomena like the distribution of stars in a galaxy or the behavior of matter near black holes.

**Jacobsen:** How does quantum information theory inform gravitational physics studying black holes? How are these quantum research ventures pursued at the Canadian Quantum Research Center?

**Pourhassan:** Quantum information theory plays a crucial role in understanding the behavior of black holes, especially in the context of their thermodynamics and the famous information paradox. One key area of focus is how quantum information behaves in extreme gravitational fields, like those near black holes. Quantum mechanics suggests that information cannot be destroyed. Yet, classical interpretations of black holes—especially the idea of the "event horizon"—suggest that anything entering a black hole would be lost to the universe, which creates a paradox. Quantum information theory helps to explore potential resolutions, such as the idea that information might be encoded in the radiation emitted by black holes (Hawking radiation) or that black holes might have an intricate quantum structure that preserves information in ways not yet fully understood. This theory bridges quantum mechanics and general relativity, pushing scientists toward a unified theory of quantum gravity.

At the Canadian Quantum Research Center, researchers delve into quantum information science to understand these extreme quantum phenomena. They explore foundational concepts like

quantum entanglement and superposition and how these might apply in the gravitational context of black holes. Researchers might also study quantum computing models or use quantum simulations to explore how information might behave at the event horizon or in a quantum gravity framework.

These efforts aim to shed light on some of the universe's deepest mysteries by developing new theories and computational tools that could eventually help reconcile quantum mechanics with the general theory of relativity.

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

**Pourhassan:** Thank you for the professional questions. I should add that the answers to most of these questions related to black hole thermodynamics are explored in detail in my book, *Thermodynamics of Quantum Black Holes: Holography*, which will be available online soon.

# America's Regress: Kristen Monroe on Trump, Misogyny, and Moral Collapse

2025/05/09

In this wide-ranging conversation, political scientist **Kristen Renwick Monroe** examines the erosion of democratic norms in the United States during the Trump era, the surge in authoritarian tendencies, and the intensifying cultural backlash against marginalized communities—particularly immigrants, women, and transgender individuals. A Chancellor's Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine, Monroe is a leading scholar in political psychology, ethics, and moral choice. She is also the founder and director of the Interdisciplinary Center for the Scientific Study of Ethics and Morality.

Educated at Smith College and the University of Chicago, Monroe has devoted her career to investigating the moral foundations of political behavior. Her acclaimed books—*The Heart of Altruism*, *The Hand of Compassion*, and *Ethics in an Age of Terror and Genocide*—explore how identity shapes altruism, moral courage, and even complicity in genocide. She has received numerous accolades, including the Nevitt Sanford Award from the International Society of Political Psychology and the Harold Lasswell Award from the American Political Science Association for lifetime achievement.

Monroe critiques Trump's disregard for constitutional principles and his polarizing leadership style, stressing the need for empathy, institutional integrity, and shared human values. She speaks passionately about the importance of gender equality and the urgency of placing more women in positions of power, drawing favorable comparisons to the inclusive political systems of countries like Finland and Sweden.

Through personal anecdotes and sharp analysis, Monroe warns of a growing tide of xenophobia and legal manipulation by Trump's allies. Though she hopes to see a woman elected president, she argues that ethical leadership and sound policy must come first. The conversation ends on a hopeful note—with a call for unity and recognizing the common humanity that should bind Americans together, not drive them apart.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Let's start big. What is your sense of the first 100 days of the second Trump administration?

**Kristen Renwick Monroe:** The journalist fact-checkers are going wild with Trump before we start.

Let me tell you the joke about Trump dying and going to heaven. He sees all these clocks and asks, "What is the deal with the clocks?" They reply, "Everyone has a clock. That one is George Washington's. He never told a lie, so the hands never moved. Every time someone tells a lie, their clock moves one minute." Trump points to another and says, "Well, that one's only moved twice." "That is Abraham Lincoln's clock," they say. "He only told two lies." Trump then asks, "Where is my clock?" "Oh, Saint Peter's using it as a fan," they reply.

A homemade sign can best capture the first 100 days. I saw one in a neighbor's window during a walk one day. It read, "OMG GOP WTF." People have used that expression so much now.

I never used to say "WTF," but I have started saying "ED"—for "expletive deleted"—because, frankly, Trump has flooded the zone with executive orders and policies that attack virtually everything I have cared about my entire life.

He has targeted civil rights and human rights. His economic policies make no sense at all. I completed two postdoctoral fellowships and was one of the few Americans to be a Killam Fellow at the University of British Columbia, specializing in political economy. These policies are starting to do the damage we feared they would.

He has cut off portions of foreign aid and treated foreign leaders with great disrespect. His treatment of President Volodymyr Zelensky during his first term—pressuring him to announce an investigation into a political opponent—was outrageous. His treatment of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was deeply undiplomatic and embarrassing.

As an American, I am embarrassed to have him as president. I am upset about it, and so is everyone I know. I do not believe he understands the full consequences of his actions.

As a political psychologist, I know there is a good movie out called *Unfit*. It was made during Trump's first term by psychoanalysts, mostly professionals trained to assess individuals' psychological fitness. They argued that he was not fit to govern from a psychological standpoint. He is undoubtedly a narcissist, a bully, and an extortionist. I do not think he understands how much he is hurting many people.

Moreover, as David Brooks has said, that is part of the point. He is a narcissist who needs power, and to have power, you have to show that you *can* hurt people. He seems to take great pleasure in doing that. That is what is so troubling.

Regarding the United States' global standing, I don't blame other countries for not trusting us in the future. He has done irreparable harm to America's reputation in the international community and significant damage to democratic institutions at home.

I am currently working on a book examining how he has harmed institutions. However, fundamentally, he is authoritarian by nature. He aspires to be a despot. He admires people like that. Yes, he has done a few things that have had some positive impact, but overall, I agree with what Jimmy Kimmel said: his grade would be somewhere between an "F" and a "U."

**Jacobsen:** On the psychoanalytic aspect, there are also elements of Cluster B personality disorders beyond narcissism. One key trait among several of those disorders is a lack of remorse. Was there any commentary around that part of the human personality about Trump?

**Monroe:** Yes—lack of empathy. You need empathy to experience remorse. Moreover, I do not think he has any. That is, in fact, part of the definition of a sociopath.

Now, these definitions—according to the DSM—vary. They shift depending on revisions and diagnostic criteria, whether you are talking about a sociopath or a psychopath. However, Trump

does not appear to have empathy for anyone. I do not think he has what we would consider a conscience. I do not believe he regrets anything.

His contact with reality is tenuous. I do not think he even understands the things he says. He makes statements that are so strange that people are left wondering, "What are you talking about?" They will show footage from the first day of his administration—there are pictures of the inauguration crowd. He sent Sean Spicer to say the photos were doctored and that his crowd was bigger than Obama's. However, the photographs clearly show that it is not true. So he says demonstrably false things.

He is claimed to be the best president since Lincoln, possibly the best president ever. He has even compared himself to Christ. If you listen to him, you think, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Canada wants to become the 51st state." Where does he get these ideas?

He makes things up, like the idea that Greenland will become part of the United States or that we're renaming the Gulf of Mexico the "Gulf of America." I do not know where he gets these things; they seem to pop into his head. So, no. He has shown no remorse for anything he has ever done.

**Jacobsen:** And what about the lack of empathy, especially in how he treats people, particularly women?

**Monroe:** I thought about that, especially since you mentioned you wanted to discuss women. I would say he is an all-purpose abuser. It is not just women. I am not sure Trump singles women out more than anyone else—he tends to go after *everyone*. However, does he treat the women in his life well? No. The stories we read do not suggest that. For example, burying his ex-wife Ivana on a golf course—that seems odd and in poor taste.

There is such a profound disconnect. People of good taste, with any empathy or concern for others, would not do the things he has done. It is hard even to know where to begin.

His relationship with Melania, for instance, appears transactional. I saw an interview in which she was asked, "Would you have married him if he were not rich?" and replied, "Would he have married me if I were not beautiful?"

At first, when Melania did not immediately move to Washington after the inauguration, the public story was that she wanted her son Barron to finish school. That seemed thoughtful until it came out that she was renegotiating the prenuptial agreement. She knew she had leverage, and she wanted more money. The one consistent thing about Trump is his obsession with money and power.

Just the other day, a significant article appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the front page of The New York Times about how his children are profiting financially from his political position through his companies on a scale we have never seen before. No other U.S. president has owned golf courses and hotels where government officials and diplomats would stay, often at taxpayer expense.

There is a story from when one of his sons—Eric, I believe—was in college. They wanted to host a small golf tournament to raise money for a children's cancer charity. They asked to use one of

Trump's golf courses. He agreed but charged them full price, like any other client. He did not offer a charitable discount.

As the tournament became successful, he raised the fees. Then, he required that they put a couple of his people on the charity's board. Eventually, he took over the whole operation. Even if politicians are venal or corrupt, they usually have a soft spot for their children. They may do questionable things to benefit them, but it is not just favouritism in Trump's case. It is empire-building through his family.

Biden may have had a little of that, yes. However, in retrospect, I cannot blame Biden for pardoning Hunter—if that even happens—because the kinds of things Hunter has been accused of are minor compared to what Trump has done.

It is like what Everett Dirksen, the Senate Minority Leader from Illinois in the 1950s and 60s, reportedly said: "That gives hypocrisy a bad name." Trump has done egregious things, and he has used his children to enrich himself. They have all made fortunes, and he is making a fortune, too.

Now we see things like "Trump coins," photoshopped images of him as the Pope. He has even talked about wanting to be like the Pope. You begin to question his grasp on reality seriously. However, the most disturbing thing about Trump, for me, is how many people voted for him.

Including people close to you, including one of my sons. He is a Bernie supporter. He hated what the Democratic Party did, thinking they failed the working class. Moreover, I cannot argue too much with that criticism. However, why would you vote for Trump? I also have a few good friends—dear people—who voted for Trump. After Trump was in office, I asked one of them, "Are you upset?" He said, "No. At least he is doing something."

I do not know what to say to people like that. There is also the husband of a good friend I have known since I was 12. She is religious. She supported Trump because of abortion. Moreover, I thought—what is that doing? I remember speaking to her husband after the immigrant children were put in cages. I asked, "How can you support someone who does something like that?" Moreover, he said, "Well, the stock market's doing great."

Again, I did not know what to say. Is that what matters most? As long as your investments are up? However, now Trump is hurting the stock market, too. Moreover, so many people I know…it will get worse. However, he has already done enormous harm to the United States' image and its democratic institutions.

There is just so much damage. However, two significant factors are at play: one, the United States' standing in the international community, and two, the rise of rival powers, especially China.

**Jacobsen:** Let's begin with the broader international landscape, and we can turn to China as a secondary focus. After World War II, the United States played a central role in creating and leading many of the global institutions we still depend on—what we now refer to as the "rules-based international order." That framework has been under strain for some time, but Trump's

presidency markedly accelerated its destabilization. He undermined alliances, withdrew from foundational agreements, and treated long-standing partners with open contempt.

This morning, I rewatched a lecture from around 2015, delivered shortly after the death of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding Prime Minister. The speaker made a pointed observation: while the United States has unquestionably contributed to global progress and institution-building, it also inflicts significant harm when it turns against those same institutions. He phrased it diplomatically, but the message was unmistakable.

At that point, the U.S. had been the principal architect of global governance for nearly seven decades. Now, almost ten years on, it feels as though we're witnessing a full-scale assault on that legacy—particularly on America's international standing and its symbolic role in promoting democracy and the rule of law through global institutions. How do you interpret this shift?

**Monroe:** We started building the international order after World War I when it became clear that we live in a globalized world. You cannot isolate yourself. What happens in one country inevitably affects others. That realization led to the creation of various international organizations.

The League of Nations was an early attempt, but it lacked the enforcement power to prevent another catastrophic war. After World War II, we saw a much stronger push. Institutions like the Bretton Woods system, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank were all part of that framework.

At that time, the U.S., Canada, and parts of Latin America were largely untouched by the devastation of the war. The United States emerged as a significant global power, and with that power came the capacity and responsibility to shape the world for the better. If you want to be the most crucial country in the world, you must behave accordingly.

Beyond geopolitics, there is also the international economic system. We live in a globally interconnected marketplace—I am wearing a sweater that was probably made in China. You likely own things made in China. I remember when I was in graduate school, I was upset about child labor and exploitative conditions in places like China. However, living standards have increased in those countries, and there are temporary dislocations.

We benefit by getting affordable goods, and they benefit through rising wages and economic development. So, things do improve over time, even if unevenly. Now, I am not arguing that capitalism is inherently humane. It is not. However, it is more efficient than communism. Central planning does not work well—it is tough to coordinate an entire economy from the top down.

In addition to the economic systems, you also have essential developments in international law and human rights organizations. I have served as President of the Human Rights Section of the American Political Science Association, and I can tell you that these issues get complicated very quickly.

I recall a case—I believe it was in Peru—where the section was lobbying for labour reform. It had to do with child labour. Children under 16 worked longer hours than legally allowed in the U.S. However, the people on the ground said, "Don't interfere. Do not try to change this from the

outside." Why? Because for them, even those problematic jobs were better than the alternative: extreme poverty or no income. These dilemmas clarify that global governance, human rights, and labour practices are deeply interconnected and require nuanced, culturally informed solutions.

In Peru, they told us, "If you are 14, you are pretty much an adult. You have to take care of yourself. If you make it impossible for us to work at 14, we are going to starve. Our families will starve. Girls will turn to prostitution." People are desperate for money. So, it gets complicated. However, the world is interconnected—you cannot ignore that. Moreover, that is one of the things Trump has tried to ignore or actively undo. Take the issue of tariffs. Tariffs do not work—not the way they are being used now.

Historically, we used tariffs when the U.S. had no income tax. However, that was before the modern tax system. Some states, like Florida, do not have a state income tax. They rely heavily on tourism for revenue, and that works for them. However, most other states *require an* income tax to function correctly.

The broader idea of shrinking government sounds appealing to some people, but you must ask: "What does government do?" It is a tool. Like a hammer, it can smash a window or build a house. Government is neither inherently good nor bad—it depends on how it is used.

Trump and many people in the 2025 conservative movement seem to treat the government as inherently evil. However, that is just not true. Without government, you lose social services and the safety net. Look at places like Scandinavia—Finland, for example. Some people cite Indonesia as a happy country, though I do not quite see that. However, Finland consistently ranks among the happiest nations on Earth.

Why? Because they have a robust social safety net. If you get into a university in Sweden, even if you are from Canada, it is paid for. No tuition. No massive student debt. You will have healthcare, public housing, and pensions when you grow old. Yes, taxes are high. I have been to Finland and Sweden. Things are expensive. I remember giving a talk there—I had come from Southern California and forgot my gloves. I went out to buy a pair and saw beautiful leather gloves. I looked at the price: $200. I thought, "That's not for me." It was the luxury tax—leather was considered a luxury.

However, here is what is interesting: if you are a millionaire in Sweden and get a speeding ticket, the fine is proportional to your income. You do not pay the same as everyone else because $2.50 means nothing to a billionaire. So, they have structured things to make economic sense. This idea that we should cut back on government—well, it is not just misguided. It is, frankly, being executed foolishly.

They've hired a bunch of high-tech kids straight out of college who do not understand what is happening. At a recent National Academy of Sciences meeting, they announced cuts to research grants, using an algorithm to flag any proposals that included the term "DEI," meaning diversity, equity, and inclusion. There was even a case where someone submitted a grant focused on the "diversity of pathogens"—and because the algorithm picked up the word *diversity*, the funding was pulled. It had nothing to do with social policy—it was scientific.

**Jacobsen:** Wasn't there a case involving the keyword "gay" in the context of the Enola Gay exhibit?

**Monroe:** Yes. Because the keyword "gay" was present, it got flagged. It is absurd. I received something from the NIH—National Institutes of Health—that was equally troubling. It is hard to say which of Trump's cabinet or political appointees has been the worst, but Pam Bondi recently made a particularly egregious statement. I do not know if you saw it but check *The Daily Show*.

She claimed that Trump's policies on fentanyl saved the lives of 248 million people. She initially said 22 million, then jumped to 248 million. Moreover, she said it confidently, as if she were about to drop some groundbreaking statistic. She made it up. Completely fabricated. However, in terms of actual harm, **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.** might be doing the most damage right now, especially with his anti-vaccine rhetoric and conspiratorial positions.

As for the NIH notice, it stated that any grant involving a foreign national will no longer be funded. If you have a foreign collaborator, you either remove them or lose funding. I do not even know what to say about that. There is a case of a woman known in the research community as "the frog embryo lady." She is a Russian scientist doing critical work on cancer at Harvard. She has publicly criticized Putin and now faces serious risks if she returns to Russia. Despite that, U.S. authorities would not let her into the country.

I have a close friend whose husband was the head of the cancer institute at NYU. She has told me private stories that do not appear in the media. For instance, the head of the Dutch National Cancer Institute, who is French, was recently turned away at the U.S. border. I do not know if it was because of his appearance, but he was denied entry.

My editor at Oxford University Press is an American citizen. She was held up at JFK Airport for about an hour after returning from a business trip to Turkey. They accused her of having a forged passport. She was born in the United States. They asked, "Are you sure?" These stories are bizarre.

There is a disturbing anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner sentiment right now. Moreover, the irony is overwhelming. The United States—arguably even more than Canada—was built on the idea: "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." That was our identity.

My family history reflects that. The first Monroe in our line came as a POW. He was captured during the English Civil War—he fought for the Stuarts, which is deeply embarrassing—and deported by Oliver Cromwell to get rid of dissenters. He arrived here in 1630 as an indentured servant. That is how so many of us got here. That history of struggle, migration, and contribution is being erased in favour of fear and exclusion.

My mother's family also came to America in 1630. They were Puritans from Holland who had fled England. They initially went to the Massachusetts Bay Colony and left almost immediately because even the Puritans were too intolerant.

So, this idea that there is something inherently wrong with immigrants or foreigners is deeply flawed. The foundational premise of the country was that if you come here, your children will be citizens. That is birthright citizenship.

Now Trump says, "I do not know—I will have to check with my lawyers." I do not know if you saw the interview from a few days ago. He was on Meet the Press—on Sunday, I believe. A female journalist interviewed him and asked, "Would you uphold the Constitution?" Moreover, he said, "I do not know. I am not a lawyer. I would have to check with my lawyers."

This man took the Oath of Office, only 34 words long. It is not complicated. It requires that he "swear to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." That is not optional. There is no ambiguity. As for birthright citizenship, it is guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment. If you are born in the United States, you are a U.S. citizen. That is not true in every country, and Canada has different routes to citizenship. However, in the U.S., it is explicit and constitutional.

You would have to repeal the Fourteenth Amendment to eliminate birthright citizenship. They asked Trump if he could run for a third term, and he said he did not know—he would have to ask his lawyers. This is where legal gamesmanship comes into play. Yes, the 22nd Amendment says you cannot be *elected* to the presidency more than twice. So perhaps they are playing with the wording. Maybe they are imagining a scenario where J.D. Vance runs as president, Trump as vice president, and Vance resigns after taking office, thus allowing Trump to step in.

I have very little respect for that kind of legal hair-splitting. However, he has some clever people working for him now. The Heritage crowd is not stupid. They include some sharp lawyers who will try to exploit every loophole they can.

What truly worries me, though, is not just the legal maneuvering. It is that a substantial portion of the American public—probably about a third of the population—genuinely agrees with him on these things.

Many people did not fully realize what they were getting. However, ultimately, what defeated Trump in 2020 was COVID and the economy. There was a general perception that—although the pandemic was not his fault—he failed to handle it well. Moreover, I do feel bad about the way the whole situation unfolded.

Biden did a good job. He implemented policies I found quite admirable. Because of COVID, he had to take strong measures. Yes, we had some inflation, but it was not extreme, certainly not compared to other countries. By global standards, our inflation was low. We came through it reasonably well.

On the other hand, Trump thinks he can do things far beyond what the Constitution allows. Moreover, we are starting to see the consequences. For example, The Washington Post recently published a story about three deportation flights that left the U.S. after a judge explicitly ordered them to return. One plane was even sitting on the runway when the order was issued, and it took off anyway.

That kind of defiance of judicial authority is alarming. The idea that immigrants have no rights at all is deeply troubling—not just ethically, but constitutionally. It violates the basic principles of due process and equal legal protection.

In the first 100 days of this new administration, there have already been over 350 lawsuits, and 129 court decisions have gone against the administration. However, they're ignoring many of these rulings. So, no, it is not a good time in the United States. I was recently watching a program on the abolitionists, and it reminded me that we have had dark times before. However, this still feels different.

The idea that we can resolve these problems civilly, without violence, is something I sincerely hope for. However, we cannot do that with Trump. The only real solution may be to vote him out in the next election. I hope it happens. It did not occur in 2018—at least, not on the scale we had hoped for. The backlash was not as significant as many of us expected. So, I do not know. I am not hopeful. I am not hopeful. It is a bad time.

**Jacobsen:** Earlier, you used the idea of *flooding the zone*. I have three related questions. First, were they consciously and deliberately flooding the zone in as many areas as possible? Second, how does this aggressive "shock-and-awe" tactic relate to the openly expressed antipathy toward China? Third, how does this align with what Larry Summers has called *economic warfare*?

**Monroe:** I am not an expert on China, so I should be careful not to overstate anything in that area. However, regarding the 2025 group, they knew exactly what they were doing. They were targeting multiple institutions and norms at once. You asked earlier about women. The 2025 crowd seems to embrace an ideology where women are essentially expected to be barefoot and pregnant. That is not far from the actual positions they are taking.

I do not understand J.D. Vance's wife. She is an immigrant whose parents are reportedly liberal. She went to Yale Law School, yet she appears to support his views, which include extreme ideas about women's roles. This is similar to Elon Musk's idea: have as many children as possible. Their vision is that women should stay home and focus solely on reproduction and homemaking.

Now, I do not think Trump himself necessarily believes that. I do not think he cares much about women's roles. However, what troubles me more than Trump himself is how many people agree with these views. I do not think they are afraid of him. I do not think they are intimidated. They support what he is doing. There is much fear—fear of foreigners and people who are different. The "other." Moreover, the "other" can be anything: arrogant women, people with dark skin, immigrants, and LGBTQ people.

There is still much racism in the United States. My friend Dianne Pinderhughes, the only Black woman to ever serve as president of the American Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association, pointed out something striking: the only person who successfully beat Trump was a white man.

Kamala Harris ran a strong campaign. She was not a bad candidate. Moreover, she did not play the identity card. She did not say, "Vote for me because I am a woman," or "Because I am of color," or anything like that. That is not a reason to vote for someone but not a reason to vote against them. She ran on policy. She had a good record and a lot to defend. However, there is

pervasive misogyny in the United States. The assumptions are deep: that a man is inherently stronger than a woman, that women might be unstable because of their menstrual cycles—*oh my god*?

**Jacobsen:** That line of thinking still lingers—and is often unspoken but present. I should mention this here because it is relevant. I mentioned it in another interview, but it belongs in this one. I eventually connected with other Canadians when I attended the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, a two-week conference with hundreds of parallel events.

We had not coordinated beforehand—we all arrived independently—but we had a candid pre-session conversation. This shared, unspoken concern was almost unanimous: "Can I go? Is it safe?" Even in that environment, even as Canadians, there was hesitation. I look like part of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir or an evangelical youth pastor.

However, two women were African Canadian, and a third was Muslim. This anxiety—the question of safety and freedom to speak openly—was *universal*. We were trying to attend a gender equality forum. As Canadians, we were on friendly terms with our American counterparts, but the contrast in the political climate and underlying assumptions about gender was deeply felt.

**Monroe:** Yes, the American Political Science Association (APSA) is holding its annual meeting in Vancouver this year, in terrible timing. I have close friends and colleagues who are dark-skinned and foreign-born. They have been in the U.S. since graduate school. They are married, long-term residents, and genuinely wonderful human beings.

Neither of them is going to the APSA meetings. I advised one of them not to attend. He holds a green card and is in the process of applying for citizenship. I told him, "You do not know what these people might do. You cannot predict it anymore."

It reminds me, unsettlingly, of Nazi Germany—when seemingly minor functionaries began enforcing arbitrary rules. I had a colleague whose daughter, in her early 30s, worked in a job that required frequent travel between the U.S. and London. She had one of those expedited travel passports that allowed for quicker processing.

Shortly after Trump won the election—in January or February—she went through the airport, saw the long line, and looked around for the shorter line she usually used. An official told her, "You *are* in the short line." She asked about it, and the man responded: "You people—you rich, frequent travelers-you have had it too easy. We are going to make it harder for you now."

That kind of sentiment—resentment from people who felt ignored or left behind—was something you saw in 1930s Germany. Back then, it was often directed at Jews. Today, in the U.S., it is directed at foreigners, immigrants, minorities, and in some cases, even white South Africans claiming persecution. The reality is grim. It feels like we have fallen down the rabbit hole. Alice in Wonderland. It is disorienting and surreal.

We are tumbling further and further down the hole. Those questions—what this all means, how far it will go—they are going to land eventually.

**Jacobsen:** What do you recommend people keep an eye on regarding gender equality?

**Monroe:** There are many things the U.S. could do better. The most important? Put women in office. That is the main thing. Once women are elected, they perform about the same as men. Some are excellent, some are average, and some are not great, just like men. I disagreed with Margaret Thatcher's policies then, but she was undoubtedly a strong leader. Moreover, she governed no differently from a man would have. So if you put women in power, you will see—they can do everything men can. They do not act irrationally because of hormonal shifts or anything like that. That is a baseless myth.

However, the deeper issue is one of values—how we see and treat people. One of the most important shifts I would like to see—whether in the U.S. or globally—is a genuine recognition that we are all the same under the skin. Why care if someone's skin is dark and mine is light? Why do we care about someone's religion—what they believe privately in their hearts? Why do we care who someone loves or what they do personally?

We keep inventing reasons to discriminate against others. Moreover, if you think about it, it makes no sense. If someone is kind, if they try their best to contribute, why should I care about their skin colour, their religion, or who they are in a relationship with? Trump, on the other hand, has gone out of his way to target transgender people. I do not understand it. There are so few transgender individuals and even fewer in the military.

My second son, Nicholas, is a lawyer. He worked with the ACLU on a transgender military case against Trump during his first term. His case was one of four that went to the Supreme Court and was the only one not thrown out. Then Biden came into office, and the case became moot because Biden reversed the policy. However, now it is all coming back again.

Moreover, honestly, why do we spend so much time fighting over bathrooms? In Scandinavia, I attended meetings at Lund University in Sweden. They had single-occupancy bathrooms. Each was a small room with a toilet, sink, and mirror. You go in, you do your business—no one cares. There is no drama. So why is this such a massive issue here?

I am sorry, but this has become such a massive distraction in American politics, and the percentage of the population that is transgender is about 1.5%. That is very small. Moreover, the HASC (the House Armed Services Committee) is moving to remove all transgender individuals from military service.

The Supreme Court said it would let the lower court's ruling stand, which upholds the exclusion. The case will have to go through litigation. However, in the meantime, it is another attack on a vulnerable group. I do not understand why we are so obsessed with targeting transgender people. Why do we care how someone dresses or expresses their identity? It makes no rational sense.

We are frightened of different people in this country, which is sad. We need to recognize that we have more in common than we think. The following person who can come along and be an effective leader—someone who can truly win—will be the one who focuses on the common ground we share, someone who appeals to our shared decency rather than exploiting the differences that divide us.

Trump has been a divider. He thrives on chaos. He positions himself at the center of every crisis—he creates the disruption and then claims he is the only one who can fix it. However, he is the

one who threw it off track in the first place. It has been destructive for the country. I would love to see a woman president before I die. However, more importantly, I want someone with sound policies—someone I can believe in. I do not just want a woman for the sake of gender. For example, I would not want Pam Bondi to be President of the United States. That would not make me happy.

**Jacobsen:** Kristen, thank you for your time, insight, and expertise.

**Monroe:** Thank you again—it is good to know you are doing well.

# Can Capital Be Faithful? The Global Iman Fund's Quiet Revolution

2025/05/10

**Ghalib Salam** brings more than 27 years of experience in business development to his new role as Vice President at **Global Growth Assets Inc.**, where he oversees the Global Iman Fund, a Sharia-compliant and ethically focused mutual fund recognized multiple times with the FundGrade A+ Award. The fund invests primarily in technology, healthcare, and consumer sectors, guided by the rigorous screening standards of the Dow Jones Islamic Market Titans 100 Index. Prior to this role, Salam served as Director at the Royal Bank of Canada in Toronto, building a track record of leadership across Canada's financial sector.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** The Global Iman Fund has received the FundGrade A+ Award multiple times. Could you explain what sets the fund apart and what this recognition represents?

**Ghalib Salam:** Sure. The Global Iman Fund is part of Global Growth Assets Inc., an investment fund with over $850 million in assets under management (AUM) and in operation since February 1998.

Global Growth Assets Inc. is part of the Global Family of Companies, a multifaceted financial organization founded in 1998, with over $3.6 billion in assets under management and administration.

The Global Iman Fund is a mutual fund that adheres to Sharia-compliant investment principles and offers socially responsible investment opportunities. It provides investors with long-term growth through a diversified global investment portfolio that meets ethical and faith-based investing standards.

The Global Iman Fund is available through various distribution channels, including financial advisors, banks, and online platforms.

**Jacobsen:** The Global Iman Fund has received the FundGrade A+ Award for several consecutive years. Could you elaborate on the significance of this recognition and what it reflects about the fund's long-term performance and positioning?

**Salam:** The award recognizes high-performing investment funds based on risk-adjusted returns, consistency, and overall portfolio strength. The ranking methodology evaluates funds against industry benchmarks across multiple tolerance levels.

Funds that receive this distinction are recognized as high-grade, actively traded funds well-received by dealers, financial advisors, and investors.

**Jacobsen:** What does the investment portfolio of the Global Iman Fund focus on? You alluded to shared principles. How do those principles feed into the portfolio itself?

**Salam:** Let me share the mechanics of how we select the portfolio. We are the fund manager, and we also have a portfolio manager—UBS is our portfolio manager. There is a Sharia Council that devises a portfolio as part of the Dow Jones Islamic Market Titans Index, selecting 100 publicly tradable companies that comply with Shariah investment principles. UBS then selects specific

entities from that portfolio. The composition of investments varies over time, but the approach remains long-term, focusing on sustainable growth.

The portfolio is diversified across different industry sectors. Approximately 37% of the fund is technology-centric, around 14-15% is in service and communications, and close to 13% is allocated to consumer services, with another 13% spread across other industries. These are the high-level concentrations in terms of sector segmentation.

**Jacobsen:** If you were to break down the size of each of those 100 companies, would you deal with a top-heavy structure where a few large companies dominate, or would the investments be more evenly distributed?

**Salam:** Yes, indeed. In the case of the Global Iman Fund, these are global companies. More than 80% of our portfolio is U.S.-based, with the remainder comprising approximately 15% European companies and around 5% Asia-centric investments. The fund is entirely U.S. dollar-denominated, providing investors with stability and liquidity.

So, talking about specific names, much of this is publicly available information, but for the benefit of this interview, I'll highlight some key holdings. Our portfolio combines technology, consumer services, and healthcare-focused investments. We hold shares in Amazon, Apple, Nvidia, Google, Alibaba, and Eli Lilly. As you can see, we focus strongly on technology and consumer-driven industries.

Before diving into specific companies, it's essential to understand why the Sharia Advisory Board selects these 100 entities. A key principle is that income from non-compliant (or "impure") sources must not exceed 5% of total revenue. Impure sources mean revenue must not be derived from industries such as alcohol, tobacco, pork and pork-related products, banking, insurance, conventional financial services, weapons, defense, entertainment, gambling, adult content, and casinos.

The portfolio is carefully structured to align with Sharia-compliant ethical investment guidelines.

**Jacobsen:** Could you elaborate specifically on the technology sector? Companies like Microsoft, AMD, Google, and Nvidia are heavily involved in semiconductors, AI, and cloud computing—volatile but high-growth industries. Do you expect this to be the most profitable sector of your portfolio over the next five years?

**Salam:** As an investment fund manager, it's difficult for me to make specific forward-looking statements on expected profitability, as our portfolio managers at UBS are the key decision-makers regarding equities selection and holding periods. However, I can say that these companies are positioned at the forefront of technological advancements, especially in areas like AI, data processing, and semiconductor manufacturing.

The long-term outlook for these sectors remains strong, but their volatility requires strategic portfolio balancing. Our portfolio managers assess market conditions and sector performance to ensure that our investments align with our long-term growth objectives while remaining within the risk parameters defined by the fund's mandate.

However, I can give you the due diligence rationale behind selecting any asset in the portfolio. One of the key questions might be—why is 38-39% of the fund tech-centric? The reason is simple: that is where the market shift is happening. This transition is accurate, and technology continues to dominate growth sectors globally.

The due diligence process carried out by our portfolio manager involves multiple steps. First, they analyze public disclosure documents, interview management teams, and investor relations representatives, and compare peer group performance metrics. After completing these assessments, they engineer the portfolio, ensuring all investment criteria are met. Once selected, each asset is subject to an ongoing risk management framework designed to mitigate exposure and maintain portfolio balance.

Regarding market volatility, we recognize that no investor operates in isolation—we are part of a broader investment community. We embrace market shifts as they happen, ensuring the portfolio remains structured yet flexible enough to withstand fluctuations while avoiding extreme risk concentration. The goal is to preserve stability while still responsibly leveraging high-growth opportunities.

**Jacobsen:** Regarding mutual funds like the Global Iman Fund, what should investors understand about the risks and disclaimers involved? And conversely, what are some potential advantages such investments can offer?

**Salam:** Regarding risk, all investments—including mutual funds—involve the possibility of losing money or failing to generate expected returns. The degree of risk varies from fund to fund, but investments with higher potential returns generally carry higher risks. Investors must carefully assess their risk tolerance before making investment decisions.

Investing in mutual funds like the Global Iman Fund involves a range of considerations. One major factor is concentration risk—when a portfolio leans heavily into specific sectors or a limited group of companies, it can become especially vulnerable to downturns in those areas. Likewise, exposure to emerging markets introduces political, regulatory, and economic uncertainties that can heighten volatility. Market fluctuations are inevitable; while the fund is structured to weather short-term shifts, investors should be prepared for periods of instability.

Additional risks include liquidity challenges, where exiting an investment quickly may not always be feasible, and regulatory shifts, which can reshape compliance obligations as financial laws evolve. For international investors, currency risk is also a factor—the fund is primarily denominated in U.S. dollars, so shifts in exchange rates can affect returns for those operating in other currencies. These factors underscore the importance of a well-informed, diversified investment approach.

There are many other potential risks, but these are some of the most significant factors I want to highlight here.

**Jacobsen:** What about the potential benefits of investing in this type of fund?

**Salam:** Our fund's disclaimer and investment information are publicly available through our website, where we provide an official prospectus. This document is purely for informational

purposes, outlining the terms, conditions, and potential risks of investing in the Global Iman Fund. Investors are always encouraged to review the prospectus carefully and consult financial advisors before making decisions.

Again, as a mutual fund administrator, we cannot guarantee that all the information is always complete or current due to the nature of the investment risks we discussed earlier. Market conditions and regulations are subject to change without notice. Mutual funds are not guaranteed investments—their value fluctuates frequently, and past performance may not necessarily be repeated. For this reason, we strongly recommend that potential investors read the prospectus carefully before investing.

Additionally, all documents, whether portfolio manager-driven or included in the prospectus, typically contain forward-looking statements. These statements are predictive and rely on future events and conditions over which we have no control. Investors need to understand that forward-looking statements are made with due caution. However, investment decisions should not be solely based on these statements, as market conditions and external factors can impact outcomes.

When you asked about possibilities and benefits, the number one benefit I can highlight is that Sharia-compliant investing is highly attractive for investors who prioritize ethical and socially responsible investment strategies. While Sharia compliance is an Islamic qualification for investing, we also have a significant number of non-Muslim investors who seek funds that align with their ethical and social values. Many investors are drawn to Sharia-compliant funds because they offer a clear conscience. They know that investments are made under strict ethical guidelines that exclude industries like alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and conventional financial services.

Another benefit is that our fund has consistently delivered strong yields. While I won't quote specific numbers here, its performance has been at par or above par compared to other mutual funds in the marketplace. Furthermore, our risk management strategies ensure that performance remains stable while maintaining a high-quality portfolio that offers substantial long-term value for investors.

Today, we hold two key distinctions. We are the oldest Sharia-compliant mutual fund in the market and, as of today, the largest.

As awareness of Sharia-compliant investing grows, we benefit from a first-mover advantage. While we do not actively influence investment decisions, we are in a strong position to attract investors looking for a proven and ethical financial product—one that is not necessarily Muslim-centric but instead appealing to all individuals who prioritize ethical responsible investing.

**Jacobsen:** Great. Thank you for your time today—I appreciate it.

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# From Ruins to Resin: A Curator's Fight to Save Ukrainian Heritage

2025/05/18

Today, I'm joined by Tetyana Fiks, a Ukrainian cultural manager and curator based in Kyiv, whose work highlights the power of art in times of conflict. Born and raised in Ukraine, Tetyana has played a central role in promoting Ukrainian culture on international platforms, with significant contributions to projects such as the **War Fragments Museum**, the Bouquet Kyiv Stage Festival, and Kyiv Art Sessions.

The War Fragments Museum, which exhibited at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in London, uses epoxy resin-encased war artifacts to convey the personal stories of Ukrainians affected by war. Through this work, Tetyana emphasizes culture as a universal language that fosters empathy, identity, and resilience. She delves into the ethical considerations of preserving and displaying wartime artifacts, the production challenges her team has faced, and the crucial role of partnerships in sustaining these efforts.

Her involvement with the Bouquet Kyiv Stage Festival and Kyiv Art Sessions further reflects her dedication to making Ukrainian art accessible to global audiences. Through storytelling, artistic expression, and memory, Tetyana Fiks continues to champion Ukraine's cultural resilience in the face of adversity.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How do soft disciplines—such as the arts and cultural fields—contribute to the development and preservation of a society's identity? And in what ways can these disciplines be effectively conveyed to international audiences as instruments of cosmopolitan diplomacy?

**Tetyana Fiks:** Do you mean in Ukraine specifically or in general?

**Jacobsen:** In general, we'll narrow it down to Ukraine shortly. You'll see where I'm going with it.

**Fiks:** I ask because we're living through extraordinary times in Ukraine. So everything feels different here. But for me, culture is an international language. Everyone can understand cultural expressions—paintings, music, performances- no matter where you live. Culture allows us to communicate across borders and deliver important messages.

As a cultural manager, it's essential for me to share these messages through Ukrainian culture and to highlight them internationally—especially because Ukrainian culture was suppressed and overshadowed by Russian culture for a long time.

Now, even many Ukrainians are discovering their own culture anew, so it is not only important—it is vital. Culture can also be a kind of weapon in that it shapes identity and perception, which we need to understand.

**Jacobsen:** How would you compare and contrast your experiences—not just with different cultures themselves but with how they evolve? Culture is not a fixed thing. It's shaped by what people do.

**Fiks:** Are you referring to the cultures in Ukraine, the UK, or the U.S.?

**Jacobsen:** Primarily Ukraine and London since both are relevant to your work. But if you want to also reflect on the U.S., we can include that. How do these cultures feel and express themselves from within? And how are they perceived from the outside? Having that dual internal and external perspective can help you see where misunderstandings arise when cultures are interpreted out of context.

**Fiks:** I prefer not to discuss others' mistakes in interpreting cultures. But yes, when you're positioned between different cultural spheres, you notice how culture is often misunderstood. Each society has its own cultural rhythm, values, and symbols. Understanding those—both from the inside and the outside—is crucial for meaningful cultural exchange.

For culture, freedom is crucial. No matter if you're an artist or an art manager, you should feel free in what you're doing because art is about freedom. Of course, not all artists can work freely, but still—whether it's Ukrainian culture, British culture, or the culture of any other country—they're all different because culture is always tied to a specific context. It's heritage. It belongs to a place and its people.

But in general, culture is important for me—and, of course, for many others. As I said before, it's an international language. Whether it's Ukrainian or Spanish, it's interesting to me. When I go to another country, visiting a museum is the only way to understand it truly.

Only after that do I feel, "Yes, now I understand this country." That's how I connect emotionally and intellectually with a place and its people.

**Jacobsen:** You mentioned that Ukraine is experiencing a special moment in time, and that's an important point. How do you bring culture forward uniquely during such extraordinary times?

**Fiks:** It's a very interesting time because now the world knows about Ukraine. But often, the only thing people speak about is the war. And, of course, people are tired of hearing about war. We are tired too—but we have no choice. People outside Ukraine have a choice.

So we—my project, my colleagues, my team—try to speak about the war through the language of art. For example, we try to address the war through artistic means with the War Fragments Museum. We realized that people can understand the message when it's conveyed through a beautiful piece of art.

It doesn't hurt you at first glance. It becomes painful to read the story behind the piece and understand what it represents. But visually, it's still a work of art. And that's powerful. It's the best way—not just for our project, but many artists and cultural managers are doing this. They are talking about the war and saying, "Look what we are going through," but they are doing it in a way that isn't overwhelming or traumatic for the audience.

So, if you want to speak now about Ukrainian culture and art, you must address the war. But if you're a cultural manager, you cannot harm people emotionally with your work. You must find a way to deliver the message without being too harsh—at least try.

**Jacobsen:** What is the process of collecting and preserving war artifacts in the cubes?

**Fiks:** So, it's a resin. So yes, you can damage a cube, but you can't break it easily. That was important for us because the resin is long-lasting. It will survive for many years.

We collected all the artifacts and stories in February 2022 and 2023. We also went on expeditions to different cities and villages—some of which were occupied or near the front line—because we wanted to show the stories that most people would never see in the news.

It was important for us that these stories and these people not become just statistics—because they have names. The cities have names, and we wanted to make them visible. So we collected the stories. We talked to people. We spoke with soldiers who had gone through captivity. These experiences will always stay with us. Our team still remembers every story, every face, and every person we spoke with.

It was painful, but I'm glad we did it. It changed us—my team and me—and gave us a deeper understanding of the project. At first, we didn't think we would go on expeditions. We thought we would write to volunteers and ask them to send us their stories and artifacts.

We received maybe 20 artifacts this way, but then we realized that was not enough. That could not be the core of this project. If we wanted to truly be part of it—and for the project to become part of us—we needed to go. We needed to talk to people and find these stories ourselves. And we did that. I'm grateful we did because it transformed the project.

**Jacobsen:** How do the artifacts from places like Kherson, Mariupol, or Sumy differ in terms of what they represent—historically and emotionally—compared to artifacts from other cities?

**Fiks:** I can't compare artifacts. Even two artifacts from Mariupol—I can't compare them. Each cube contains someone's life. And every life is unique. You cannot compare one to another.

That's why each cube is important. Of course, you might expect that artifacts from Mariupol or Lviv would be different—and they are. But they all carry a piece of the war inside. A war of this scale spreads across the entire country. Maybe Lviv is not on the front line, while Kharkiv is—but all the artifacts are still about war. They are about people. And that's why I won't compare any artifact or story.

**Jacobsen:** How do you balance historical documentation with emotional storytelling?

**Fiks:** We try to keep that balance because it's important. Facts matter. Facts are things you can verify—true and check them online. But emotions matter, too, because this project is about people.

And no matter where you live—whether it's the U.S., Canada, the UK, or Spain—when you read a story about a woman giving birth under missile strikes, you can imagine that. Or when a father buries his 13-year-old son next to the house because he can't leave his home—you can imagine that, too.

I don't even know how to describe it. But it's personal. And as a human being, you understand this. It's not about philosophy or abstract ideas. It's about the basic things we all need—eating, living safely, giving birth in normal conditions. These are universal experiences.

**Jacobsen:** How does the museum aim to combat—using that word carefully—war fatigue or the desensitization that can come with prolonged exposure to war and suffering?

**Fiks:** Honestly, I think we'll only truly understand that after the war is over. Right now, yes—we are tired. But it's more than tiredness. It's real fatigue.

Still, we know we have to keep going. We have to fight. We must support those on the front lines—our soldiers, our military. And we can't allow ourselves to say, "Oh, I'm tired, I'll do nothing." We don't have that luxury.

Everything you're saying—yes—is something we must face once this war is over.

**Jacobsen:** Have you received contributions directly from soldiers? So you go there and gather stories in person—someone finds an artifact in the rubble of an administrative building, a primary school, or something belonging to a loved one on the front line. Maybe that soldier is now injured and cannot return to combat. Have you had moments where people heard about your project and gave you something, saying, "I want this to be preserved in resin and remembered"?

**Fiks:** Yes. I was amazed when Azov soldiers—who had been in Mariupol, were captured, taken to Russia, and eventually returned—shared their stories with us. We interviewed them after they were released from captivity while they were still in the hospital.

They gave us the one thing they had kept with them during captivity in Mariupol. I told them, "This is something you could give to your children or grandchildren—priceless." But they said, "No. We want this to be part of history. We want it to be in a museum. We want this story to be told."

I was deeply moved. When I say "I," I'm also speaking on behalf of my team because this is a team project. We felt a huge responsibility. They gave us something that is beyond value. And then it became our mission—not to make the project famous—but to speak through this project, to speak with it.

So yes, we have these stories—especially from soldiers of Azov—and I'm very grateful we had the opportunity to talk to them. It was important for them to tell their stories, and it was important for us to listen.

**Jacobsen:** Soldiers have protocol. Politicians have messaging strategies. First responders have procedures. Doctors have ethical guidelines. For cultural managers and museum professionals, what is the protocol for the ethical and responsible handling of artifacts—even if those artifacts are embedded in resin and cannot be shattered, only damaged?

**Fiks:** The question of ethics was crucial for us. We had to ask ourselves with every story: "Is this, okay? Are we doing the right thing?"

Because we are living through the war, too, we are under missile strikes. We are not sitting in another country, calmly evaluating everything from a distance. No—we're here. We're under pressure and stress, like everyone else.

So we thought about it a lot. But we truly tried to make the project as ethical as possible. And I believe we succeeded—because we haven't received a single message from any soldier, any

official, or any private person saying, “Your project is unethical,” or, “You shouldn’t be doing this,” or, “You’re misrepresenting our stories.”

That tells me we’ve managed to approach this with the care and respect it demands.

But it was a hard question for us. With every story, we asked ourselves: Is it okay to share these things? Is it ethical? We questioned ourselves constantly.

**Jacobsen:** What is the importance of collaboration and partnerships? As you noted, museums do not come together alone—there’s a team. But what about teams working with other teams? How do you build partnerships? How do you maintain them? And how do you determine which ones are appropriate, especially for a project as sensitive as this?

**Fiks:** Of course, collaboration is important. In every field, it matters—but especially in cultural work. We collaborate with museums and galleries within Ukraine, and we also collaborate with partners outside of Ukraine. But for us, there are some key principles.

The most important is that the organization or person supports Ukraine. They cannot have any ties to Russia. That’s essential—because we cannot present the stories of Azov soldiers, for example, while collaborating with someone with connections to Russia. So our partners must support Ukraine, have no relationship with Russia, and not travel to Russia, among other things. Those are our non-negotiables.

**Jacobsen:** What has been the short-term impact of the exhibitions and the museum?

**Fiks:** That’s correct—our project is not just about the museum. We have two goals. One is to exhibit the resin cubes in Ukraine and internationally. The second is to raise funds through them. People can purchase a cube from our website, and the proceeds go to one of three charitable foundations we support.

Out of 300 cubes, we now have about 130 left—so we’ve already sold more than half. But we decided to reserve 30 to 40 cubes to donate to museums in Ukraine and abroad. We want this to become part of historical memory.

I should have said this initially: our project is about memory. Memory is essential to every nation because it shapes the future—it shapes future generations. We created this project for them to help them understand what happened. So yes, we will keep several cubes for permanent collections, but we are also using the rest to raise support. That balance is working well so far.

**Jacobsen:** What is your favourite cube?

**Fiks:** Oh, I can’t say that I have one favourite. But I really loved one—it has burned wheat inside.

**Jacobsen:** Burned wheat?

**Fiks:** Yes. It came from the Mykolaiv region. During the harvest season, there were heavy strikes in the area. The fields were burning—but farmers kept working to save the grain. Because in Ukraine, grain is everything. It is our bread—our symbol of life.

There are many photos of grain fields on fire, yet farmers continue to gather what they can. One of those farmers sent us a handful of scorched grain. The grains were whole but darkened by the fire. We turned that into a cube.

I loved that cube. It was sold in just one day.

But truly, I can't say I have a favourite. These cubes are part of us. This isn't just a project about art—it's about war, about our people. And it will always be part of us. I don't have a favourite cube or a favourite story. All of them are part of us, the team.

Even when someone buys a cube, I'm always happy—because it means we can help the foundations we support. But when I'm packing the cube, I always pause. I feel, "Okay…I understand I have to let it go," but it's still hard for me every time.

**Jacobsen:** The way the cubes are shaped—do you design them, so they are faceted in a way that allows light to reflect through them? So you can see the object more clearly no matter what angle you view it?

**Fiks:** They all have the same shape and size—15 centimetres by 15 centimetres. We have professional partners who manufacture them. This isn't something just anyone can do. It takes a lot of resources, expertise, and time.

The epoxy resin we use was developed specifically for this project. It's very difficult to produce a cube of this size that is still so transparent, so we waited a long time for this resin to be developed. Once we had it, we worked closely with our partners to figure out how to embed the objects to make them look like they've always been there.

But it wasn't easy—it was a long and complicated process. I'm really glad we succeeded in producing the cubes exactly as we envisioned them. It's a full production, not something that can be done in an office setting.

**Jacobsen:** I noticed in the online photos, especially from the angles at the vertices of each cube, that there's a reflective quality—almost like the object inside is mirrored or glowing. Was that something you specifically requested from the resin and cube designers, or did that effect emerge?

**Fiks:** That effect wasn't something we planned. It became apparent while we were already producing the cubes. We didn't predict or request it in advance—but it turned out beautifully.

**Jacobsen:** How long are these cubes expected to last? Since this is a custom-made epoxy resin, does it have a longer shelf life than standard epoxy once it's set?

**Fiks:** Yes. These cubes are designed to last forever. As I've said before, you can damage them but not break them. That was part of the idea. They will work like amber capturing history inside them.

**Jacobsen:** That also sounds like a metaphor.

**Fiks:** It can be seen as a metaphor. But yes, they are full solids. They will last. I hope they will last forever.

**Jacobsen:** What was Evgeni Utkin's role and vision in founding the War Fragments Museum?

**Fiks:** Evgeny is a special person for all of us on the team. Before the full-scale invasion, he brought us together for another project. Without him, we would never have met or created the War Fragments Museum.

He supported us throughout the entire process—during the preparation period, during production, and once the cubes were ready. He helped in many ways, and I couldn't list them all. He's an incredibly important figure in this project. Without him, it wouldn't exist in the way it does now.

**Jacobsen:** Were there any moments when the project nearly didn't happen?

**Fiks:** There was one serious challenge. When we started producing the cubes, we had a donor and specific milestones to meet. But then a rocket struck the production site where the cubes were being made. We had to postpone everything.

Still, we overcame that delay and finished production in time to meet our project milestones. So yes, it came close, but we made it happen. That was the one major incident. Thankfully, everyone was alive.

**Jacobsen:** Is there a particular quote from any of the stories—an excerpt or phrase from the descriptions that stand out to you?

**Fiks:** A quote? I'm not sure I understand the question.

**Jacobsen:** Ah, yes—so the cubes, as I understand, come with descriptions or accompanying stories. Is there one of those—not necessarily your favourite—but one you've been thinking about recently? Something that continues to resonate with you because of its poignancy?

**Fiks:** Yes, now I understand what you mean. I still carry some sentences from those stories in my mind. I remember certain lines. Not just one—I have a few of them that stay with me and that I think about often.

But they are painful, so I prefer not to say them aloud. I think everyone who's interested should visit our website and find their own quote. Your quote will be different, depending on your circumstances, your thoughts, and your life. Everyone interested should find their own.

**Jacobsen:** Tetyana, thank you so much for your time today. It was a pleasure to meet you, and I appreciate your expertise.

**Fiks:** Thank you so much, Scott. It was nice to meet you, too. Thank you for having me.

# Who Watches the Watchers? A Conversation on Digital Rights and Decentralization

2025/05/13

Today, I'm joined by Alexander Linton, a leading voice in the fight for digital privacy and a central figure behind Session, a privacy-first messaging app developed by the Australian nonprofit **Oxen Project**. With a background in communications and over five years of work on the Session project, Linton has emerged as a staunch advocate for end-to-end encryption, decentralized networks, and open-source development.

As the public face of Session's outreach and education efforts, he promotes a platform designed to minimize metadata and safeguard user anonymity—principles that are increasingly under siege in today's surveillance-driven digital landscape. Linton writes and speaks regularly on the future of privacy technologies, legislative overreach, and digital autonomy, grounding his advocacy in the belief that privacy is not a privilege but a basic human right.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Your background is in journalism and media. How did you transition into digital rights and technology?

**Alexander Linton:** It was a relatively smooth transition.

The media is such an exposed group these days. Journalists are constantly in the spotlight when it comes to digital rights. So many examples exist where media workers have had their data or communications compromised. So, if you're passionate about media or journalism, that passion often translates well into working in digital rights. Of course, you end up on the other side of the table. Instead of reporting on issues, you're now helping build the tools that protect people from them.

That said, I've always tried to prioritize human needs when developing technology. I honed this perspective while working directly with people, especially when producing stories or researching sensitive topics. This mindset carries over to building and promoting privacy tools.

**Jacobsen:** Broadly speaking, what does "digital privacy" mean in something as diverse, expansive, and porous as the Internet?

**Linton:** That's a good question. There are a lot of ways to approach digital privacy, and it matters both on a personal level and at a societal level.

On a personal level, digital privacy touches our lives constantly. Something as simple as seeing a targeted advertisement for something you didn't realize you needed — but that an algorithm already knew you did — is a basic example of how privacy issues play out daily.

But more insidiously, digital privacy affects the kind of content we see, the information we're exposed to, and the narratives that shape public opinion. It can influence voting behaviour, shift belief systems, and ultimately rewire society. That's when the concept of digital privacy moves from being a personal issue to a collective one.

The consequences are systemic. These platforms collect and aggregate data on a massive scale — and over the last two decades, our appetite for technological innovation has far outpaced our commitment to protecting privacy. We've ended up in a position where privacy has been sidelined in favour of convenience, speed, and profit.

And now, we're starting to see the ripple effects of that. From the erosion of trust in institutions to increased surveillance and manipulation, the cost of ignoring privacy is becoming increasingly visible—not just individually but also in how our communities function and societies cohere.

**Jacobsen:** I keep coming back to the question of whether threats to digital privacy are best understood as a matter of who or what. On one hand, threats are always evolving—becoming more sophisticated as defenses struggle to keep pace. And the usual suspects are still in play: governments, corporations, individuals. But there's also a less visible tier of actors—lone wolves who operate in the shadows, outside even of collectives like Anonymous, which, for all its controversy, often champions worthy causes.

So how should we be framing this? Are threats to digital privacy primarily about who is behind them—or what systems, technologies, or failures are enabling them?

**Linton:** Those things go hand in hand, but at the end of the day, it's who — because it's us that is affected when privacy deteriorates. And when we talk about at-risk groups like journalists, hacktivists, whistleblowers — or anyone who might be especially sensitive to privacy — a lot of the time, these are people who are well-resourced, or at least more motivated and better equipped to protect themselves than the average person. However, privacy works best when it's collective.

Suppose you're the only person practicing privacy out of a group of a hundred. In that case, you stand out — and that can actually make you more vulnerable. You get a kind of "herd immunity" effect with privacy.

Ultimately, while digital privacy benefits everyone, it is especially important for the vulnerable —people in our communities who may be at risk. Whether they're vulnerable because of their work, who they are, or where they live doesn't matter. What matters is that improving digital privacy can strengthen and protect those people—and their rights.

**Jacobsen:** People see buzzwords thrown around, which, unfortunately, shouldn't be buzzwords like "closed source" and "open source." OpenAI took its name from the idea of open-sourced AI. What does "open source" mean?

**Linton:** Sure. Open source refers to publicly available source code of a piece of software. That means anyone can inspect it, audit it, and, in many cases, contribute to it. It also means anyone can recompile it themselves to ensure the software they're running actually matches the publicly available code. This is important for building trust, verifiability, and security in software. It's also important to encourage collaboration, fairness, and transparency when developing technologies that shape our lives.

Now, in the example you gave — OpenAI — AI is clearly going to be a major force in society in the future. So everyone who has a stake in that future (which is all of us) must be able to see what's happening and potentially shape its direction. The closed source is the opposite: the

source code is hidden, and you cannot verify how the software works or whether it's doing what it claims.

You can't take pieces of it and build your tools. Generally, this is done so that a company can protect its intellectual property and profit from whatever that technology is.

A simpler definition…It's quite tricky, but the basic idea is that open source means I'm going to show you how I'm making this thing. Regardless of what it is—it could be your iPad—I will show you all the detailed steps and little pieces that go inside so that, if you wanted to, you could build your own iPad, and it would work exactly the same.

A closed source is when you go to the shop and buy the iPad, which works—but you have no idea how it works or what's inside. That's the core difference between open source and closed source.

**Jacobsen:** How does Session differ from other secure messaging apps like Signal or Telegram?

**Linton:** The basic principle we're working with is that the technological systems we use today are essentially critical infrastructure for protecting our rights—things like freedom of speech, privacy, and even freedom of assembly. Encrypted messaging apps are incredibly important tools for maintaining those rights.

The problem is that the systems we rely on today place our rights in the hands of individual companies—or, in some cases, one very rich person. We trust them to continue protecting those rights. Everyone has an agenda, and politics or profit can shift. What's acceptable or protected today might not be tomorrow.

Suddenly, the speech you thought you had, the communication you believed was private, could be stripped away.

The idea behind Session is to address this risk through disintermediation — removing the reliance on a single company or person to uphold your rights. Instead, we use a decentralized system operated by the people whose rights are at stake. It's a much more equitable and democratic approach. But technology hasn't typically worked this way, which is what makes Session different.

So the first way that Session is different is that it's decentralized. While we have a foundation — responsible for issuing grants and contributing to Session's open-source development, we don't run the network that stores and routes messages.

That's a significant difference between something like Session and something like Signal.

Now, don't get it twisted — I trust Signal and the people who work there. They're good people, for sure. But this is a philosophical difference — a different approach.

Technologically, as you mentioned earlier, there's also additional metadata hardening that Session does, which most messaging apps don't go through. For example, Signal requires a phone number when you sign up. Even though that number may not be shared or logged for long, Signal can still see who you're messaging, when you're doing it, and your IP address.

That kind of information is valuable in the era of surveillance capitalism. Now, to their credit, Signal chooses not to exploit it—which is great.

But Session takes a different approach. Because we operate using a decentralized network, we can use onion routing—a concept championed by the Tor Project—to protect metadata such as IP addresses and prevent the timing correlation of messages.

**Jacobsen:** That's powerful. This is a good point for distinguishing between P2P, onion routing, VPNs, double VPNs, and dedicated IP. They're each distinct, but they matter to people thinking seriously about privacy.

**Linton:** Absolutely. I can definitely do that. Let me backtrack a little to where I was — Tor.

Tor invented onion routing, which basically means that your message is wrapped in multiple layers of encryption and sent through several nodes in a network. The first node peels off one layer of encryption and sees only the address of the next node.

Typically, there are three nodes in a route. The first node sees the sender's IP but has no idea where the message is ultimately going. The final node sees that a message is being delivered to someone, and it sees the recipient's IP — but it has no idea where the message originally came from.

In practical terms, this means that no single part of the network ever has access to the full picture. Your conversations—and the sensitive metadata that surrounds them—are obscured by design. That's only possible because of Session's disintermediated and decentralized architecture.

This process happens in Session by default, but users can also add a layer of protection by using VPNs.

A VPN — or Virtual Private Network — works on a simpler principle. It acts as a middleman. If you're using WhatsApp, for example, instead of WhatsApp seeing your actual IP address, they see the IP of your VPN.

That's better, but there are trade-offs. While the platform doesn't have your IP, it still has your account data — like your phone number and possibly your contact list — which can still be used to identify you and the people you're talking to.

There are variations like double VPNs, where traffic is routed through two VPN servers for added privacy, and dedicated IPs, which assign a unique IP to you — often for business or stability reasons — but which may be less private in terms of anonymity.

P2P — or peer-to-peer — involves direct user connections, sometimes exposing IPs unless wrapped in privacy layers.

Unlike all of these, onion routing is built specifically for anonymity, distributing trust across the network. That's why it's so important in privacy-preserving tools like Session.

Still, a VPN can often be a useful anonymizing tool, but it's definitely a step down from onion routing when it comes to minimizing metadata.

Another major difference in our system is that because we don't have a central company routing messages or managing accounts, we can't use an identifier like a phone number — which is more of a legacy system — to handle addressing or account creation. In fact, there's no way to create an account at all on Session because there's no central authority with which to register.

Instead, we generate a key pair on the user's device. If you're familiar with public-key encryption, that means private and public keys. Your private key is used primarily for decrypting messages, while your public key is what other people use to encrypt messages sent to you.

You share your public key, and anyone can send you a message that only you can decrypt with your private key. It's generated locally, so you never need to register anything with anyone. Using some clever mathematical techniques, we can use this public key for addressing inside the decentralized network.

You never need to use a personal identifier like a phone number, which, as a journalist, I'm sure you know can be quite sensitive information to give out when using a messaging service.

Those are the main ways Session differentiates itself from something like Signal, WhatsApp, or Telegram.

**Jacobsen:** So, how can people protect their privacy? What's on the cutting edge of the need to protect privacy? I've encountered things like double VPN and "onion over VPN," which essentially add extra layers to the onion. They are helpful but slow things down, especially the double VPN setups. What are your recommendations? And what are you seeing in the future?

**Linton:** Absolutely. So, first of all, we have systemic problems in how we build technology — and those problems don't just come from how the tech itself works. They also come from our government structures, how tech companies are regulated (or not), and how funding works in the tech space. All of this contributes to the privacy issues we see today.

Now, all of these tools—VPNs, onion routing, encryption—are fantastic, and the people working on them are absolutely brilliant. But often, it feels like we're applying Band-Aid solutions to a structural wound.

We often shift the burden of solving this systemic issue onto the consumer. The individual is expected to outsmart the system—and that's not fair. People often end up isolating themselves by using privacy tools. For example, you're stuck if you want to use a secure messaging app, but none of your friends are on it.

Okay — that's the end of the rant. So, what can people do? What are some practical steps? My advice is always to start small and build up. This is a big issue, and it's easy to throw your hands up and say, "Well, my privacy is already compromised. My data's already out there. What's the point?"

But there is a point. Start with the things you use every day. If you use email constantly, find an email provider that supports encryption and has strong privacy-focused policies. If you use messaging apps a lot, find one that is end-to-end encrypted at a minimum—and ideally, one backed by a nonprofit structure like Signal or Session.

If you're big on social media, say you use Twitter, and maybe look into alternatives like Bluesky or a federated platform like Mastodon. Use what aligns with your own digital habits.

If you're concerned about network privacy, there's an ongoing debate about VPNs and whether they're just privacy theatre. It really comes down to this: do you trust your ISP, or do you trust a VPN company more? The answer depends on your country, your ISP's practices, and the legal obligations in your jurisdiction.

That said, onion routing is a huge step forward from VPNs in protecting anonymity and minimizing metadata. It's the more robust, privacy-first option, especially when integrated by default, like in Session.

However, most of the time, when you use a VPN, you don't even notice it's running — unless a website blocks you. Things often get noticeably worse if you use an onion network like Tor. Some websites break completely, you get blocked more frequently, and page load times can be significantly slower.

Even further along the spectrum, there's a concept called a mixnet, which is an even more advanced type of obfuscation overlay network than onion routing. Mixnets group packets together and send them through the network with delays, making it impossible to deanonymize the data using timing attacks.

Timing attacks are a surveillance method only highly sophisticated adversaries can carry out. To monitor when packets are sent and received, you'd need access to the physical Internet infrastructure, such as fibre cables, routers, and middleboxes. Based on that timing, it becomes theoretically possible to deanonymize users, even using a privacy-preserving network like Tor.

Researchers have shown that timing attacks can work, in some cases, even against Tor. Mixnets, like the one used by Nym, address this specific vulnerability.

However, as you might expect, using a mixnet can cause an even bigger impact on user experience. The trade-off between privacy and convenience becomes more extreme.

So, we're looking at an unsustainable situation in which we ask everyday users to make serious sacrifices in usability to protect their privacy. That's not a reasonable long-term model.

We need a more privacy-forward approach — giving people privacy by default rather than making them jump through hoops. Tools like mixes are important, but ideally, people shouldn't have to think about them at all.

**Jacobsen:** What ethical frameworks are presently in place — or in development — for digital privacy in an era of narrow AI and increasingly sophisticated good and bad actors?

**Linton:** I'm not as familiar with the AI side of things. But in terms of frameworks that address human actors — both good and bad — there's a general principle of aiming for "the most good for the most people."

Let me give an example of digital privacy: Privacy tools like encryption have immense value. They protect the people who uphold democratic society—activists, journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders.

They also offer essential safeguards for people living under oppressive regimes or anyone vulnerable for social, political, or personal reasons.

So, when we ask whether we should build and deploy privacy tools, the answer becomes clear: yes. The benefits—the very real protections they offer—far outweigh the hypothetical risks. Privacy strengthens the fabric of a just society.

We should advocate for and implement it as broadly as possible, not only as a technical matter but also as a moral imperative.

**Jacobsen:** Are there any final points people should definitely know about digital privacy that we haven't already covered?

**Linton:** Yes — two quick ones.

First, as you said earlier, people often encounter a lot of buzzwords: encryption, onion routing, end-to-end encryption, and open source. These are important concepts, but they're only parts of the puzzle. We really want to address privacy at its root. In that case, we need to reckon with the broader system of surveillance capitalism.

That system—extracting data for profit—poisons a huge part of today's tech industry. The good news is that there are better ways to design systems. We can embrace alternative governance models and open-source practices that are more accountable, equitable, and privacy-respecting. That's where real structural change begins.

Second—and on a more optimistic note—it's easy to feel pessimistic or helpless about digital privacy. But it's not too late. Tools, communities, and developers are working to build better systems. The future isn't written yet, and if we act with purpose and clarity, we can still shape it to protect our rights.

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

# Gospel of Denial: How Churches Continue to Fail Clergy Abuse Survivors

2025/05/22

Today, I'm joined by Katherine Archer, Father Bojan Jovanović, Dr. Hermina Nedelescu, and Dorothy Small for a wide-ranging discussion on clergy abuse—its psychological toll, institutional roots, and pathways to reform.

Katherine Archer is the co-founder of Prosopon Healing and a graduate student in Theological Studies. She will begin a Master's in Counseling Psychology in the fall. Her work focuses on clergy abuse within the Eastern Orthodox Church, blending academic research with nonprofit advocacy. Archer champions policy reform addressing adult clergy exploitation, advancing a vision of healing grounded in justice, accountability, and survivor support.

Father Bojan Jovanović, a Serbian Orthodox priest and Secretary of the Union of Christians of Croatia is known for his searing critiques of institutional failings within the Church. His book *Confession: How We Killed God* and his work with the Alliance of Christians of Croatia underscore a commitment to ethical reform and moral reckoning. Jovanović advocates for transparency and internal dialogue as essential steps toward restoring trust in religious life.

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu is a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in San Diego whose research probes the neurobiological underpinnings of human behavior, particularly in the context of substance use and trauma. Her current work explores how trauma, including sexual abuse, is encoded in the brain's circuitry and how community-based interventions can address PTSD and addiction in survivors of clergy abuse.

Dorothy Small is a retired registered nurse and longtime survivor advocate with SNAP. A survivor of both childhood and adult clergy abuse, Small began speaking out long before the #MeToo movement gave such voices a broader platform. A cancer survivor and grandmother, she now writes about recovery, resilience, and personal freedom, amplifying the strength of survivors and the urgency of institutional accountability.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** In 2024, journalists faced unprecedented threats, with at least 124 killed—the highest number recorded to date—though some sources report 122. The violence in Gaza accounted for a significant share of these deaths. Beyond physical danger, journalists today confront a host of pressures: online harassment, legal intimidation, surveillance, the erosion of press freedoms, and increasing self-censorship. I've experienced several of these realities myself. That is the nature of this work.

Each of you here has encountered similar challenges through very different lenses: as a distinguished member of the Serbian Orthodox clergy, a young adult woman within the Orthodox community, a Catholic youth, and a neuroscientist. These identities frame the most critical points of contact within each of your narratives. You all chose to speak out—something most people never do. So let me ask: Once someone breaks that silence and becomes outspoken—whether about their own experience or on behalf of others—what happens? What shifts and consequences follow when the truth is no longer kept quiet?

**Katherine Archer:** When I was 21, I came forward and reported a clergyperson for what I experienced as a violation of trust and an abuse of pastoral authority. If I had to choose one word to describe how I felt in the aftermath, it would be annihilation. The Orthodox Church upholds the use of icons in worship and annually celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy–a commemoration of the end of iconoclasm, or the historical period when people smashed and destroyed icons.

I have often felt a deep dissonance between the reverence given to painted wood as the representation of the human person and my own experience, as a living person, coming forward with a painful and vulnerable account of harm involving a priest. Over the years, I have spoken with many survivors who shared similar feelings after trying to report experiences of abuse within Orthodox Christian communities—whether through conversations with fellow parishioners, clergy, or through official channels.

It is a beautiful and moving tradition to process around the church holding icons on that particular Sunday in Lent. Yet it is profoundly more difficult to carry the weight of someone's story, confront painful realities, and respond compassionately to a living human reporting such things.

**Father Bojan Jovanović:** When I first spoke the truth, my truth experienced a paradox: liberation and humiliation in the same breath. I talked about the attempted sexual abuse I survived within the Serbian Orthodox Church and about an even more harrowing reality — the knowledge that a child had been raped and murdered in a monastery. The facts were clear, but the world I spoke them into could not receive them.

Instead of being a space of light and confession of sin, the Church became a prison of denial. Some immediately tried to silence my voice, to "protect the Church," as if the truth were the threat and not the crime. Others looked at me with discomfort, as if I were the one disrupting the order. Theologically, I felt like a prophet bringing truth, only to be met with stones. Psychologically, it was only the beginning of confronting the deep trauma I had suppressed and wrapped in silence for years.

**Hermina Nedelescu:** I received supportive responses from most individuals and institutions. In contrast, the response I experienced from the Greek Orthodox Church of America was, in my view, deeply disappointing and lacking in basic compassion. From my experience, their response felt—and continues to feel—fundamentally inhumane.

**Dorothy Small:** Reporting the sexual assault by my grandfather, just shy of age six, resulted in a slap across the cheek by my grandmother and a swear in French. Ultimately, it resulted in no further abuse by my grandfather. However, almost a year later, living under the same roof as the predator, my grandmother brought me to a Catholic orphanage to be adopted. At the last minute, I was adopted by an aunt and uncle. They were abusive. I feared them. But they were familiar. I feared the orphanage far more. It was unknown. Plus, I feared nuns.

Reporting the schoolteacher helped to stop the harassment my best friend was receiving. It also caused me to be blamed and scorned by my parents. I only had one friend who stood beside me. Ultimately, I ended up moving across the country to escape a small town and the state where I lived. I could not recover from the emotional consequences of living in that state. It took about

three or four years for the emotional pain to ease. My parents contacted the principal of the school, mandating that the teacher had until evening to reveal what he did with me to his wife, or my adoptive father would pay him a visit to his home. He had to tell his wife.

Reporting the priest led to a massive fallout. On a work visa from a foreign country, he was pulled from the ministry in the diocese here and remanded to his bishop, where he returned to active ministry. I was banned by the pastor of the Church from all ministry for reporting him. If I had not, I could have continued ministry even though they knew what happened. Silence would have been rewarded. I lost a few close friends due to the publicity of the lawsuit and their discomfort being associated with me. I feared retaliation beyond being shunned, ostracized, and ridiculed, which led to my retreating at home for six weeks, afraid to leave. Some told me that I was hated and accused of seducing the priest.

Once loved and accepted by my church community, I fell sharply from grace. There was also a backlash from my adult son. I ended up walking away from the community that was like a family. It caused marked spiritual confusion and distress for well over five years.

**Jacobsen:** How were people helpful in this coming-out experience?

**Archer:** The community of survivors and advocates is incredible. I have come to know some incredibly fierce, strong, and benevolent people. I am moved by people like law professor Amos Guiora and some of the attorneys we have spoken to, who are empathic but knowledgeable and have a fierce resolve to help survivors see justice.

I am excited about the community I will join in the fall to start working towards my Master's in Counselling Psychology, with professors willing to engage with complex ideas and not turn to binary thinking or platitudes. I do not think a person needs a vast community, but since we are wired to connect with others, some community is necessary for healing. It can be a community of another person, holding a story with respect and tenderness and unwilling to inflict further harm. That is a true "triumph over iconoclasm," by the way.

**Jovanović:** Individuals — not institutions, not the majority, but individuals — became lighthouses in my night. These people did not demand proof but listened to my heart. Psychologists, friends, and a few believers who truly understood Christ's message of love and justice — helped me rediscover my humanity. Their support was not in words, but in the silence where I could cry without shame.

From a theological perspective, it was through these people that God drew near to me. Paradoxically, it was only after I left the institution that called itself His house that I felt God's presence in my pain. Through them, I understood that faith is not unquestioning loyalty to an institution, but the courage to break with evil in the name of truth, even when that evil is draped in robes.

**Nedelescu:** Colleagues, mentors, and even strangers responded with empathy and moral clarity, affirming that speaking out was valid and necessary. Some institutions took immediate steps to understand what happened and offered to help in any way possible, whether through documentation, emotional support, or a safe space to be heard. Those responses reminded me

that despite my suffering, individuals and institutions are committed to accountability, dignity, and survivor support.

In contrast, the only institution that responded in a reactionary and, in my view, deeply disappointing manner was the Greek Orthodox Church of America. That response had a severe emotional impact on me and compounded the trauma.

**Small:** With my grandfather, I suppose that although initially, it met with a shocked reaction from my grandmother, there was no further incident the remainder of the time I stayed with them. The positive thing about the schoolteacher was the response I received from the superintendent. I expected to be chastised. Instead, he listened as I berated myself. He interrupted and told me never to speak harshly and negatively about myself again. I was just talking about myself and the way I was spoken to at home. The teacher, however, only received a verbal warning. He did not lose his position.

With the priest, the victim advocate for the diocese was very kind and supportive. One woman from my parish ended up standing beside me throughout everything, even though she did not understand anything about dealing with someone with so much trauma and symptoms, as well as clergy abuse of adults.

After the lawsuit was mediated, I found a spiritual director ed, who became a strong support person. The lawyer I retained was phenomenal. He had a degree in clinical psychology as well as in law. I also contacted SNAP, which is a nonprofit organization for those abused by clergy. I also had a therapist initially, but she did not understand the complex nature of clergy abuse. I ended therapy.

**Jacobsen:** How were people unhelpful in this coming-out experience?

**Archer:** People who will not access a body of knowledge on trauma, consent, or abuse, including spiritual abuse, have said atrocious things to me over the years. I was abused by a man starting when I was 14, so I have been in this space of being a "survivor" (and actually, I do not always like that word) for a long time. However, over time, with healing, ignorant words feel like tiny ant bites as I move towards the people committed to modeling authenticity in their lives and growing and learning.

When people say atrocious things, I think, "Thank you for showing me who you are so I can move far away from you." So, the unhelpful people have ultimately been helpful, after all, in allowing me to disconnect and attach to healthier people and communities. There are healthy communities; we do not have to feel stuck in sick communities.

**Jovanović:** The unhelpfulness of people was most deeply expressed in their silence. It was not just the words of denial — the quiet distance, the turning away, that wounded me the most. Some even tried to convince me I had misunderstood what had happened, that "people like that do not exist in the Church," as if I had imagined my trauma.

The abuser did not inflict the most significant pain, but by those who knew, suspected, or heard, and did nothing. Their theological passivity, their silence in the name of "peace" and "God's order," is what spiritually broke me the most. They failed to see Christ in me as the wounded

one. They trusted those in vestments more than the truth of a broken soul. Moreover, that, in my most profound conviction, is the greatest betrayal of faith.

**Nedelescu:** How the Greek Orthodox Church of America has responded has, in my view, been profoundly unhelpful—and continues to be. Rather than expressing empathy or taking responsibility, I experienced their response as involving victim-blaming, narrative distortion, and a general attitude that felt fundamentally inhumane. From my perspective, their actions appear more focused on protecting the institution than on acknowledging the harm I experienced at the hands of one of their high-ranking employees.

That kind of ongoing institutional response doesn't just fail survivors—it intensifies the harm and reinforces the very silence we are trying to break. It is profoundly disheartening to witness such reactionary and defensive behavior from individuals in positions of authority who, in my view, knew—or should have known—that serious harm had occurred and failed to act to mitigate it.

This aligns with what Professor Amos Guiora, a leading expert on sexual assault and enabling behavior, defines as the "enabling phenomenon." As he writes, an enabler is "an individual able to reasonably know another individual has been harmed and/or is likely to be harmed yet fails to act to minimize the harm to that individual."

Finally, the words of Diane Langberg resonate with me: "Systems that cover up abuse through deception, coercion, or abuse of power mimic the perpetrator and revictimize the victim. Tragically, many lives have been sacrificed on the altar of secrecy for the sake of the church or the mission."

**Small:** The comments made by those who just did not understand the abuse of adults by clergy were tough. My grandmother struck my face with an open hand. My grandfather threatened me after the assault that if I told, he would tell everyone I was lying and I would get into trouble. No one would believe me.

Much is the same when I reported the priest as an adult. Many stood beside him and turned away from me. I think just the fundamental lack of knowledge and understanding, as well as the impact on their religious practice, made it more complicated than if what happened were with a stranger or anyone but a priest as far as the school teacher admitting to my parents, who discovered evidence in my room, that the teacher caused me to hear some of the most horrific things any person who calls himself a father should ever say to any teenager.

His words took deep root. He was a sadistic bully who left a lifetime of damage in his wake. The consequences of being raised by the aunt and uncle, as well as devastating early childhood loss, left me vulnerable to subsequent abuse, culminating in what transpired with the priest at age sixty.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you all for continuing to break new ground by offering distinct perspectives on this less-discussed darkness in the community ecosphere around abuse.

# Can Journalism Draw Parallels with the Council of Nicaea?

2025/05/23

On May 18th, in honour of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, a Croatian Christian association invited me to give a virtual speech. The following is my contribution to the conference.

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Distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues,

With sincere gratitude, I accept the opportunity to address this gathering of international intellectuals, researchers, and religious scholars. This occasion is both solemn and celebratory, as we mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, a foundational moment in the theological and institutional development of Christianity. Though I come to you not as a theologian or confessional believer but as a humanist and a journalist grounded in secular principles, I approach this event with profound respect for its historical gravity and moral resonance.

The Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 CE, was not merely an ecclesiastical deliberation. It was a forged coherence in doctrinal chaos, a work to unify diverse communities under a shared conceptual framework. The idea was to assert that *truth* must be sought collectively and with a seriousness of purpose. This ambition, couched in theological terms of the day, remarkably echoes the vocation of journalism.

Journalists operating in open, pluralistic societies such as Canada are entrusted with a public responsibility not unlike that of the Nicene Fathers. We are to confront genuine ambiguity, interrogate prevailing narratives, and seek the contours of *truth* in the cacophony of competing claims. The mechanisms differ: evidence over exegesis, investigation over revelation. Even so, the ethical thrust remains analogous.

To practice journalism with integrity now is to swim against currents of misinformation, polarization, and sensationalism. We do not gather in councils. We ‘convene’ in newsrooms, editorial boards, and digital spaces. We have a responsibility because we shape public consciousness. Moreover, we often give voice and clarity to the sentiments already present within it.

We should strive to exercise discernment. We do not amplify what is popular but accurate and proportional. These may include aspects of fairness and justice. Some accurate and proportional truths reveal unfortunate realities: unfairness and injustice.

As a humanist, I operate within a worldview anchored in reason, empirical inquiry, and the inherent dignity of all persons. I do not profess metaphysical certainties, but I am not without conviction. Akin to Christian ethical traditions, the humanist lifestance esteems truthfulness, compassion, and defence of the vulnerable. These values should transcend doctrinal boundaries and offer a common cause, particularly in an age needing principled dialogue.

There is an urgent need for rapprochement between religious and secular actors in the public sphere. The gates of *truth*themselves are under siege, and some walls have been breached. We must not conflate differences with hostility. We should recognize our shared concerns and common moral aspirations. We converge around shared imperatives: human rights, peace, intellectual honesty, and epistemic humility.

Journalism functions as a moral cartography. It maps the terrain. It informs, yes. But it also describes, interprets, orients, and records. It buttresses the elements for building the future by creating the narratives for it.

The Council of Nicaea engaged in a similar project. It defined orthodoxy and stabilized the foundations of collective meaning. While I may not subscribe to the theological conclusions, I recognize the profundity of the aspiration: to reconcile *truth* and conviction with coherence in the community.

Today, as we reflect on the legacy of that council, let us reflect on the character of our institutions—both religious and secular. Are they upholding the *truth* or succumbing to expedient falsehoods? Are they fostering understanding or estrangement? Ultimately, do they deserve the public's trust?

These questions transcend tradition. We must continue to ask these questions rigorously and together.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to speak across differences and to dignify those differences on concerns of the intellectual commons. In the space between faith and reason, as between the meaning of music made between a note and a rest in a piano piece by Orlando Gibbons or Johannes Bach, we may yet rediscover that most elusive and essential of social goods: the *truth*.

# Antisemitism Isn’t Just a Bug in the System. It’s Being Amplified by It.

2025/05/30

As Australia headed into its 2025 federal election, a darker undercurrent pulsed through its digital platforms. **CyberWell**, a watchdog group specializing in online antisemitism, uncovered a disturbing trend: antisemitic narratives were not just circulating—they were being algorithmically amplified to more than 257,000 users. Using proprietary monitoring tools guided by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, CyberWell flagged 548 posts between November 2024 and April 2025. Of those, 80 were confirmed antisemitic.

The responses from social media platforms varied starkly. X (formerly Twitter) removed just 5% of flagged content, citing permissive “civic integrity” policies, while Facebook removed nearly 90%. Classic antisemitic conspiracies—like the Kalergi Plan—reemerged in digital camouflage, retooled into memes and coded language to evade detection.

CyberWell argues that such normalization of Jewish hatred poses a direct threat to democratic norms, public safety, and civil discourse. They advocate for mandatory IHRA-based moderator training and stronger enforcement. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook, which maintain clearer policies and trusted partnerships, demonstrated more robust moderation. But as the data suggests, uneven enforcement leaves critical gaps—ones that extremists are all too eager to exploit.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** How did CyberWell identify and verify the posts?

**Tal-Or Cohen Montemayor:** CyberWell utilizes a combination of social media listening tools and a proprietary monitoring system to identify posts that are highly likely to be antisemitic, according to the IHRA working definition. Between Nov 11, 2024 – April 22, 2025, CyberWell’s monitoring technology flagged 548 posts in English on Facebook, X (Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube that included keywords related to the Australian federal election and had a high likelihood of being antisemitic.

Of the 548 posts, CyberWell selected a sample for manual review. In total, 80 posts were confirmed as antisemitic according to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism by CyberWell’s research team. The high level of engagement around a select sample of just 80 posts indicates that the exposure of deeply anti-Jewish narratives ahead of the election period in Australia is far worse than what CyberWell’s research indicates.

**Jacobsen:** Elon Musk’s X platform removed only ~5% of flagged antisemitic election content compared to 54.2% in 2024. What explains the dramatic drop in moderation?

Montemayor: The significance of removal between X and other platforms is largely due to their policy approach to election-related content. Much of the hate speech that intersects with election issues is mistakenly perceived by X and their moderators as political expression and, therefore, allowed on their platform. X is the platform with the most permissive “Civic Integrity” policy, and it appears that much of the antisemitic election-related content is categorized under this

policy as far as they are concerned. This extraordinarily low rate of actioning open Jewish hatred is not something we have encountered before.

Additionally, the gap between X's rate of removal of antisemitic election content and their average rate of removal in 2024 highlights a key issue when relying on user reporting and escalation to major social media platforms, particularly to X: response time. The average rate of removal of reported antisemitic content by X in 2024, as collected by CyberWell, is a snapshot at the end of the calendar year, giving the platform many months to respond to our reporting. X's average rate of removal of the antisemitic Australia election dataset collected by CyberWell is approximately 5% reflects the rate of removal three to five days after reporting it to X. While platforms take days to respond to user reports, the engagement algorithms continue to push and suggest content, especially ahead of events of wide public interest like a national election.

**Jacobsen:** Your report mentions the use of classic antisemitic conspiracy theories, such as the Kalergi Plan and alleged Jewish control over political parties. How have these narratives evolved?

**Montemayor:** The dominant antisemitic theme that election antisemitism centers around is conspiracy theories about Jewish global control and influence. These narratives characterize Jews as manipulative puppeteers who secretly control governments, political leaders, and the electoral process itself. Antisemitic conspiracy theories—such as the Kalergi Plan and claims of Jewish control over specific political parties—have evolved online by merging with contemporary political narratives and global events.

On social media, this very old anti-Jewish idea is often repackaged using coded language, emojis, and memes. The conspiracy theories suggesting secret Jewish control frequently surface in discussions about major political events, such as federal elections, where antisemitic tropes are embedded within broader ideological discourse. This blending allows hate actors to evade platform policies and challenges enforcement in practice while spreading this harmful narrative to mass audiences during times of increased social sensitivity and tension. This is extremely dangerous for the Jewish community in Australia, which is already experiencing a marked rise in violent and targeted attacks.

**Jacobsen:** How have these gained traction in digital political discourse during election cycles?

**Montemayor:** CyberWell will be releasing a comparative analysis of antisemitic narratives during election cycles, examining how these anti-Jewish trends have gained popularity and audience during the UK, U.S., Canadian, and Australian elections towards the end of the summer.

However, we can share that in each of the four election cycles, classic antisemitism criticizing disproportionate Jewish power and conspiracies of covert control are the most prevalent types of Jewish hatred in election antisemitism across the board. This indicates that the dominant antisemitic theme in this dataset centers on conspiracy theories about Jewish global control and influence.

Notably, this form of classic antisemitism, consistent with the second example of the IHRA working definition, closely aligns with the core principles of major social media platforms' hate

speech and hateful conduct policies. This content includes offensive generalizations, harmful stereotypes, and conspiracy theories targeting a "protected group," including those defined by religious affiliation or belief.

Since these carve-outs and protections are already recognized by most large social media platforms in their policies, it is reasonable to expect that platforms would enforce their policies against this type of content effectively. In practice, however, enforcement of election-related antisemitic hate speech appears to be significantly lower than typical enforcement rates against online Jewish hatred.

Political rhetoric focused on candidates and party platforms, including those that are irate and critical, are an important part of freedom of expression and political speech. However, the targeted violence against the Australian Jewish community and other Jewish communities across the globe has proven that online conspiracy theories and hatred has real-world consequences.

**Jacobsen:** How does CyberWell's application of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism help distinguish rhetoric?

**Montemayor:** The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism is a globally recognized consensus definition, rooted in multi-disciplinary expertise, that CyberWell uses as a discourse analysis tool. The eleven examples featured in the IHRA working definition provide a framework for a lexicon focused on identifying particular beliefs, conspiracy theories, and narratives that are the cornerstones of Jewish hatred. We apply the definition as a tool for narrative analysis context. It not only helps us monitor specific narratives online but also organizes and allows us to track spikes in particular tropes, accusations, slurs, and narratives.

A post shared by Everyone Hates Elon (@everyonehateselon_)

**Jacobsen:** What are the strengths and weaknesses of the IHRA definition of antisemitism? How can social media companies improve enforcement during elections?

**Montemayor:** A major strength of the IHRA working definition is that it provides a comprehensive consensus definition of antisemitism that addresses the multifaceted nature of Jewish hatred as it has evolved over time and up to the modern day.

The IHRA working definition through the eleven categories laid out in the definition covers the evolution of Jewish hatred from its historical roots in religious antisemitism, race-based Jewish hatred during the Holocaust to its most modern iteration, political antisemitism via vilification of Jews as agents of the Israeli state, demonization of the concept of Jewish self-determination and using the state of Israel or the Israeli identity as a touchstone for promoting classic and openly anti-Jewish tropes, biases and hatred. However, as one of the most complex forms of hatred, even this working definition needs updates.

For example, CyberWell's research of online antisemitism, particularly the October 7 denial campaign, has revealed that purposeful denial of atrocities or attacks committed against the Jewish community is a form of current antisemitism. The denial or 'false flag' narrative, either blaming the victims for the attack or erroneously claiming that they set up the attack, has also

been used to delegitimize and dismiss the attacks against the Jewish community in Australia from Sydney to Melbourne. The recognition of Holocaust denial and distortion as a form of antisemitism, featured in the IHRA working definition, should be applied to the purposeful denial or distortion of atrocities committed against Jews for being Jews.

Some social media platforms have gone on the record stating that they use the IHRA working definition as a reference point when updating their policies, but the truth is the practitioners and enforcers of the policies, the content moderators, often outsourced by major platforms to third party providers around the world, are unfamiliar with the IHRA working definition and there is no indication that it is part of their regular training material.

A more comprehensive application of the IHRA working definition within the existing policies of the social media platforms, making sure the definition is part of content moderator training and implementation of recommendations from off-platform experts like CyberWell, including reliance on specialized datasets and keywords around events like the elections, would significantly impact better enforcement of digital policy on social media.

**Jacobsen:** There is a growing normalization of antisemitism online and offline in Australian society. What are the urgent consequences of this normalization?

**Montemayor:** The normalization of antisemitism—both online and offline—erodes social tolerance and creates an environment where hate speech, hostility, and violence against Jewish citizens is more likely to be accepted or ignored. It emboldens extremist actors to act criminally and violently, legitimizes dangerous conspiracy theories that erode trust, and fosters a climate of fear within Jewish communities. When antisemitic rhetoric goes unchecked, it weakens democratic norms and desensitizes the public to open bigotry and hatred. This is why many Jewish communities are experiencing increased incidents of harassment, threats to community safety, and the risk of real-world attacks—the increased violence is fueled by online radicalization and algorithmically charged hate speech. The platforms must be responsible for systematic and effective enforcement of their own digital policies in order to stem the tide of increasing violence.

**Jacobsen:** Facebook and YouTube demonstrated stronger enforcement. Why are they more proactive? Are they more successful?

**Montemayor:** Unlike the other platforms, YouTube takes a more defined stance by including specific policies on hate speech related to elections and civic integrity. The platform explicitly prohibits hate speech and harassment in the context of elections. Reflecting this policy, YouTube had the fewest antisemitic posts in the dataset. While the removal rate stood at 0%, this is attributable to the fact that only one video was identified during the monitoring period.

Overall, CyberWell's research across platforms suggests that the more explicit a policy is, the more effectively it is enforced. This is true in terms of technological resources, such as pre-emptive AI removal through classifiers and human content moderation, which reviews users' reports of violating content. While Facebook does not currently include explicit clauses in their policies targeting election-related hate speech, Facebook demonstrated the highest rate of content removal, taking down 89.47% of the reported posts. It is also worth noting that CyberWell is a

trusted partner of TikTok and Meta, but not an official partner of YouTube. This may support stronger response mechanisms by Meta for reported antisemitic content.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Tal-Or.

# How America's Allies are Watching it Fall Behind

2025/06/02

George Carrillo is the co-founder and CEO of the **Hispanic Construction Council** (HCC), an organization dedicated to advancing Hispanic professionals in the construction industry through workforce development, advocacy, and access to business resources. A U.S. Marine Corps veteran and former sheriff's deputy who specialized in child and domestic abuse cases, Carrillo went on to serve as Oregon's Director of Social Determinants of Health. His career—bridging frontline service, community advocacy, and senior policymaking—offers a rare and layered vantage point on the intersections of labor, public health, economic equity, and national security.

Carrillo brings a resolutely mission-driven approach to public service. His work highlights the structural forces that shape opportunities in America, including racial and economic disparities, fragmented public systems, and the often-overlooked consequences of policy decisions on marginalized communities. Whether in the context of health equity or workforce inclusion, Carrillo consistently centers the need for strategic coordination and the empowerment of underserved populations to build societal resilience.

In our conversation, Carrillo offers a pointed critique of the Trump administration's politicization of national security—specifically, the replacement of experienced National Security Council officials with loyalists. He warns that this approach weakens interagency coordination, erodes diplomatic continuity, and undermines public safety. Beyond the personnel shifts, Carrillo draws attention to deeper systemic damage: cratering morale among career civil servants, diminishing institutional accountability, and the normalization of authoritarian posturing in democratic governance.

At the same time, Carrillo is not without examples of what principled leadership can look like. He praises countries such as Canada for their commitment to international cooperation and civic integrity. Rooted in a belief that service should reflect enduring national values, Carrillo often returns to the words of John F. Kennedy as a compass point. For him, public service is not simply a job—it is a lifelong commitment to equity, dignity, and national integrity.

Taken together, Carrillo's experiences—as a Marine, a law enforcement officer, a state policymaker, and a civic leader—form a holistic understanding of how democratic institutions succeed or falter. His insights offer a sobering, urgent, but ultimately hopeful vision for public service at a time when its very foundations are under strain.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Thank you for joining me today. So, what are the immediate strategic risks of replacing seasoned National Security Council officials with political loyalists?

**George Carrillo:** Yes. Particularly concerning is that national security and foreign policy decisions require continuity, expertise, and coordination across agencies. When these roles are filled by political appointees with limited relevant experience, as in certain instances during the Trump administration, it can undermine the national security strategy.

National security is inherently complex. Effective operations require collaboration between federal agencies, such as the FBI, CIA, Department of Defense, and the Department of State.

These entities must coordinate intelligence gathering, operational logistics, and diplomatic communication, often in rapidly changing environments.

You need individuals with operational, diplomatic, or military experience who understand interagency processes and can act with precision and foresight. Appointing individuals without such knowledge, including some with media or partisan political backgrounds, introduces strategic risks. For example, some NSC appointees under Trump, such as political operatives and media personalities, drew criticism for lacking relevant expertise.

Recent reports from within the Department of Defence indicate ongoing concerns about leadership vacancies and policy instability. Such disarray can have real implications for defense readiness and diplomatic positioning.

This trend represents a significant risk to national safety. Leadership choices at the federal level can have a direct impact on Americans' security. This was evident during the Trump administration, which saw high turnover in national security roles and tensions with career officials. There is concern that a second Trump term or similar leadership style would repeat these patterns.

This political oscillation between administrations and parties should not interfere with the integrity of the executive agencies. Regardless of whether a Democrat or Republican is in office, key national security positions should be filled by individuals with demonstrated qualifications and leadership capacity.

These agencies, particularly those involved in defense and intelligence, require professionals who can lead under pressure and possess a deep understanding of the mission. The national defense relies on structured, multi-agency collaboration. When politically driven change management interrupts that structure, it can compromise the effectiveness of entire operations.

Having worked in government myself, I've seen that every time a new administration enters—whether at the state or federal level—there's often significant disruption. This constant churn undermines stability, and with instability comes a loss of institutional credibility.

**Jacobsen:** Given the volatility of today's international order—with recurring crises and sudden geopolitical disruptions—how does a diminished level of institutional competence hinder our ability to adapt and respond swiftly? In what ways does this erosion of expertise slow down decision-making and make those responses less effective?

**Carrillo:** It opens us up to attacks—whether on foreign soil or at home. The lack of cooperation and the breakdown in intelligence gathering severely limit our ability to defend ourselves against future threats.

Trump's selections for cabinet positions and national defense leadership are highly disarrayed. The individuals hired under Peter Hegseth—his pick for Secretary of Defense—raise significant concerns. There is an absolute lack of clarity and coordination, making us vulnerable to exploitation.

If we are attacked overseas, we could face a difficult situation. The question becomes: How are we going to respond? Is the intelligence we are gathering credible? Do we have the mobility and

logistical readiness to mount a proportionate and timely response? These are the uncertainties we are dealing with.

**Jacobsen:** When institutional competence erodes, intelligence failures aren't just more likely—they become more dangerous. In your view, what are the most critical intelligence gaps that are likely to widen? While lowered competence can be discussed in broad strokes, it often takes on specific shapes. Where do you see the most acute vulnerabilities forming—particularly in areas where the American public could face the greatest risk?

**Carrillo:** One significant risk is our current understanding of Russia's threat, particularly to European nations, and how that threat could directly impact the United States.

Another is our relations with Arab countries. What Trump is doing now is deeply concerning. He has accepted gifts from foreign nations, which raises questions about the ethics of those exchanges and how they might entangle him or align him with specific actors in the Middle East. That compromises our credibility and complicates our diplomatic relationships.

And then there's the threat that the American people often do not see: Who is planning an attack on the United States right now? We know that plans are constantly being developed against us globally. Are we properly allocating resources to get ahead of those threats? Many of us, including myself, do not have confidence that the current leadership is truthful or transparent about what is happening domestically and abroad.

**Jacobsen:** What are the implications for NATO? The European Union seems to be taking more assertive steps toward military and defensive independence from the United States, even within NATO member countries. What are the consequences of the deeply rooted intelligence, defense, and military ties among NATO countries?

**Carrillo:** You can see it on their faces whenever Trump talks—NATO allies are visibly concerned.

I agree with the president on a few points, such as the expectation that all NATO countries should contribute their fair share financially. That is a legitimate discussion. However, the alliance goes far beyond finances. NATO's core tenets include intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and a collective commitment to defend one another against shared threats. Those require mutual trust and strategic stability.

Currently, I want to believe that the United States will continue to stand by its NATO partners and that our commitment will be guided more by principle than by dollars and cents. But with this administration, it is hard to predict. What NATO needs now is to keep moving forward with unity and purpose, regardless of the unpredictable nature of U.S. leadership.

NATO needs to demonstrate, especially within Europe, that it will not allow Vladimir Putin to continue acting as the aggressor, seizing territory from Ukraine. The burden is also on the United States to determine how we will participate. Will we stand by our oldest and most reliable NATO partners, or will we retreat and try to avoid conflict, which often only delays and worsens future crises?

What I see in President Trump is the repetition of past mistakes. We are reliving the same missteps that led to greater global instability, similar to the hesitation that preceded the United States' entry into World War II. Many historians argue that had we joined sooner, the war would have ended faster with fewer casualties.

I also see shades of Richard Nixon's approach—this idea of isolating ourselves while trying to posture as dominant. The result is a looming disaster regarding NATO solidarity and military readiness as we weaken our alliances through trade wars, aggressive rhetoric, and a general shift toward authoritarian-style leadership.

He operates under the mentality, "We're the United States—no one can touch us." That is arrogant. I do not think our NATO allies, nor should they, appreciate it. I believe Europe will need to respond with strength and signal that there is new leadership in the free world, possibly emerging from within Europe itself.

Ideally, the United States should remain the leader of the free world, but currently, we are not demonstrating a presence that inspires trust or confidence.

**Jacobsen:** While attending the 69th Commission on the Status of Women at UN Headquarters in New York, what struck me wasn't just what the United States said—but what it didn't. On American soil, the most revealing insights came not from official remarks but from informal conversations. I met a group of Canadians—each of us had arrived independently—and we found ourselves voicing the same unease: "Are we safe here?" That question lingered, even for me. I later spoke with three women—two African, one a Muslim Canadian—and each shared legitimate concerns about personal safety while in the U.S.

That, I think, is telling. My second key takeaway was about how the world views the United States. Increasingly, the global community is no longer seeking a hegemon. There is a growing recognition of America's duality—its strengths and its profound flaws. Rather than a rigid top-down leader, people see the U.S. more like a windbreaker goose in a V-formation: not commanding from above, but guiding from within. Yet under the current administration, there's a sense that the lead goose is drifting to the rear while Europe is quietly taking the front—particularly on issues like human rights and moral leadership within their respective spheres.

Given all this, what's your sense of how Americans see the world right now? Do they recognize this perceptual shift from abroad, or are they still imagining themselves in the lead?

**Carrillo:** It depends on who you ask, to be honest.

From a global perspective, the United States is not currently well-regarded; however, this depends on the context.

What worries me most is the way we are forming relationships right now with authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-Un. That signals a troubling shift in values and alliances. It alienates our traditional partners and undermines the global trust that the United States once commanded.

We seem to speak nicely about authoritarian leaders while speaking terribly about our democratic allies. That is deeply concerning—not just for Americans but the world. When the so-called leaders of the free world appear to be cozying up to autocrats, it sends the wrong message.

I did not necessarily agree with the previous approach, which avoided dialogue altogether. We should continuously pursue conversation and bring people to the table. However, I do not believe Trump's approach is the right one. It is a snowball effect: now, he is changing how we engage with foreign partners and talk about foundational values like human rights and dignity.

At the same time, domestically, using the phrase "diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)" is suddenly seen as negative. So the question becomes: "What do we stand for as a country anymore?" We are losing sight of our core American identity.

Jacobsen: Canada?

**Carrillo:** Yes—Canada. I appreciate the current prime minister's approach. It is professional but firm. His recent response to President Trump was a good example of maintaining dignity while showing strength. That kind of leadership earns respect.

Many may consider Canada to be the most stable and respectable leader when people think of North America today. Canadians know how to represent themselves and foster authentic partnerships. Meanwhile, the U.S. can come off as arrogant, as though having the biggest economy or the strongest military entitles us to dominate.

But every great nation in history has eventually crumbled. George Carlin once joked, "Because you have the most flavours of Rice-A-Roni doesn't mean you're the greatest." Exactly.

That is how I feel as an American. I can only imagine how others around the globe now perceive us.

When I served in the military, people genuinely saw America as a beacon of hope. I do not think that perception holds in the same way anymore.

**Jacobsen:** What words come to mind when you think about the current makeup of the administration? I am trying to remember the Japanese term for the "front face" a group shows to the public.

**Carrillo:** You might think of *tatemae*—the public face, as opposed to *honne*, the private truth.

In any political system, yes, there will be internal disagreements. However, just as in a family, those discussions should occur behind closed doors. You have media relations and public events to present a unified front because you represent millions. It is not just politics—it is diplomacy and responsibility.

As for the second Trump administration, the words that come to mind are rebellious and vindictive. That perception stems not only from Trump's mugshot following his criminal conviction but also from the language he uses, like discussing the military toward domestic protests or threatening political opponents.

These are dangerous narratives in a democratic society. This increasingly feels like a revenge tour—not a campaign rooted in service or vision. One of the most important values instilled in the military is the concept of accountability.

**Jacobsen:** We've seen cases where Signal groups of prominent journalists and publishers coordinate the release of classified or sensitive material to the public—and in many instances, there appears to be little to no accountability. Misleading statements are sometimes made in advance. And then, once the facts emerge, no one is held responsible. The issue simply fades from view, swept under the rug.

Contrast that with the military context. As you know, U.S. service members operate under a dual legal system: civilian law and the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). The UCMJ tends to be far less lenient—particularly in a country like the United States, where the legal system is already highly punitive. If a service member breaks the law, they can face consequences under both frameworks.

So what would happen if a higher-ranking officer—say, a major or above—were to violate the law? How would that accountability process unfold in the military, and how does it compare to the virtual impunity we often see in civilian or media settings?

**Carrillo:** You're right. In the military, there's a higher standard, period. And because that standard is higher, if you make a mistake, especially as a ranking officer, you are held accountable under the UCMJ. The system does not spare you. It is intended to maintain discipline, order, and trust within the chain of command. You can lose your rank and pension and even face imprisonment. There is absolute and enforceable accountability.

What we see now in the civilian sphere, particularly among political appointees and cabinet-level officials, is that they are not held to the same level of accountability. In most cases, the worst that happens is dismissal or quietly resigning.

However, there has been virtually no accountability system in the Trump era, not even for Trump himself as Commander-in-Chief. That is where the Supreme Court got it wrong, especially in its recent ruling that a sitting president cannot be prosecuted for actions taken while in office. Trump has interpreted that as a blank check to do whatever he wants, unconstrained.

Now, he governs almost entirely by executive order. Even when those actions violate the Constitution, they become a matter of legal debate rather than immediate consequences. And in that legal gray zone, no one can stop him in real-time. There's no enforcement mechanism.

Take the case of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, an undocumented immigrant who was deported. A federal court ordered the administration to bring him back, and Trump's team ignored the ruling. There has been no consequence for that defiance. Nothing could be done.

We are in a constitutional crisis, even though the administration may deny it. We are allowing a sitting president to violate the Constitution he swore to defend. The judiciary's failure to enforce clear limits has created a precedent of unchecked executive power.

**Jacobsen:** How does all this impact the morale and retention of career national security professionals?

**Carrillo:** Right now, morale is incredibly low. There has been significant turnover, and what is particularly disturbing is the number of positions being cut, especially within our national security infrastructure. And interestingly, these cuts are being made across all agencies.

They're trying to funnel more money into certain agencies, but many career professionals realize it is time to retire. If you are not politically aligned with the president, you likely will not have a job—you will be dismissed.

This is happening across the government. The people doing the real work—career civil servants—have continuously operated independently of partisan politics. I recall being in public service: it didn't matter who was president. We never talked about politics. We focused on the mission and the job at hand.

But now, regardless of job performance, people are targeted for their political affiliations. That is not how a professional, nonpartisan civil service should function. Dismissing people based on party loyalty rather than merit threatens the integrity of government institutions.

**Jacobsen:** Let's close on a lighter note. What are some of your favourite presidential quotes?

**Carrillo:** From Trump?

**Jacobsen:** From any president.

**Carrillo:** One of my favourite quotes is from John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." That quote has stayed with me throughout my life.

I have worked in government, served in the military, worked as a police officer, and later in social services. I have always tried to give back, represent underserved communities, and defend the ideals this country is supposed to stand for.

That quote captures the spirit of public service. It has guided how I live my life: How can I give back? How can I serve my country or my community?

**Jacobsen:** George, thank you so much for your time and expertise. It was an absolute pleasure to meet you.

**Carrillo:** Thank you. I appreciate it.

# The Gospel According to Mark Driscoll: Masculinity, Control, and Reinvention

2025/06/08

Today I'm joined by Ashley Darling, a former member of both Mars Hill Church and Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona—two congregations shaped by the distinct theology and culture of New Calvinism under Pastor Mark Driscoll. This movement fused rigid doctrine with a stylized vision of masculinity, casting male dominance as both the spiritual mandate and an evangelistic strategy.

In our conversation, Darling examines the gender politics and cultural dynamics of New Calvinism, interrogating how Driscoll's rebranding of "biblical manhood" sanctified control, authority, and aggression as divine virtues. She speaks candidly about the systemic harm to women—ranging from normalized abuse and enforced silence to lasting psychological trauma. Darling also details how Driscoll leveraged public relations and theological rhetoric to rehabilitate his image in Arizona, sustaining a model of leadership cloaked in repentance but resistant to accountability.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Ashley, can you help unpack those two ideas for us—what is New Calvinism, and how was masculinity used in its missionary efforts?

**Ashley Darling:** Yes. These are connected but distinct ideas. New Calvinism was a movement that emerged in the early 2000s, characterized by a resurgence of Reformed theology among younger evangelicals. It was deeply influenced by thinkers like John Piper, Tim Keller, and later, Mark Driscoll and Matt Chandler. At its core, it affirmed traditional Calvinist doctrines like predestination, total depravity, and the sovereignty of God. Still, it presented them in a modern, culturally engaged, and often emotionally restrained way.

Although New Calvinism didn't outright ban women from theological discussions, it was rooted in a complementarian framework that assigned distinct roles to men and women. Leadership, especially in the church and home, was reserved for men. That theology, over time, shaped the culture of churches associated with the movement.

One thing that attracted many men to New Calvinism was its emphasis on structure, clarity, and what some saw as a more rational, no-nonsense theology. It avoided the emotionalism or ecstatic spirituality often found in charismatic churches. Instead, it offered something more intellectual and systematized. For many men, particularly those who felt alienated by more emotive expressions of Christianity, that was compelling.

Mark Driscoll, in particular, combined intellectual Reformed theology with a hyper-masculine, confrontational style. He was one of the few high-profile pastors to openly challenge the "feminization" of the church. He encouraged MMA-style aggression and rugged manhood and positioned male headship as essential to both spiritual and cultural renewal. In doing so, he created a platform that attracted young men seeking purpose, authority, and a sense of identity.

**Jacobsen:** And when we talk about masculinity being used as a kind of missionary tool, or even as branding—how did that function in his church, and why was it so effective, especially in contrast to churches with predominantly female congregations?

**Darling:** That's a great question. At its core, it was marketing, and Mark Driscoll knew it. His background in communications played a role. He understood that he had to speak their language to build a church that attracted young, unchurched men. He framed Jesus not as gentle or meek but as a fighter, a carpenter, a man's man. He used masculine imagery to frame spiritual leadership, fatherhood, and theology.

In evangelical churches, it's common for women to outnumber men. Driscoll flipped that by appealing directly to male identity. And here's the strategic part: if you get the men, statistically, the family often follows. So, it was also a pragmatic approach to church growth.

But we have to be honest—there was also a financial incentive. If you follow biblical tithing, converts tithe ten percent of their income, supporting the institution. So, targeting men wasn't just theological but structural and economic. Driscoll's model was successful, but it came with a cost.

At Mars Hill and Trinity Church, the desire for strong leadership sometimes evolved into authoritarianism. When power becomes a defining theological virtue rather than humility or service, it can open the door to abuse.

**Jacobsen:** And so, if you could expand on the role of power and how it was framed within these churches, there were men who already felt they had power and seemed to be reinforcing it among their peers or even over their wives. But there were also others, as you've noted before, who carried deep emotional wounds. How did Driscoll's approach speak to both groups?

**Darling:** Yes. For the men who already felt they had power—those who were always trying to assert it in front of their guy friends or over their wives—Driscoll's message validated them. It confirmed, "Yes, I am doing this right by lording my power over those I see beneath me."

But it also spoke powerfully to another group—men who carried deep, unprocessed father wounds: emotional neglect, constant criticism, or the sense that they were never good enough. For them, Driscoll's framework offered an emotional escape. Instead of confronting that pain, they could trade emotional vulnerability for power. That's a compelling exchange, especially for men in the church who were taught to suppress emotion.

Mark Driscoll brought "authenticity" and "honesty" to this equation. He would say things like, "You men are weak. You're effeminate. You're failing in your God-given duty to lead your family." It was deliberately confrontational. And in marketing terms, he was hitting the pain point. The classic strategy: "You don't have X because you're not Y."

Whether it's fitness or finances, that's a familiar technique—aggravate the pain, then offer a solution. Driscoll applied that same model to masculinity and spirituality. He would shame men; even at its best, that system was still driven by shame.

But it worked because many men responded, "Yes, I need to stand up. I need to be a man of God." And Mark Driscoll came in offering "truth," no sugarcoating. That was compelling for many guys, especially in contrast to what I would call the Hillsong movement.

Hillsong churches were deeply emotional at the time. You'd walk in and be enveloped in lights, music, tears, and speaking in tongues. Every service felt like a spiritual spectacle. Mark Driscoll stood in violent contrast to that. He rejected it outright.

He said, "F*** that." That kind of emotional display? That's effeminate. That's for the women. Let them have it at their conferences. But we—*we're men*. We come into church to be strong. He painted Jesus as a badass, sword-carrying man and called other men to embody that same energy.

It was, honestly, considerable big dick energy—aggressively so. And it appealed to the broadest base of men in the church then. Even those outside the church found a sense of safety in it. They could come to church and not feel like it was a weakness or like they were caving to their wife's demands. They could go and feel *better* about themselves.

However, it was ultimately a self-serving model. You weren't going to church to worship. You would get your ego stroked to feel like you were the big man on campus, at home, and in public.

A post shared by Pastor Mark Driscoll (@markdriscoll)

**Jacobsen:** Critics of this, to give them their due, have called this a form of "performative masculinity." Would you agree? And how would you unpack that critique?

**Darling:** Yes, I would agree. It *has* to be performative.

Because underneath all that posturing, there's pain that's never addressed. The model doesn't leave space for vulnerability. So the performance becomes the substitute for authenticity. You put on the role of the strong man, the leader, the protector—but you're never really invited to be known for your weakness. That's not biblical masculinity. That's branding.

**Jacobsen:** Because for men, especially married men, the highest standard of manhood in the church, regardless of denomination, often remains marriage. That remains the pinnacle of masculine identity. So when these men come into church with their wives and begin lording their manhood over them, it gives them a clear sense of identity, power, and self-worth. But that dynamic doesn't function without women participating in it. The other side of the equation must also be emphasized for it to be effective.

**Darling:** For that model to function, women had to be taught to "fall in line." So Mark Driscoll would either say directly or have his wife, Grace Driscoll, say things to women like, "Submission is beautiful. It's not less than; it's just different." That message was a significant theme.

One of the most dangerous teachings, particularly for married couples, was the idea that women owed sex to their husbands. That was emphasized repeatedly. And it was incredibly harmful, especially for women who were already in abusive relationships with their "good Christian husbands." Women who were already enduring physical or emotional violence were now being told that God obligated them to offer their bodies, regardless of consent or safety.

And that's the core issue. It wasn't just a pastor's opinion—it was positioned as divine truth, framed as if *God Himself* was saying it. To that point, one of the key indicators that Mars Hill had cult-like characteristics was how closely Driscoll's words were placed alongside, or even equated with, the voice of God. That stems from the New Calvinist framework. Within that structure, if you were the pastor, you weren't simply someone who interpreted or explained Scripture. You were seen as a *mouthpiece for God*. That was the role.

So when Driscoll stood at the pulpit and said, "You're not a man if you're not leading your wife in this way," or "If she thinks she's in charge, something's wrong," or "If your wife isn't happily and enthusiastically giving you sex at every opportunity, you're failing as a husband"—you *believed* that was coming from God. Because he was the pastor, and in that environment, the pastor's voice carried a sense of divine authority. That's where it became hazardous.

**Jacobsen:** Let's dig into that last point a bit. What happened when someone started to question these ideas? Do you not necessarily question the pastor directly, or even the junior pastors, but within the community setting or your own home, say, to your husband?

**Darling:** You would be ostracized. The response was: Why would you question that? And this is where Calvinism gets cold, rigid, and binary. It's all black and white.

Ironically, many people in New Calvinist circles consider themselves scholars, deep theological thinkers. For example, my ex-husband had his master's degree in theology from Liberty University, which is well-known in the United States for its religious studies programs. He was drawn to that intellectual framework.

So, if you tried to raise a concern or disagree, you weren't met with openness. If they acknowledged your point, it would come as "I can see how *you* would think that. If I were in your position, I might think that too." But it always ended with, "Let me introduce you to higher thinking."

That was the default response. It wasn't a dialogue but a subtle form of dismissal wrapped in intellectual superiority.

You learn to go along with it because they would talk to you in circles. Ultimately, dissent was framed as dissent against God. Mark Driscoll elevated himself to the voice of God within his community and implicitly empowered that same mindset in the men under his teaching.

These men were commanded to be the spiritual leaders of their homes. That meant they were expected to teach their wives and children about theology, interpret Scripture, and set the tone for the household's spiritual life. It positioned them as the final authority, not just regarding leadership but regarding access to spiritual knowledge.

So, if you, as a woman, wanted to explore something outside the narrow teachings of New Calvinism—maybe a different theological perspective or a more inclusive spiritual framework—and you brought that up to your husband, it was framed as rebellion. Because those men had been taught that *they* were God's designated mouthpiece in the home, disagreeing with them was often treated as disagreeing with God Himself.

**Jacobsen:** What about something you mentioned earlier—charismatic continuationism? That's a phrase people may not be familiar with.

**Darling:** Yes, so charismatic continuationism is the belief that the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament—like speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing—*continue* to this day. That's in contrast to "cessationism," which holds that those gifts were given in the early church to authenticate the gospel and were later withdrawn.

There is considerable debate within Christian circles about this. Most Calvinists, including traditional Reformed churches, are cessationists. They believe those gifts ended with the apostolic age. However, the charismatic and Pentecostal traditions affirm that those gifts are still active and accessible.

Mark Driscoll pivoted on this. Toward the end of his tenure at Mars Hill, and especially during his relaunch at Trinity Church in Arizona, he began embracing more charismatic elements. He partnered with Charisma Media and released *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, emphasizing prophetic impressions and phrases like "God told me…" So, he transitioned from a hardline Reformed stance to something more hybrid—part Calvinist, part charismatic.

**Jacobsen:** Let's place this in context. Most people today know Driscoll as the pastor of Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona. But before that, he was the founder and public face of Mars Hill Church in Seattle. Can you walk us through the timeline of Mars Hill's rise and fall and its rebirth, so to speak, in Arizona?

**Darling:** Sure. So Mars Hill Church was founded in 1996 in Seattle and gained momentum in the early 2000s. By 2010–2012, it was one of the fastest-growing churches in the U.S. Mark Driscoll had become a national voice in the New Calvinist movement. This was before the advent of short-form content like TikTok or Instagram Reels, so the primary way to access his teachings was through YouTube sermons or podcast downloads from the Mars Hill website.

He wasn't charismatic in the Pentecostal sense—not initially. His sermons were aggressive, bold, and highly structured, drawing in a large number of men with the appeal of strong, unapologetic leadership.

That said, many *women* also found his message compelling—but for different reasons. To put it bluntly, if you were a "pick-me girl," you probably loved Mark Driscoll. Because if you played by the rules—if you submitted, stayed sexually available, and supported your husband without question—you were praised. You were worthy of being "picked." And I say that with self-awareness. That was me.

**Jacobsen:** So Mars Hill collapses, but Driscoll reemerges in Arizona. After his resignation in 2014 following multiple allegations of spiritual abuse, authoritarian leadership, and financial misconduct, Mars Hill dissolved. A few years later, Driscoll resurfaced in Scottsdale, Arizona, founding Trinity Church. Why Arizona?

**Darling:** I can only speculate, but it's a red state with many transplanted evangelicals, a high rate of churchgoing households, and very little institutional memory of what happened in Seattle. It was a fresh start for him, but not necessarily a fresh *approach*.

**Jacobsen:** Quick clip point of clarification here, Ashley. "Pick me" is an American colloquial term. It is sharp and evocative—but for those outside the U.S. context, can you define it? What exactly is a "pick-me girl"?

**Darling:** Sure. A "pick-me girl" is someone who craves male attention so much that she'll say or do whatever she thinks will appeal to men. She'll agree with anything they say and laugh at all their jokes—her whole vibe is, "Pick me! Pick me!" It's a kind of performative femininity centred entirely around male approval. And within the church context, that identity can easily align with specific teachings on submission, modesty, and obedience to male authority.

**Jacobsen:** Now, moving from that to a broader theological frame—let's talk about the link between doctrine and praxis, specifically around the concept of "father hunger" and what, from an external perspective, might look like hypermasculinity. Internally, it's often framed as "authentic manhood" or "biblical masculinity." Is that a fair characterization? And what's the relationship between those ideas and the gender constructs taught in this theology?

**Darling:** Yes, that's a fair framing. So, stepping back, in the 1990s, culturally, we were starting to see a lot more visibility and public acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, especially in the wake of the AIDS crisis in the '80s. That decade had pushed many queer people into hiding. However, by the 1990s, a shift had occurred through television, film, and legal protections toward greater social inclusion.

And the church, especially evangelical Christianity, tends to be reactive to culture rather than proactive. As this shift was occurring in society, the church responded defensively. This was also the rise of the so-called "apologist era," and debates began to center around what were perceived as the two most significant threats to Christian morality: abortion and homosexuality.

At the same time, churches began realizing that closeted gay people were already part of their congregations. So, new questions emerged: Does your church affirm LGBTQ individuals? That divide became very public very fast.

Now, a lot of the cultural stereotypes—especially in America—frame gay men as "effeminate." In conservative evangelical circles, any perceived proximity to that stereotype, even among straight men, being soft-spoken, gentle, artistic, and emotionally expressive was utterly unacceptable. It wasn't just about sexuality. It was about *masculine identity*.

So when Mark Driscoll came on the scene, what he offered was a kind of aggressive, exaggerated masculinity that repackaged the most toxic aspects of male behaviour as *holy*. He said: "This is what it means to be a man of God." He took this idea of "father hunger"—men's deep, unresolved pain from emotionally absent or abusive fathers—and filled that void not with healing but with dominance.

He told men that the church didn't have to be emotional or "feminine." It could be tough, loud, and gritty. For many men who had felt alienated from the church due to its emotional tone or were afraid of being perceived as soft or effeminate, this was a revelation. They were being told: "You belong here. You can be strong. You can be in control." So in a way, it was a rebranding of the church—away from its emotional, nurturing associations and toward something hard-edged and "manly."

There was even a joke in Christian circles back then: "Church is for women." It was a place where people cried, hugged, and became emotional. That was seen as feminine. Driscoll blew that apart and said, "No, church is for warriors. Church is for fighters." Many men bought into that vision, not necessarily because it was *spiritually true*, but because it permitted them to express power, anger, and dominance under the guise of godliness.

Mark Driscoll says, "This is what a real man looks like." He wasn't crying. He wasn't emotional—except when it came to anger. And that made many men sit up and go, "Oh. So, the worst parts of toxic masculinity are the best parts of being a holy man? Cool."

It was this unspoken permission: "I don't have to change anything about myself. I can take all these traits I already have—anger, control, dominance—and amplify them. Not only does that make me more masculine, it makes me more *holy*."

For many men, that was deeply affirming. Because we're all human, we want to feel in control. That's a primal need. We want to avoid death and feel like we have some agency in the world.

This brand of Christianity—Driscoll's version—offered both. Eternal security: "You don't have to worry about dying because you know what the afterlife holds." And immediate control: "Here's how to take charge of your life and household." That combination? It was brilliant marketing. And that's how he got them.

**Jacobsen:** Let's talk more about "head of household" or household headship—this idea that men are meant to provide, protect, and lead. These aren't unique ideas to Mars Hill or even to Driscoll. Figures like Steve Harvey, who blend Christian themes with cultural commentary, promote the same beliefs, especially in communities where traditional gender roles are emphasized. Women in those settings are highly motivated to adopt the model because the church exerts such a significant social influence. But if we narrow it down—let's say, within the Anglo-American evangelical framework—what does household headship mean in practice? What does it look like today?

**Darling:** Yes, "head of household" is aurally loaded. It has deep traditional roots. Historically, it referred to the man as the provider, the protector, the one who sets the moral and financial direction of the home. It was always paternalistic, but Mars Hill stripped away any nurturing aspect and repackaged it as more about dominance and control.

This wasn't about care or stewardship—it was about power. And that's important. The phrase had existed for a long time, but Mars Hill and Trinity Church reframed it in a way that felt like reclaiming something "lost."

Historically, yes, men were the hunters and providers, while women stayed home to tend to domestic responsibilities. However, as society changed, women entered the workforce, gained independence, and made financial decisions—these shifts were perceived as a *threat* to traditional Christian gender roles.

In response, a cultural and theological backlash ensued. The message became: "Men, step up. Take back the leadership of your homes. Reclaim your role." Simultaneously, you had second-

wave and third-wave feminism rising, and women were saying, “Actually, no. I’m the one leading this home. I make the money. I make the decisions.”

There was this deep tension—this ideological clash. What emerged from that was a surge of Christian literature, sermons, and workshops all focused on gender roles: what they “should” be, how to “restore” them, and how to “discipline” the home into biblical order.

The result was a kind of spiritual cold war happening in households. Women were increasingly independent, but men were being told that their very *godliness* depended on asserting control. That dynamic is still playing out today in churches across America.

**Jacobsen:** So there’s this kind of back-and-forth—men saying, “I want to be in charge,” and women responding, “The hell you are.” It created tension, right? A kind of ideological tug-of-war.

**Darling:** What we saw in the early 2000s—through figures like Mark Driscoll, Matt Chandler, Francis Chan, and others—was a collective attempt to reassert control within that gender dynamic. These were the intellectual pastors, the theological heavyweights of the New Calvinist movement. They asked: “How do we make this compelling for men to step up and lead again?”

The answer was to incentivize *them*. The message became, “If you take charge, you’ll be rewarded with power and sex.” So they went to women and preached, “Relinquishing your power is the most godly thing you can do. Give up your autonomy. Give up your consent.” That was the transactional framework: men lead, women submit.

They preached both sides of that coin. Women were already craving love and affirmation from their husbands. And when you sat in a Driscoll sermon and heard him gush about his wife, it was easy to get pulled in.

**Jacobsen:** There’s a whole TikTok trend mocking that, right? Pastors are standing at the pulpit saying, “My wife is so hot,” over and over again. It’s performative.

**Darling:** Yes, 100 percent. There is a specific genre on TikTok where people parody this. Mark Driscoll would get up and say, “My wife—she’s so hot. I love her. God, she’s beautiful. My wife is hotter than yours.” And he meant it. There was even a moment where women in the congregation echoed that, like a weird sort of competition.

And women *bought into* that narrative. Because here was this pastor—moderately attractive, sure—but married way out of his league, and worshiping the ground his wife walked on *in public*. Women saw that and thought, “God, if my husband listens to this guy, maybe he’ll talk about me that way too.”

That’s how they got the women. That’s why I say if you were a “pick me” girl, you were highly susceptible to that theology. You were already willing to trade some autonomy for perceived love and admiration.

**Jacobsen:** The way I’m hearing it, from the social and theological trends of that brand of evangelicalism and the feminist responses, there’s no *balance*, no mutuality, no conversation. “I’m in charge.” “No, I’m in charge.”

**Darling:** It's this classically American pendulum swing—from one extreme to another. There's no room for nuance—the more complex the framing on one side, the more extreme the reaction on the other. You had hardline feminism developing in response to hardline patriarchy. Then, even more reactionary masculinity is being built to defend that patriarchy.

**Jacobsen:** And then Mars Hill collapses. And Trinity Church rises.

**Darling:** Yes, the whole dynamic was—and still is—deeply unhealthy. What's fascinating and disturbing is how forgiveness was used to justify Driscoll's return. He had built something enormous, then burned it down. Yet, within a few years, he re-emerged in Arizona, planting Trinity Church as if nothing had happened.

**Jacobsen:** So the question becomes: what's the social mechanism by which someone can crash a movement of that scale and then be accepted again—by a new congregation—as if the past doesn't matter?

**Darling:** That's exactly it. There's a deeply embedded notion in evangelical circles of "grace" that, when weaponized, allows spiritual leaders, especially male ones, to escape accountability. They'll say, "He's repented. We've forgiven him. Let's move on." But the people harmed by his leadership? They're often still reeling. Still silenced. Still dismissed.

So you see, it's not actual repentance or restitution—it's *rebranding*. He's back with a name change, a location shift, a few new catchphrases, and boom. The theology remains unchanged, as does the model. Only the platform has.

Pastors are excellent at crisis PR. They know how to slip out of almost any situation. And that's precisely what Mark Driscoll did—he victimized *himself* throughout the entire collapse of Mars Hill.

Instead of taking responsibility, he spun the story and said, "This is spiritual warfare." That's a classic Christian playbook move: when accountability surfaces, blame Satan. Say that the backlash is demonic opposition. That tactic works *every time*—it deflects criticism and repositions the leader as the one under attack.

We were trying to hold him accountable. We were saying: "You can't treat your staff like this. You can't treat your wife like this. You can't scream at people and call it leadership." But he refused to accept responsibility. Many of us were sending emails, trying to speak out and create some form of collective accountability within Mars Hill, because we *knew*what was happening wasn't right.

Still, some people remained die-hard defenders. And here's where it gets alarming: some people will sit in church, and if a pastor gets up and says, "I had sexual relations with a 15-year-old, but I repented," they'll applaud. They'll say, "Yes, thank you for your honesty. We forgive you." The amount of blanket, uncritical forgiveness in the church can be toxic.

That's what happened with Driscoll. He launched a massive PR campaign, framing himself as a spiritual warrior under attack. He claimed that those of us trying to hold him accountable were tools of the enemy. That is textbook cult leadership. It follows the same trajectory as almost

every other cult: the inner circle gets wise to what's happening, toxic behaviours come to light, and when they're exposed, the leader deflects everything.

They say, "I didn't know," or "None of this is true. Could you believe it? This is an attack on our mission." They paint themselves as martyrs, and that's precisely what Driscoll did.

**Jacobsen:** It wasn't just a collapse—it was a rebrand. And he needed time to plan that.

**Darling:** Yes. It took him a minute to start a new church because he had to do market research. He had to ask, "Where do I still have support? Where will people still come and listen to me preach?"

The answer was Republican states, places with a strong evangelical base and some cultural insulation. Arizona was a strategic choice. It's a red state with conservative values, but it's still on the West Coast and has a veneer of progressiveness in certain pockets. For Driscoll, that was the *perfect* happy medium.

And yes, some people from his Mars Hill days—including myself—lived in Arizona. He knew that. He likely counted on people coming out of curiosity, or even offering him grace and a second chance.

So, his reemergence wasn't just accidental. It was a well-orchestrated crisis public relations campaign, and it worked. He rebuilt. He rebranded. And he still has a substantial following, especially among men who continue to buy into the same rigid, patriarchal model he's been selling for years.

**Jacobsen:** I don't think it came up directly in our earlier conversations, but I've been writing about Trinity Western University—a kind of Canadian counterpart to Liberty University. That finance-based, fundamentalist institutional world—that's the environment I grew up around.

**Darling:** That makes sense. It's a parallel path. The structures are similar—the theological rigidity, the emphasis on hierarchy, the idealized gender roles, and the blending of religious power with institutional branding. Whether in Canada or the United States, these conservative evangelical subcultures unfold similarly.

**Jacobsen:** I recently wrote an article based on Reddit commentary and mainstream articulation. In one thread, someone mentioned a disturbing account of sexual assault on a Christian campus. One commenter said, "I know at least five women who have been raped on campus, but they're afraid to say anything—so they don't."

For women in that kind of community, especially those who are married and are being told that submission is a divine command, how many would you say are dealing with PTSD from sexual assault but are either hiding it or feeling unsafe talking about it?

**Darling:** A lot. There are *many* women in that position. Dr. Jessica Johnson conducted extensive ethnographic research on Mars Hill Church, focusing on the experiences of women within the congregation. Dr. Rose Madrid-Swetman was a pastor and adjunct faculty member at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology who provided pastoral care to individuals who left Mars Hill Church.

She interviewed women who had been in those marriages—women who had internalized the Mars Hill theology and were dealing with severe emotional trauma. Some of them were still married. Others were divorced. But the core theme was the same: these women were conditioned to stay silent.

Even now, on social media, you'll see waves—every so often, the "hate train" for Mark Driscoll comes back around, and more women come forward with their stories. They talk about being married to men who fully bought into that theology—hook, line, and sinker. Some of these men were emotionally or sexually abusive. And their wives were told to stay, to submit, to serve.

And yes, some women are still in that environment, still saying, "My pastor will protect me." But many have left, and they're just beginning to process what they've experienced.

**Jacobsen:** That's horrifying.

**Darling:** Yes. It is. It's important. It needs to be heard.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you so much. This conversation—it's been a long time coming. I've been waiting for this opportunity for, I don't know, probably seven years.

# Christian White Nationalists are Thriving in British Columbia

2025/07/03

**Sir James Douglas**, often hailed as the Father of British Columbia, looms large in the collective memory of the community where I was raised. His legacy is not just remembered—it is revered. Yet to venerate him without scrutiny is to ignore the dissonances embedded within his story. As Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company and later colonial governor, Douglas blurred the lines between private profit and public duty. He granted monopolistic privileges to his own company and family, weaving personal gain into the colonial fabric.

His governance reflected this entanglement. By imposing property-based voting qualifications, Douglas effectively disenfranchised broad swaths of the population. The treaties he negotiated with First Nations—especially the Douglas Treaties—were signed under suspect conditions, often on blank sheets with terms inserted after the fact. Indigenous signatories, unaware of the full scope of these agreements, unknowingly surrendered immense tracts of land. During the gold rush, Douglas's heavy-handed licensing policies and delayed responses to conflicts such as the Fraser Canyon War did little to protect Indigenous communities. Violence erupted, and villages burned. He also recruited Black settlers from California, less out of egalitarianism than political expediency, hoping to secure their loyalty in a shifting demographic landscape.

Douglas, a man of Guyanese descent married to a Cree woman, defies easy categorization. His legacy is not a matter of simple condemnation or celebration but a duality of ambition and exploitation, idealism and self-interest. That tension remains deeply embedded in Fort Langley today—a township marked by contradictions and inhabited by a curious coalition of hipster intellectual farmers, affluent Evangelical Christians, and politically active citizens whose reach extends into federal spheres.

I speak from within this complexity. Having served on heritage committees in both Fort Langley and the broader Township of Langley, I can attest to how seriously locals take the idea of heritage—even when that heritage proves inconvenient. One elder committee member, a Euro-Canadian woman, once snapped at me during a meeting, "I know who you are," a remark steeped in latent hostility and social surveillance. These tensions are not abstract; they have shaped my lived experience.

The more recent history of Fort Langley intersects uncomfortably with the Evangelical presence centered around Trinity Western University (TWU). That story begins with a scandal. In 2005, TWU faced a human rights complaint involving **Neil Snider**, the longest-serving university president in Canadian history. Snider had helmed the university for 32 years, overseeing significant growth and cultivating a powerful institutional identity. Within the Evangelical lexicon, he was believed to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But his 2006 retirement came on the heels of sexual misconduct allegations. Internal reports and media scrutiny questioned the administration's handling of the matter. The community, understandably embarrassed, responded with a familiar instinct: concealment. I understand this impulse; religious institutions often circle the wagons when confronted with such crises. A colleague's mother once rationalized Snider's behavior to me by saying, "He was lonely,"

referencing a deceased or estranged spouse. Such rationalizations reveal much about the elasticity of excuse-making within tightly-knit religious communities.

ChristianWeek's article "Trinity Western resolves human rights complaint" documented the complaint and its settlement, prompting internal policy reviews. Interviews with former faculty hinted at deeper discontent. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) conducted an inquiry that focused on TWU's Community Covenant—a document that faculty were required to sign, affirming a particular set of religious beliefs and behaviors. Scholars William Bruneau and Thomas Friedman raised alarms about how such requirements might suppress academic freedom and skew hiring practices. Their findings remain a touchstone in Canadian academic discourse.

By 2011, TWU and similar institutions became acutely aware of their public image. That year, the Institute for Canadian Values ran a controversial advertisement opposing LGBTQ-inclusive education, supported by the Canada Christian College and published in the National Post and the Toronto Sun. The backlash was swift and widespread. While the Post issued a retraction, the Sun did not.

From 2005 to 2015, TWU faced mounting internal and external pressures. Archival memos and former administrators revealed dissent over enforced religious conformity. Most Christian universities in Canada are private and Evangelical, and TWU, as the largest among them, became a symbol of these tensions. Repeated journalistic efforts to speak with dissenting students and faculty were mostly rebuffed, though a few agreed to off-the-record conversations. They painted a portrait of an institution governed by rigid executives, indifferent to internal diversity and unresponsive to calls for reform.

By 2016, discontent spilled into online spaces. Students and alumni criticized the university's treatment of LGBTQ individuals. One former student described an environment where coming out was fraught, even dangerous. Another pointed to a "thriving rape culture," claiming that multiple victims remained silent out of fear they would be disbelieved or shamed.

Maclean's examined these themes in its article "**The end of the religious university?**" linking early administrative policies to the mounting legal and cultural backlash. The BBC **reported** on TWU's attempt to open a law school, branding it a homophobic institution. These reports laid the groundwork for what would become a landmark Supreme Court case.

Xtra Magazine, a Canadian queer news site hosted on Medium, in-depth coverage featured searing testimonials from LGBTQ students, revealing systemic marginalization. Legal journals dissected the Supreme Court decision that ultimately denied TWU accreditation for its law school, arguing that the Community Covenant clashed with constitutional equality rights. The ruling, a decisive 7-2 verdict, signaled a turning point.

In response, TWU amended its policy to make the Covenant optional for students. However, as a Reddit poster, purportedly a current student, pointed out, the decision was driven by accreditation pressures and business concerns, rather than a moral awakening. Faculty and staff remain bound by the Covenant, and TWU's mission to produce "godly Christian leaders" remains intact.

From 2019 to 2021, TWU's cultural inertia persisted. In a piece for Xtra, Carter Sawatzky **noted** that the policy change had little impact on the campus climate. "TWU has doubled down on its social conservatism, at the expense of queer students like myself," he wrote. One particularly jarring episode involved a student who attempted suicide and was subsequently expelled. TWU cited "inability to self-regulate" as justification. Mental health professionals and advocates viewed the move as indicative of systemic failings. The Toronto Star and CBC News covered the case, placing it within a broader national concern about campus mental health.

In 2021, the Langley Advance Times reported that TWU denied a student group's request to host an LGBTQ storytelling night. Sawatzky again spoke out, emphasizing that sharing personal narratives should not be controversial. Yet, the university deemed the event incompatible with Evangelical values.

The scandals deepened. CBC News reported on the conviction of a TWU security guard for manslaughter. The article, "Former guard at B.C. university found guilty of manslaughter," detailed an incident from Fall 2020 involving "a man wearing all black" who had wandered into student residences and was seen rifling through belongings. Security guard Howard Glen Hill confronted the intruder, Jack Cruthers Hutchison, and, according to reports, struck him in the head, pulled his hair, and spat on him. When police arrived, Hill was "in a neck restraint, limp and unresponsive." He died two days later in the hospital. Hutchison was ultimately charged with manslaughter. TWU responded with a brief statement: "The university has no comment on the court ruling. TWU's commitment has always been to safeguard our campus community, and we continue to provide a safe place of learning for all our students."

Langley Union, in its piece titled "**Trinity Western University President's Son Linked to Prolific White Nationalist Account**," reported on digital forensic evidence tying the TWU president's son to a high-profile white nationalist social media presence. While the son's actions must be considered distinct from those of his father and the institution, the connection nonetheless raised serious concerns and made headlines.

The account associated with the son posted incendiary content, including statements such as: "I believe in a white future. An Aryan future. A future where my children will make Indian Bronson shine our shoes. Where brown people cannot secure a line of credit, Black people pick cotton. We will win – this is what we fight for," and "I am a colonialist. I make no effort to hide this. I believe in worldwide white supremacy."

The Nelson Star added further dimension to the regional picture in its report, "'**Alt-right' group uses Fort Langley historic site as meeting place**." The article described how a local pub in Fort Langley had become a regular gathering site for an openly self-identified white nationalist group. As one former supervisor once observed to me, "I don't know what is wrong with we the white race." That may be a sentiment rather than a structured ideology, but it still reveals a troubling cultural undercurrent. This entire microcosm offers a glimpse into the broader and often uneasy intersections of race, religion, and identity in Canadian sociopolitics—particularly among some Evangelical enclaves where allegations of racialism, if not outright racism, occasionally surface.

TWU officially promotes a policy called **Inclusive Excellence**. Its public statement reads: "We aim to promote a consistent atmosphere of inclusion and belonging at TWU by establishing a shared commitment to diversity and equity founded in the gospel's truth. Christ came to save, reconcile, and equip all people (Rev. 7:9), and the incredible array of gifts God has given us is evidence of his creativity, beauty, and love of diversity." Yet, one administrator reportedly commented informally that a particular event was "not in line with Evangelical values."

These contradictions are not isolated to Langley. In the United States, the legacy of racial exclusion within Christian education remains evident. Bob Jones University, for example, banned interracial dating until the year 2000, sparking debates about federal funding and accreditation. In Australia, Christian colleges have come under scrutiny for enforcing policies that exclude LGBTI+ students and faculty. The United Kingdom has also experienced friction between faith-based institutional codes and national equality laws, though generally with less intensity than in Canada. Meanwhile, American Evangelical influence continues to spread in Canada, particularly in Indigenous communities. Some Canadian churches, for example, now have Ojibwe pastors—a sign of both cultural engagement and contested terrain.

A Xtra Magazine piece titled "**The Painful Truth About Being Gay at Canada's Largest Christian University**" chronicled the experience of a gay student, pseudonymously called Jacob. When peers suspected him of being gay, they sent messages like, "We hate everything about you, and you better watch your back because we are going to kill you on your way to school." Despite the threats, Jacob said, "I loved the community here so much that I did not want to jeopardize those relationships." That's what it means to live in the closet—not out of denial, but out of preservation.

Another student, Corben from Alberta, explained, "My parents, I think, kind of wanted Trinity to be for me sort of like reparative therapy, which is why they would only help financially with this school." Former Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau **led a legislative effort** to ban conversion therapy—a pseudoscientific practice aimed at altering a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Since 2016, the practice has been outlawed in Malta, Germany (2020), France (2022), Canada (2022), New Zealand (2022), Iceland (2023), Spain (2023), Mexico (2024), Greece (2024), and Belgium (2024). Still, that was TWU, and Fort Langley—where I grew up—is inextricably tied to this institution and its shadow.

The Langley Advance Times **reported** on a blackface incident in a 2017 Chilliwack school yearbook, part of a "mock trial." The justification, like others before it, relied on the thin defense of context. Just as excuses were made for Snider's legacy, they surface again in episodes like this. British Columbia has not been immune to clerical sexual misconduct, either. The Archdiocese of Vancouver became the first in Canada to publicly name priests involved in decades of abuse. Other prominent cases, including those of Michael Conaghan, Damian Lawrence Cooper, and Erlindo Molon, reflect a broader pattern of clerical exploitation and institutional evasion of accountability. I wish this weren't the truth, but it is the history we have.

In 2022, a TWU dean resigned under pressure for her stance on gender issues. A Reddit user alleged that TWU administrators had "tried to make her leave her position as dean because she…

stated she was an LGBTQ+ ally," only to follow her resignation with impersonal bureaucratic statements of loss and regret.

From living there, I can attest that excuses like these are often recycled in local social media threads. Community intimidation is real, and it's not just socially corrosive—it's bad for business. What's being protected isn't morality, but image. As many LGBTQ students at TWU have experienced, and as many outsiders to the broader community have learned, the resistance isn't grounded in theology; it's rooted in public relations. Langley is a wealthy place in a wealthy country, and money often determines what is spoken, forgotten, or buried. The Fort Langley Night Market was **repeatedly shut down** due to vandalism and alcohol-related incidents—another example of how image management takes precedence over genuine community repair.

Discussions continue online about the quality of a TWU degree. One comment **captures** the sentiment: "So before anyone says 'it's an immigration scam,' it's not—but most of TWU's programs are essentially useless for immigrating to Canada. Any non-degree program from a private school disqualifies you from applying for a PGWP. That said, it does offer a couple of degree programs that may lead to one."

Local disputes are not confined to institutional campuses. Brandon Gabriel, an Indigenous artist, and Eric Woodward, a developer and now mayor, have been at odds for more than a decade. Their conflict echoes older colonial dynamics. Gabriel represents the pushback against erasure; Woodward has **painted buildings pink** in protest, a showy symbol of his frustration with regulatory and cultural resistance. Woodward has his supporters—those eager for development—and his detractors. He embodies another complicated figure in Langley's contemporary political landscape. As ever, a minority of loud actors project their theatrics onto a quieter public that endures the consequences.

Between institutionalized LGBTI discrimination, local blackface scandals, and latent homophobia, Langley is not an outlier—it's a microcosm. **Christian white nationalist undercurrents** are not unheard of here. That they exist alongside the veneration of a colonial founder who was a mixed-race timocratic administrator married to a Cree woman is no contradiction at all in Canada—it's continuity. It shows how unexamined myths crystallize into social realities.

Welcome to Langley—a light introduction. Home, sorta.

# The Long Campaign to Free Belarus's Political Prisoners

2025/07/05

Tatsiana Khomich is one of Belarus's most prominent human rights advocates, a co-founder of the **Free Belarus Prisoners** organization, and the designated representative for political prisoners on the Belarus Coordination Council. She is also the sister of Maria Kalesnikava, a celebrated opposition figure who was sentenced to 11 years in prison in September 2021. In the years since her sister's arrest, Khomich has become a tireless voice on the international stage, traveling across Europe to press for her sister's release and draw attention to the more than 1,400 political prisoners languishing in Belarusian jails.

Khomich often speaks of the trio of women who helped ignite Belarus's 2020 pro-democracy movement—Kalesnikava, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, and Viktar Babaryka—and the brutal crackdown that followed. While the prison population remains alarmingly high, more than 300 detainees have been released since mid-2023, many of them elderly or gravely ill. These releases, Khomich notes, have been driven by strategic diplomacy and international pressure, including efforts like the #**ReleaseNow** campaign.

Still, she warns, progress is fragile. In her view, only sustained diplomatic engagement, targeted sanctions, and ongoing humanitarian negotiations can offer protection to those behind bars—particularly as **Belarus** continues to navigate the gravitational pull of larger geopolitical forces.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is your focus on human rights?

**Tatsiana Khomich:** My sister, Maria Kalesnikava, was sentenced to eleven years in prison in September 2021. In 2020, Maria was one of the leaders of the opposition campaign supporting Viktar Babaryka, a key presidential contender who was barred from running and later sentenced to fourteen years on politically motivated charges. After Babaryka's arrest, Maria joined forces with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the wife of another jailed candidate, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, and Veronika Tsepkalo to form the now-iconic "women's trio."

This trio symbolized peaceful resistance and inspired mass protests across Belarus. Despite the scale and spirit of the movement, the regime responded with brutal crackdowns. Five years later, Maria remains imprisoned, and over 1,400 political prisoners are still held in Belarusian jails, according to human rights organizations such as Viasna.

We are advocating for engagement and humanitarian negotiations with the government to save lives. Many political prisoners suffer serious health issues—at least 29 are known to have cancer, diabetes, or cardiovascular conditions. Eight prisoners have died in custody, and the actual number could be higher.

There are also approximately 170 individuals who face extreme social or family hardship due to political repression. In some cases, both parents are imprisoned, leaving children in the care of grandparents or forcing them into exile. Others affected include the elderly and people with disabilities. The oldest known political prisoner, Aliaksandr Lubeika, is 77 years old.

Minors have also been prosecuted: some were arrested as young as 16. Over recent years, international attention on Belarus has waned, even as the humanitarian crisis has deepened. The policies pursued by Western governments so far have not led to the mass release of prisoners or significant political change.

That said, there have been some modest positive developments in the past year. Since mid-2023, the government has pardoned or conditionally released over 300 prisoners. These releases have occurred periodically, and the most recent group, comprising 16 individuals, including some with severe health conditions, was freed recently.

We urge democratic nations, including the United States and the European Union, to play a more active role in supporting humanitarian negotiations. In the past six months, multiple visits by U.S. diplomats to Belarus have coincided with the release of detainees, including 14 individuals with U.S. citizenship or ties, such as Siarhei Tsikhanouski. Others released include citizens of Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Japan. While not all of them are classified as political prisoners, many were detained under politically repressive circumstances.

These actions show that while repression continues, the government is also sending signals of willingness to improve relations with the West. Strategic humanitarian engagement could help secure more releases—and ultimately save lives.

Moreover, we have heard it clearly in recent months through their communication, especially from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and even from Lukashenka himself. I believe this is one of the ways that has made the release of political prisoners possible. Belarusian human rights organizations initiated and publicized a campaign in democratic countries under the name #ReleaseNow.

It was primarily Belarusian human rights and civil society organizations that developed a declaration—a manifesto—urging democratic governments, as well as the Belarusian authorities themselves, to engage in negotiations. The goal is simple: to save lives. Some political prisoners are in such poor health that they do not have time to wait.

I hope that my sister will be included in one of the future rounds of releases.

**Jacobsen:** Like yourself, many family members have been deeply inspired by years of advocacy and research.

**Khomich:** Yes, for a long time, I believed—and we talked about it—that the prominent opposition leaders from 2020 would be the last to be released. However, we now see that it is not necessarily true. The recent releases show that change is possible. It is a significant step for us and a strong outcome of international negotiations.

We also understand that Belarus is part of a wider regional crisis—the war between Russia and Ukraine—and that the geopolitical context is shifting. This shift is creating space for discussions and negotiations that could lead to the further release of political prisoners.

**Jacobsen:** Are there comparable international cases? For example, Venezuela?

**Khomich:** Yes. In Venezuela, political prisoners have also been used as leverage or part of negotiations. Some of those cases date back even longer than ours, predating 2020. These people are often silenced in similar ways.

**Jacobsen:** And in those situations, do they follow a similar pattern? Long criminal sentences, political repression, years of silence, and then, eventually, selective releases?

**Khomich:** Yes, that is the pattern. Political prisoners are often sentenced under vague or inflated charges. Many become seriously ill or die in prison. Then, after years of suffering, some are released—but the struggle remains constant. In Belarus, we had never seen this scale of repression before. Ten years ago, there were only a few dozen political prisoners. Now there are over 1,400. Even back then, the leaders of the movement were usually the last to be released, typically after serving nearly their entire five-year sentences.

By "term," I mean the period between presidential elections. At that time, there was also a warming of relations between Lukashenka and the West. Now, the situation is entirely different. The broader regional context, particularly the war in Ukraine, has a significant impact on developments in Belarus.

Regarding sentencing, there are more than 140 political prisoners in Belarus who have been sentenced to more than ten years in prison. Some have been given sentences of up to twenty or even twenty-five years. As I mentioned, there are individuals over 60 or 70 years old who are facing life sentences. For them, it is effectively a death sentence.

Yes, there have been some releases this year, especially of older adults with severe health conditions. However, it is not enough. We need more.

We should not have illusions about the nature of these transactional relationships. Some of these diplomatic visits were made possible because they were publicly linked to discussions around sanctions and the exchange of political prisoners.

So yes, I think it is time to use all available instruments—including sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and international pressure—as tools to secure the release of political prisoners. These instruments are not an end in themselves; the goal is to improve the situation and, ultimately, end repression in Belarus.

We also need to be realistic. Lukashenka is likely to remain in power for some time. It is currently challenging to envision a complete democratic transition. However, incremental improvements—such as releasing prisoners and halting political repression—are possible. It will take time, but I do believe it can happen.

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

# Šukrija Meholjic on the Legacy of the Srebrenica Genocide

2025/07/06

Šukrija Meholjić is a Bosniak survivor of the **Srebrenica genocide** who fled in 1992, eventually resettling in Norway. A self-taught artist and published author, he began drawing caricatures in a refugee camp in 1993 as a way to process the trauma of war and displacement.

Over the past three decades, Meholjić has created hundreds of illustrations and authored three bilingual books in Bosnian and English, with his work exhibited internationally. Through both his art and writing, he commemorates the victims of genocide, confronts denialism, and grapples with the nationalist forces that continue to threaten Bosnia's fragile unity. His work is at once deeply personal and profoundly political—a therapeutic act of memory and a public plea for vigilance.

In this conversation, Meholjić reflects on the haunted legacy of Srebrenica, describing it as a "city of ghosts," scarred by irrevocable demographic loss and the enduring shame of global indifference. He speaks of the moral imperative to remember—through education, memorials, and official recognition—and warns of the dangers posed by ongoing denial and secessionist rhetoric. His testimony, like his art, is a form of resistance—a personal reckoning and a collective call to never forget.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What is the legacy of the Srebrenica genocide?

**Šukrija Meholjić:** That is complicated. After the genocide, Srebrenica became a city of ghosts. Only a small percentage of the original population remained. The majority were killed or displaced during the genocide in July 1995.

However, the persecution and killings of Bosniaks in eastern Bosnia had begun much earlier, during the war that started in 1992. Between 1992 and 1995, thousands of Bosniak civilians were killed in towns and villages across the region, including in areas like Bijeljina, Zvornik, and Vlasenica.

The genocide in Srebrenica in July 1995 marked the most brutal and concentrated episode of mass killing. Over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were systematically executed by units of the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska under the command of General Ratko Mladić. It was the worst atrocity in Europe since World War II and has been legally classified as genocide by both the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice.

Some older survivors did return to Srebrenica after the war, but the town had changed irreversibly. It became a place of silence and sorrow, with more dead commemorated than living remembered. The demographic destruction and post-war neglect contributed to ongoing depopulation.

Life after the war has been brutal. Today, young people who return to the area face high unemployment, inadequate healthcare, limited educational opportunities, and a lack of cultural and economic infrastructure. As a result, many continue to leave Srebrenica.

Srebrenica is no longer what it once was—and it is unlikely to regain its former vitality any time soon. That is all I can say for now. I am unsure whether I will continue discussing this issue or move on to something else.

**Jacobsen:** How did this evolve for you?

**Meholjić:** I am one of the original residents of Srebrenica who had to leave in the early stages of the Bosnian War back in 1992 before the siege of Srebrenica began. Two days before severe fighting reached the town, I evacuated with my family in an attempt to save them. Eventually, it became clear that returning was impossible as the war escalated.

We first went to Croatia, where we lived for a year, and then relocated to Norway, where we still reside. Every summer, we return to Bosnia and Herzegovina—especially to Srebrenica.

During those visits, we usually go to honour the victims. It is a painful and challenging experience not to see my friends, neighbours, and those I lived with for so many years. Instead of shaking their hands, I now visit the Memorial Center in Potočari to pay respects to their remains.

This is the reality that life has imposed, but we must continue forward. We must never forget Srebrenica—for the sake of those who were killed, for those of us who survived, and for the generations yet to come.

We must remember Srebrenica because it represents the deepest wound in the history of Bosnia. It is the tear on Bosnia's face. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that the genocide in Srebrenica was not an isolated act. Mass killings and ethnic cleansing of Bosniak civilians took place in other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well—such as in Prijedor, Foča, Višegrad, and elsewhere.

We must remember Srebrenica in every possible way to prevent such crimes from ever happening again—anywhere in the world.

I will not remain silent, but I will not destroy myself through my illustrations and caricatures, which I began creating in a refugee camp in Norway. I drew my first caricature shortly after arriving in Norway in 1993. From then on, I continued drawing them, one after another.

In a way, it became a personal therapy—an outlet to release the emotional burden I carried, filled with questions: Why? Why did all of this happen? Why did my neighbour—someone I had sat with and shared food and drink with—suddenly take up a gun and shoot at my friends and me?

It was initially incomprehensible to me. However, the political agenda behind it became clear. The leadership in Serbia, under Slobodan Milošević, sought to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina into two parts—collaborating with Croatian President Franjo Tuđman. Their goal was to eliminate Bosnia and create a "Greater Serbia" and a "Greater Croatia."

That plan, however, never fully succeeded. Although the international community imposed an arms embargo on all of the former Yugoslavia in September 1991, the former Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and its vast arsenal were essentially handed over to Serbian leadership. This gave the Serb forces a significant military advantage.

Meanwhile, in 1993, the Croatian Defence Council, with support from the Croatian Army, began attacking Bosniaks in parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina—furthering the joint goals of Tuđman and Milošević.

In response, the Bosniaks—along with all patriots of Bosnia and Herzegovina—united to form a comprehensive defence force. This led to the creation of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which mounted effective resistance against both Serb and Croat forces.

At one point, this army advanced close to Banja Luka, a key stronghold in the region. When it seemed that the liberation of Banja Luka was near, Milošević appealed to U.S. President Bill Clinton and diplomat Richard Holbrooke, who was leading peace negotiations, to stop the Bosnian forces and initiate peace talks to end the war.

Tragically, that request was granted. The war was halted, and the **Dayton Peace Agreement** was signed. In retrospect, had the offensive continued, Bosnia and Herzegovina might have been preserved as a unified, sovereign state—without the internal divisions that persist to this day. Thirty years later, the successors of Milošević's ultranationalist policies still deny the genocide and continue to push for separatism.

Today, leaders of Republika Srpska—one of the two constituent entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina—are attempting to secede. Though Republika Srpska has no legal right to unilateral independence, its leaders, with the backing of Serbia, continue attempts to divide the country and destabilize its sovereignty.

**Jacobsen:** What did the international community do well?

**Meholjić:** First of all, what did they fail to do correctly? The United Nations had its representatives in the so-called protected area of Srebrenica–Žepa. This zone was established in 1993, not 1995.

There were United Nations peacekeeping troops stationed there, mandated to protect the civilian population. However, when the Bosnian Serb Army, under the command of Ratko Mladić, attacked the Srebrenica enclave in July 1995 and carried out genocide against the population—not only in the municipality of Srebrenica but also in surrounding areas—the UN troops did not intervene. They did not prevent or stop what the Bosnian Serb soldiers were doing to the civilians.

Srebrenica was left entirely alone in the world. The international community, particularly the United Nations, failed to take action. They stood by and did nothing. Moreover, that failure will remain a moral burden for the rest of their lives.

We will never forgive the United Nations representatives for that failure. Because had they truly wanted to protect Srebrenica, not a single life should have been lost during the genocide of 1995. Unfortunately, it took until very recently for the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution officially designating July 11 as the International Day of Remembrance of the Srebrenica Genocide.

That is a significant step. We thank them for that because now no one will be able to say, "I did not know about Srebrenica," or "I did not hear that a genocide happened there," or "I did not

know who the perpetrators were," or "I did not know who the victims were." The resolution makes it clear: July 11 will be marked internationally as a day of remembrance for the genocide when close to 8,000 Bosniak men and boys from Srebrenica were systematically murdered.

That is a significant achievement. From now on, this day will be commemorated worldwide. It will not be forgotten. It will become part of school curricula, institutional memory, and educational programmes. It will shape how future generations understand and remember this tragedy.

Moreover, it will serve as a starting point to prevent similar genocides from occurring in the future anywhere in the world.

The next step must be for the international community—though still present in Bosnia and Herzegovina—to show greater resolve and capacity to help maintain Bosnia and Herzegovina as a sovereign, unified state.

Currently, I cannot say I am satisfied with the level of political engagement among the international community. Too often, it relies on working through the internal leadership of Bosnia's institutions—while ignoring the persistent obstructions from political elites.

We face daily political obstruction, particularly from the ruling elite in Republika Srpska and also from nationalist elements in the Croat-majority areas of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. These factions consistently block the implementation of constructive decisions at the state level—decisions that would move Bosnia and Herzegovina in the direction it desires and deserves.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is geographically in Europe. It is in the very heart of Europe—but it is **still not a member of the European Union**. It must become a member.

We must all work toward that goal. If **Bosnia and Herzegovina** can join the EU, many problems in both the Balkans and Europe will be alleviated. I repeat: I am not satisfied with the international community's impact on the present situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a centuries-old country with a history that stretches back more than a thousand years.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a turbulent and dynamic history, but it has always existed. It is the oldest of all the neighbouring countries in the Balkans. However, today, we live surrounded—both internally and externally—by forces that seek to divide Bosnia and Herzegovina into parts.

However, this will not happen. As long as we, the sons and daughters of Bosnia, live anywhere in the world, we will fight for our state—our homeland—because it is our only homeland.

As a citizen of Srebrenica, I contribute in the ways I can. I have been working for over 30 years on illustrations that depict the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing particularly on the genocide in Srebrenica, on proceedings at the Hague Tribunal, and other key decisions related to Srebrenica.

I have created over 500 illustrations and published three books featuring my work. These books are bilingual, in Bosnian and English. They are housed in libraries worldwide. I have also held 30 exhibitions of my illustrations.

People have responded positively to my work, which shows me that I am doing my part. I am not trying to ease the conscience of those within the United Nations, nor do I claim to have saved lives. However, at the very least, I want to help prevent such tragedies from happening again in the future.

Today, we are witnessing the proceedings at the International Court of Justice related to Gaza, where the international community is again struggling to prevent the daily killing of innocent civilians—whether by bullets or bombs.

I continue to write for various Norwegian news outlets, contributing information and perspective on what is happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have given my utmost because Srebrenica and Bosnia and Herzegovina live deeply within me. They run through my veins, and I will never stop.

I wish no harm on anyone, but what happened to us in Srebrenica and Bosnia and Herzegovina is unforgettable. It will remain part of our collective memory.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for your time.

**Meholjić:** Thank you for the interview.

# How Democracy Rewards the Pathologically Self-Interested

2025/07/12

Ross Rosenberg is an internationally recognized authority on codependency, **narcissistic abuse**, and trauma recovery. As the CEO and founder of the **Self-Love Recovery Institute**, he has become a trusted voice in mental health circles—an in-demand therapist, speaker, and expert witness. His breakout book, *The Human Magnet Syndrome*, has sold over 190,000 copies and been translated into 12 languages. In his latest work, *Codependency Cure*, Rosenberg introduces the concept of Self-Love Deficit Disorder (SLDD), a reframing of traditional views on codependency that blends clinical insight with accessible guidance.

With decades of clinical and teaching experience, Rosenberg's work offers a vital bridge between psychological theory and real-world application, helping individuals escape toxic relational patterns and reclaim a sense of self-worth. In this wide-ranging conversation with journalist Scott Douglas Jacobsen, Rosenberg examines the volatile intersection of narcissism, codependency, and politics. He argues that narcissistic traits—particularly covert narcissism—can offer distinct advantages in political life, enabling candidates to manipulate public perception and prey on voter insecurities.

Rosenberg connects SLDD to a broader vulnerability among citizens to propaganda, fear-driven politics, and cult-like political loyalty. He warns that the psychological spectacle of modern politics, amplified by social media and disinformation, erodes democratic resilience. To counter this, he calls for greater civic awareness, historical perspective, and psychological literacy as essential tools for recognizing manipulative leadership and safeguarding democratic integrity.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Ross, thank you for joining me today. Hello from Reykjavik.

**Ross Rosenberg:** Scott, it's great to talk to you again. We've had many conversations.

**Jacobsen:** Today, we're going to be focusing on politics, self-love deficit disorder, and narcissism. If you were to apply these analyses of individual psychology, how would you fit them into the **American political system**?

**Rosenberg:** Wow, that's a really big question. So, let me unpack what you just asked. So, you want to know how my ideas of codependency or self-love deficit disorder, the human magnet syndrome, and narcissism. People who follow me understand that the human magnet syndrome states that codependents are reflexively attracted to narcissists, and narcissists are attracted to codependents because they're inversely opposite. Their personalities match with each other. How do my human magnet syndrome and other related ideas relate to politics? Well, that's a big question. I look at politics as a business and a profession, and like all businesses and professions, the very best succeed and rise to the top. Those who cannot succeed, who lack the same talent, or who cannot find a way to meet and surpass their goals tend to struggle. And so, politics, by its nature, I define it as a job where you represent your constituents in a governmental position.

You speak for them, you advocate for them while representing the country, the city, the jurisdiction, the area that you come from, and you represent that. A politician must be selected and possess a certain personality trait, and none of them are mutually exclusive. None of them is

selfless. All successful politicians must figure out a way to make themselves appear attractive, to be seen as the person who will represent them and stand up for them. Therefore, they must create a persona that aligns with what they believe their constituents want and one that is more appealing than those of their competitors running for election. In essence, begin with narcissism, a self-centered approach to life where you think about yourself more than the needs of others. It helps in politics because if you're going to be elected, you have to make everyone aware of who you are and what you stand for. Well, that sounds narcissistic.

**Jacobsen:** Another aspect of adopting a persona is presenting yourself as something you're not —essentially, a kind of fabrication. How does this contribute to the construction of a false self?

**Rosenberg:** That is very dismaying and very upsetting for me and, of course, other people. It is endemic in politics that if you're going to win an election, you have to figure out a way to present yourself in a manner, in a fashion, that resonates with the people that you want to vote for you. You must continually reinvent yourself as a person who stands for and advocates for specific issues. And these issues change, devolving and evolving, so you have to keep changing yourself. And the person who does that well and keeps tabs on the pulse of their constituents, the people who are going to elect them, is going to get elected. And because what is important to Americans, Canadians, and whoever is listening to this podcast or YouTube video, it changes. It changes generationally. It changes culturally. It changes historically. So, politicians have to keep changing.

Suppose you're a person with a set of ideas and morals, and you have a specific vision that remains consistent throughout your lifetime. In that case, you won't get elected because people's ideas, needs, and wants change. Therefore, the person who can be malleable and change themselves, create or recreate their persona, and conveniently adjust their beliefs or lack thereof to match what they believe the voters want requires a certain personality type. And I don't think it's healthy. It's narcissistic, and it's very sad because these are the people who win elections.

**Jacobsen:** In the U.S., we often divide people into conservatives and liberals. Are there consistent personality traits that tend to align with either group?

**Rosenberg:** If we look at politics and we break down what is a liberal, what is a Democrat, or we break down what is a conservative, what is a Republican, and we go to what used to be the general ideas, the general descriptions, is that Republicans and conservatives represented big business. They wanted less government interference. They believe that if you are left alone, the forces of the economy drive the country to success and comfort. If there's too much government oversight and regulation, it becomes too bureaucratic and harmful to the creative process, which not only creates businesses but also businesses that create jobs, which in turn create money and spending, and this whole idea of financial success or the trickle-down theory.

By the way, I don't have a political science background, but that is what I understand as Republican and conservative, as it used to be. Now, let's look at liberals and Democrats. They believe that the government has a responsibility to all people, whether they're homeless, poor, mentally ill, independent of colour, or sexual orientation. It's a very open philosophy that emphasizes the importance of taking care of one another. And because it is so easy for humans

and local jurisdictions, cities, states, and governments to overlook this, they create programs and laws that are inclusive and consider people who are disenfranchised. And they believe that government programmes have to be created. People must be responsible for these programs so that they work and help those who can't otherwise represent themselves and achieve success.

Suppose you can accept this basic explanation of Democrats, liberals, and conservative Republicans. In that case, I have tried my best not to speak about them qualitatively differently. However, if you look at these two, you don't see them as bad but rather as different ideas. I read this in Neil deGrasse Tyson's book Cosmic Perspectives or something similar. And in this book, it just blew me away. He said Democrats and Republicans have a lot in common, but we never talk about it.

But I'm talking about differences. And if we talk about those differences, a person who takes care of others, who sacrifices themselves to help other people, not necessarily codependent, that's more pathological, is going to line up with liberal ideology and politics or consider themselves a Democrat.

A more self-centred person believes the world is better if everyone takes care of themselves and believes that is how we solve problems. We take care of our communities. We take care of our families. That will align with the Republican or conservative ideology. So, I believe that in extremes, now that we're looking at extremes, the extreme person who gives everything and doesn't take much for themselves is codependent. Well, the extreme of someone who takes everything and it's completely all about themselves, well, that's pathologically narcissistic. This is essentially my relationship compatibility continuum that I talk about in my Human Magnet Syndrome book, where I discuss codependence and pathological narcissism regarding the distribution of love, respect, and caring. Codependence, give it all away; pathological narcissists take it.

So if you accept my explanation about liberals and conservatives as far as how they see the world and what they believe how government can function, which is not dysfunctional, well, then I'm asking the viewers or listeners to accept, well, in the most dysfunctional sense, the most self-orientated are going to be the pathological narcissist and the most selfless orientated are going to be codependents. And in politics, pathologically narcissistic people do much, much better in getting elected than any person.

It is a valuable asset, which sounds terrible because what I'm saying is a personality disorder, which is a horrible thing for people, let alone anyone that's in a relationship with them; that becomes a benefit for the politician because it allows them without much empathy, without much inner turmoil, cognitive dissonance to mould themselves and shape themselves in any form possible to get elected, not feel bad about it and covertly try to represent your constituents in a beneficent, caring, decent way. But behind the scenes, they're just about themselves.

Those people get elected because they have it's a horrible paradox; they have the necessary pathological skillset to beat other people and to figure out ways to crush the other side while getting other people to like them and to vote for them. And by the way, this goes on both sides of the aisle. You can be a pathological narcissist and be a liberal. You can be a pathological

narcissist and be a conservative. As much as I say liberal politics aligns with people who are more orientated and conservative politics is more self-orientated, the person who has a personality disorder gets to invent themselves. And that's why I believe the term covert narcissism is a very important term when we understand politics and politicians.

**Jacobsen:** In politics, we have leaders, followers, and movements made up of both. How do tactics like fear, loyalty tests, and emotional manipulation within these movements reflect the psychological dynamics of narcissistic abuse or codependency?

**Rosenberg:** If we look at the history of humanity, I look at it as humans, by their very nature, are very selfish, territorial, and warmongering. Let's think of that and go back as far as we can to the furthest history we have humans as homo sapiens. We've been around for approximately 200,000 years. Still, modern humans can be traced back around 20,000 years, and written history begins about 10,000 years ago. From the very beginning of any historical representation of humans, whether it's cave paintings or actual writings by the Sumerians in cuneiform, I believe that we started wars and people conquered. There were constant kings' fights. It is human nature. I had a teacher once who joked that a few million years from now, if aliens discover Earth after we wipe each other out and the world out, they'll find archaeological remnants of humans and try to figure them out. They're going to go; what's wrong with these people? They fought all the time. They kept killing each other.

Well, if you accept that as basic human nature and that the part about loving and taking care of each other is an evolution of that, that is also a part of human nature, but it's not as strong, and it has less power to it, and it cannot ever beat the dominant, narcissistic, controlling, power-hungry forces in the world. And that is why these benevolent figures in society, who represent humanity, love, and caretaking, are upheld. We celebrate them, but they never really stick around for a while. They get assassinated. They get toppled. Something happens, and they become corrupt.

So if we understand that the forces in the world are more geared towards domination and control, the type of person who's going to be successful at that, and I neutrally use successful kind of, success is not positive, are going to be people that are selfish, self-centred, manipulative, who are covert narcissists or malignant narcissists who can shape themselves and get masses of people to believe that they represent them. They want to stand up for them. They aim to lead them and establish a concept of the mother country, the father country, the motherland, and the fatherland. And whether you're Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Gaddafi, Castro, or we go through all of these despots, these horrible humans who took control of their countries, they began by getting people to like them and support them.

How do you do that? Well, you have to be a covert narcissist, which is a narcissistic personality disorder and sociopath, or you have to be a sociopath, or what we call a malignant narcissist, which is a combination of narcissism, sociopathy, and paranoia. So sadly, these pathological traits give people the power and strength to be successful in politics or whatever it takes to rule or dominate people and countries. That's how I think it fits in with the whole idea of politics, narcissism, and codependency. It's a lot to think about.

**Jacobsen:** How might citizens with SLDD traits be more vulnerable to political disinformation, propaganda, or even cult-like political allegiance?

**Rosenberg:** Just to be fair, I think the people who are susceptible to propaganda are independent of their orientation or codependency, and can also be self-oriented or narcissistic. All people, regardless of their background or type, are susceptible to disinformation and propaganda because everyone has ideas about what they want in a government or what they need from it. And the narcissist politician, *In Sheep's Clothing: Understanding and Dealing with Manipulative People*, which is a great book by George Simon, who coined that term, well, if they can fool you and become the person that you believe represents them, well, they're going to vote with you. That applies to all aspects of my relationship compatibility continuum.

**Jacobsen:** You've suggested that individuals with certain personality disorders often succeed in political contests. What psychological warning signs should the public—not just constituents—watch for when assessing political leaders?

**Rosenberg:** The warning signs are not heeded. People want so badly to have someone protect them and represent them. And politicians are so good at activating wounds in a way that gets people to understand how much they're hurt and say, "Well, I represent you. I will stand up for you." And in a perfect sense, with a hypothetical, perfectly healthy politician, they're going to say the same thing. "This isn't good. I represent good; vote for me, and I will help you." Well, the narcissists are going to say the same thing. "This is what I will do to help you: good, bad, or otherwise." The necessary discernment is to gather historical information about this person and their record.

Voting for or upholding issues or promises they have made is crucial for discerning the difference between promises and follow-through, as well as their consistency. Because politicians continually reinvent themselves, and yes, they might say, "I stand for this, and I'm going to make sure that I vote for it and get it passed if elected," and they might do so. But what were they, say, five years ago, if they were a politician? Did they have the same belief set? And that's where you have to do your homework. And very few people want to do that. And that's very sad, but it's the truth. Very few people want to do the historical digging to find out who this person is, what their central beliefs are, and how consistently they pursue those beliefs in their job, compared to someone who keeps shifting and changing based on what they believe people want, so that they can get elected.

**Jacobsen:** Do you think social media has intensified these political dynamics? In other words, are we seeing age-old patterns in human behavior and political organization—only now amplified by the reach and speed of digital platforms?

**Rosenberg:** Absolutely. When I wrote the second edition of The Human Magnet Syndrome, I was upset about how the 2016 election unfolded, and it impacted a chapter I had written. And my publisher gave me some great advice, and he said, "The world doesn't want you to talk about politics, Ross. They want you to talk about psychology." And so, we took that part out of the book. However, my research revealed that social media has been instrumental in spreading information, disinformation, and propaganda in every election since 2016. There are countries

such as China, Iran, and Russia that invest millions, millions, and millions of dollars in creating disinformation through social media.

It was so intense and grandly organized that, according to the research I saw, they stated that if they could have eliminated the interference from other international players or countries, the election would have had a different outcome. That's important because if a powerful country believes that different US presidents will be more beneficial to them. They can sway the American public by 2% or 3% through disinformation on social media, then that can significantly alter the election's outcome. So, absolutely, 100%. Social media is a primary source of information for many people.

And unfortunately, a significant percentage of these people, although not a majority, do not fact-check. And that is sad. Millions of people will believe what they are told and will not seek countervailing information or evidence to either prove or disprove it. And most people, especially during the 2016 election and the subsequent election, obtained their political information from social media sources.

**Jacobsen:** Anything you would like to add?

**Rosenberg:** I'm passionate about it, but I rarely talk about it because I know that if people believe that one person is better than the other, you know, one political group is better than the other, people don't change their minds. If you go to a party and a Christian wants to get a Jew to change their religion, it never happens. A Republican will never get a Democrat to change their ideas. It just doesn't happen. If someone holds these beliefs, whether it's in religion, philosophy, or politics, they're unlikely to budge because of what one person says. I do a lot better in my life by just keeping my opinions to myself. But you, my friend, you're a troublemaker. So, I hope the people who are listening to this hear a balanced approach that is neither anti-Republican conservative nor anti-Democrat liberal, but more of an explanation of how narcissism or pathological narcissism impacts our politics and why that's not good for humankind.

**Jacobsen:** Ross, thank you very much for your time today. I appreciate your expertise.

**Rosenberg:** And everyone, this guy's smart, young, ambitious, and he will go wherever he needs to go to get information. You're now in Reykjavik, Iceland. Didn't you go to Ukraine to research the Russian-Ukrainian war? You've got a lot of courage, my friend.

**Jacobsen:** I went to Ukraine twice. The second book project is done. I have to format it and publish it. So, that's also upcoming.

**Rosenberg:** Thank you, Scott. The world needs people like you. And thank you for this interview. And it helps people understand politics or people in general. So, I appreciate it.

# Inside the UN: A Young Diplomat's First Look at Global Governance

2025/07/18

Sarah Sydra Anissa Faraoun, who holds a Bachelor's degree in Applied Human Sciences, recently completed a three-week internship at the UN Office in Geneva through U.P.I.C.E., under the mentorship of Ambassador David Fernández Puyana. Raised in a diplomatic household, Faraoun found the UN's atmosphere both welcoming and intellectually vibrant. She was particularly struck by a decolonization conference and a high-level session on Israel-Iran tensions—moments that underscored the weight of global diplomacy.

While not actively participating in protests, she witnessed peaceful demonstrations and came away convinced that young voices are too often sidelined in international affairs. A passionate advocate for diplomacy and global engagement, she admires the work of Pascal Boniface and draws inspiration from literature on personal development. As UN budget cuts loom, she's especially attuned to the uncertain future of unpaid internships and the accessibility of such opportunities.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Could you walk us through your personal and academic background? What drew you to the United Nations, and how did you secure this internship opportunity?

**Sarah Sydra Anissa Faraoun:** I currently hold a Bachelor's degree in Applied Human Sciences. As part of the graduation requirements for my degree, I was required to complete a three-week internship, totaling 90 to 105 hours. I was fortunate to undertake this internship at the United Nations Office in Geneva, in collaboration with U.P.I.C.E. (Unión de Promoción de la Identidad y Cultura Española), thanks to the support of Ambassador David Fernández Puyana. The internship lasted three weeks.

**Jacobsen:** Do you come from a family with a history in diplomacy or international affairs?

**Faraoun:** Not specifically with the United Nations, but I have always been in a diplomatic environment thanks to my parents, who are both Algerian diplomats. My father served in administrative posts in Paris, Tunisia, and Brussels. I was born in Tunisia and lived there for four years. We then moved back to Algeria for two years before relocating to Brussels for five years. Later, my father was again posted to Paris. Currently, my mother is serving as a consul in Grenoble, France, and my father is the Director General of Finance at the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Growing up in this environment has constantly exposed me to international diplomacy and enriched my understanding of global affairs.

**Jacobsen:** Having spent nearly three weeks immersed in the UN's Geneva operations, what patterns or dynamics have stood out to you—whether in the formal sessions or the day-to-day environment?

**Faraoun:** Yes, I just completed my internship at the United Nations. It ended on July 9th and began on June 16th, which aligns with the 59th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, currently taking place at the UN Office in Geneva. One noticeable trend is the collegial and international atmosphere. I found it easy to engage with representatives and meet new

people. Everyone is very open and welcoming, even with the cultural and linguistic differences we all bring to the table.

**Jacobsen:** Were there particular moments during the Human Rights Council or related events that left a lasting impression on you?

**Faraoun:** Yes, one moment that stood out was a session discussing the current tensions in the Middle East, particularly regarding the situation involving Israel and Iran. A high-level representative delivered a speech that drew significant attention from delegates and attendees. It was a moment that underscored the gravity of the geopolitical issues discussed at the UN and left a lasting impression on me.

**Jacobsen:** Did any specific speeches resonate with you—either for their content, delivery, or the issues they spotlighted?

**Faraoun:** Speeches that stuck with me? The first one I remember was during a side event—a conference on decolonization. It focused primarily on the Sahrawi people. We had the opportunity to hear from a lawyer, a professor, the ambassador of Tanzania, I believe, and an activist. It was the activist's speech that left the most profound impression on me. She shared that her husband had been imprisoned for ten years. Her testimony was incredibly moving. That was one of the speeches that resonated with me the most. There were others during different conferences. I would also say that it was deeply impactful when speakers addressed topics such as the right to education for women and human rights in Afghanistan.

**Jacobsen:** On my way to the UN, I came across a one-person protest. Have you noticed any larger or more significant demonstrations, either near the UN complex or elsewhere in Geneva? Or has the atmosphere remained largely calm?

**Faraoun:** By the way, I was invited to participate in one. Representatives from various associations encourage participation. However, I did not have the chance to join or fully witness a demonstration myself. I did pass by several protests that were held in front of the Palace of Nations. They were relatively calm.

Interestingly, the ambassador shared some information with me—not quite an anecdote, but a fact—about the fountains located directly in front of the palace. They are designed to prevent mass gatherings, helping to limit and control the size of demonstrations. So, it is good to know that this feature serves a purpose in maintaining order.

**Jacobsen:** From your vantage point, how would you characterize the way disagreements are handled between high-level international representatives during proceedings at the UN in Geneva?

**Faraoun:** Disagreements are generally handled quite diplomatically. Yes, they are addressed respectfully and with decorum. The key is always to seek a resolution to the issues at hand. That is the essence of diplomacy.

Currently, I am looking forward to an event primarily organized by Algeria, which will take place tomorrow—Friday, June 27th—from 12:00 to 1:00 p.m. at Place des Juges Femmes, within

the Algerian delegation. As an Algerian myself, I feel directly involved and eager to hear what will be discussed, what ideas will be presented, and what concerns will be raised.

**Jacobsen:** The UN is facing a budget shortfall, which has already led to cuts across various programs. Without getting into the politics behind it, what do you think the implications might be for internships, volunteer roles, and job opportunities for young people seeking a future in international work?

**Faraoun:** It could affect future internship opportunities. For example, in my situation, I am not paid. Therefore, I believe that for unpaid internships, the impact may not be significant—as long as the internship remains unpaid, opportunities may still be available.

**Jacobsen:** Over the past few weeks, what kinds of comments, concerns, or reflections have you heard from other participants or observers?

**Faraoun:** I have not necessarily heard frequent comments. It was quite varied. Opinions differ—so yes, quite varied. I do not have any particular frequent comments that come to mind.

**Jacobsen:** Do you have any favorite quotes that speak to internationalism, justice, or peace—words that have guided or inspired you during your time here?

**Faraoun:** A favourite quote? I am thinking…I am trying to recall the books I have had the opportunity to read.

**Jacobsen:** I keep returning to Gandhi's legacy every time I pass by that statue. Does that kind of symbolism resonate with you?

**Faraoun:** There is one. She is in one of my books, but I do not want to say anything inaccurate.

I tend to focus more on personal development books—those related to psychology and inner growth. Therefore, it is not directly related to the internship I am currently undertaking. However, I am also very interested in books on international relations, human rights, and geopolitics.

I like Pascal Boniface; his writing interests me a lot. I have had the opportunity to read several of his works. I am not writing any books at the moment, but it has always been a project that interests me—perhaps in the future, when I have gained more experience. I am currently reading *The Man Who Wanted to Be Happy* by Laurent Gounelle. So again, it is more focused on individual and inner development.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for your time.

**Faraoun:** You are welcome.

# When Pilgrims Become Targets: A Human Rights Officer on Jihadist Violence in Kashmir

2025/07/27

Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD), a non-governmental organization with special consultative status at the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), has long worked to spotlight the consequences of religious and ethnic violence in overlooked regions.

In this interview, conducted by one of its human rights officers, the organization discusses its latest advocacy work on Kashmir following the deadly attack in Reasi, Jammu and Kashmir, where Hindu pilgrims were deliberately targeted. Drawing from field reports and UN submissions, the officer outlines a pattern of extremist violence enabled by transnational jihadist networks—many with alleged ties to Pakistan.

GHRD emphasizes the urgent need for stronger accountability mechanisms within the United Nations framework, while also exposing the gendered tactics used to terrorize communities and dismantle their social fabric. With decades of advocacy behind them, they now warn that the threat is no longer contained within Kashmir's borders—it's metastasizing, with implications for global security. Through diplomatic engagement, documentation, and public awareness campaigns, GHRD seeks not only to honor the victims but to demand sustained international action.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** What exactly is being presented here today?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** I am a human rights officer at Global Human Rights Defence, an NGO with special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

**Jacobsen:** In relation to the recent terror attack in the Reasi district of Jammu and Kashmir, what broader themes are being addressed beyond the specific incident and its victims?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** We are here to raise awareness about the broader human rights situation in Jammu and Kashmir and, more importantly, to demand accountability at the international level. There is credible concern that terrorist groups operating with support from elements within Pakistan have carried out attacks like the one we saw in Reasi recently. We aim to bring these concerns to the attention of the international community and advocate for the establishment of accountability mechanisms through the United Nations and its various bodies and procedures.

**Jacobsen:** How has the response been so far—both from the public and within UN channels?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** The response has been modest—we have only been here for a few hours. This action is primarily focused on raising public awareness. In parallel, we have submitted detailed written reports and communications to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and other UN mechanisms. Unfortunately, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir often receives less attention due to the volume of global human rights crises. Our objective is to shift that attention and elevate the issue.

**Jacobsen:** Can you provide specifics about the victims of the Reasi attack? What made this incident stand out?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** In the Reasi attack, which occurred in June 2024, at least nine people were killed and over 30 were injured when militants ambushed a bus carrying Hindu pilgrims. What makes this incident especially disturbing is the apparent targeting of religious pilgrims. While investigations are ongoing, early reports suggest that the attackers may have had religious motives, given the nature of the victims and the context. This adds to a pattern of communal violence that raises grave human rights concerns.

**Jacobsen:** From your findings, what rationale or justification do the perpetrators offer for such attacks?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Well, it is a very jihadist, nationalist kind of situation we are talking about. It is part of the jihad—part of eliminating non-believers or those who do not fit within their ideological system. From what we have observed, these are armed militant groups. According to our findings, they have been financially supported by Pakistan for some time. Pakistan has also provided shelter to ISIS and al-Qaeda members for decades. That is why we are calling on countries—particularly members of the Human Rights Council—to cease this type of funding. The European Union, for example, has a programme called the GSP+ (Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus). It involves trade and financial support through association agreements. What we hope to achieve is a suspension or at least a thorough review of such support, based on human rights conditionality, so that terrorism like this can no longer receive financial backing.

**Jacobsen:** Given the support networks you've mentioned, is there credible concern that this kind of extremist violence could spread regionally or even globally?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Absolutely. That is always the risk with terrorism—it does not respect borders. The network is already expanding. We are seeing evidence that different governments have ties to it. What began in Pakistan is now affecting India. Moreover, of course, with the proper financial and logistical support, it could expand anywhere. That is precisely what makes it so threatening in our view—it truly could be global.

**Jacobsen:** How are these killings typically carried out?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** I do not want to go into graphic detail, but virtually every form of violence you can imagine has been documented. Victims have been shot at point-blank range, execution-style. While not specific to these recent attacks, we have seen beheadings and stonings in past instances.

**Jacobsen:** Would you say there is a clear religious or ideological component to this violence?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Exactly. These are jihadist methods—deeply rooted in an extremist religious ideology. The brutality is all too real and deliberate.

**Jacobsen:** Are there individuals who, out of fear or coercion, surrender or join the cause of these militant groups? Are there those who relent and join their cause to avoid being killed?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** I am not aware of any specific cases, but I can easily imagine that a deep sense of fear is instilled. The military in Pakistan wields considerable power, and we have seen many instances—not only related to terrorism but also involving the suppression of minorities, particularly in regions like Balochistan—where the crackdowns have been ruthless. This creates an atmosphere of fear across the country. I firmly believe that some individuals may turn to these organizations for a sense of security, something they are not receiving from their government, which is supposed to protect them.

**Jacobsen:** Besides military responses, what other entities—human rights organizations, policy actors, treaty bodies—are actively working to counter these networks?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Sadly, not many organizations are currently working on this issue, which is precisely why we are here. However, this issue falls under several international mandates. For example, there is the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. There is also the Committee Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Another relevant body is the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, which is especially important because enforced disappearances are a recurring issue in this context.

There are several international mechanisms available, but the key right now is advocacy. It is about ensuring that this issue stands out amid the many concerns these bodies face daily. These mandates also face limitations in terms of resources. What we are trying to do is amplify the voices of victims—many of whom can no longer speak for themselves—in the hope of achieving some measure of justice.

**Jacobsen:** Were any of the victims particularly prominent, or was this attack directed more broadly at ordinary civilians?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** I do not believe there were any prominent individuals among the victims, which, in a way, makes the situation even more disheartening. These were ordinary civilians. They were not politically active or involved in any movements. Most were simply family men—fathers.

**Jacobsen:** So the victims were primarily male?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Regular working men, yes. They specifically selected the men from the group.

**Jacobsen:** Why do you think men were specifically targeted?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** I believe it is about striking the country where it hurts the most. They selected the men based on whether they identified as Hindu. Then they addressed the women and said, “You are going to have to watch this. We are going to execute your husband. Then you go back to your government and tell them what we have done.” It is a tactic of intimidation. At the same time, it is about stripping the country of its human capital—its men—and traumatizing the women to inflict maximum psychological damage.

**Jacobsen:** Are there other details or patterns in this case that are important to highlight?

**Global Human Rights Defence:** Generally speaking, this was not an isolated incident. While this particular event gained media attention—especially with the brief escalation between India and Pakistan that followed—it is essential to recognize that such acts of terror happen almost daily, though often on a smaller scale. This conflict has been building for decades. What we saw is only the tip of the iceberg. There is far more to this than what meets the eye. That is why a simple ceasefire agreement, such as the one currently in place, is insufficient. We need a comprehensive investigation. We need stronger accountability mechanisms. That is the only way to prevent such atrocities from occurring again in the future.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for taking the time to speak with me.

# Foreign Money, Ethnic Violence, and a Nation in Ruins

2025/07/31

Nasir Hassan is a veteran Sudanese human rights advocate who has lived in Switzerland since 1993. As president of For Sudan, an NGO focused on humanitarian aid, Hassan speaks candidly about the devastating war engulfing Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—a group widely accused of atrocities, particularly in Darfur.

In this wide-ranging conversation, Hassan outlines the RSF's ethnic violence, foreign support from the United Arab Emirates, logistical coordination via Chad, and the catastrophic toll: over eight million Sudanese displaced. Urging immediate Western engagement, Hassan calls for a shift in international aid and policy to bypass sanctions and deliver direct support to those suffering on the ground.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Nasir, thank you for joining me. You're a longtime human rights defender from Sudan living in Geneva. Can you share more about your background—your work in Switzerland and your experience in Sudan?

**Nasir Hassan:** I have lived in Switzerland since 1993. I am the president of For Sudan. Our organization focuses primarily on humanitarian aid. Right now, Sudan is **experiencing a devastating civil war**. This war is destroying the country. Many people have been killed or displaced.

The RSF was originally a government-backed militia known as the Janjaweed during the Darfur conflict. It was later formalized into a paramilitary force under the Sudanese government. However, in April 2023, tensions between the SAF and RSF escalated into full-scale war, with both sides vying for control of the country. The RSF has been accused of committing widespread atrocities against civilians, particularly in the Darfur region, including ethnically targeted violence against non-Arab communities. I firmly affirm that the legitimate authority to defend and protect Sudan lies with the internationally recognized government and the national military institutions, led by the President and the Security Council, under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, Chairman of the Sovereignty Council.

At the same time, I categorically reject the notion that the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) represent a legitimate national army. The RSF is an ethnically driven militia that serves agendas unrepresentative of the Sudanese people and operates in the interest of foreign actors—most notably the United Arab Emirates, which has supported the group through funding and arms. Their actions have deeply fractured Sudan's unity and gravely threatened the safety and sovereignty of its people.

The responsibility for national defense must remain in the hands of national institutions that represent and protect all Sudanese—regardless of ethnicity, region, or background—not forces driven by sectarian loyalties or acting as proxies for external powers.

**Jacobsen:** When we talk about this war, are the divisions you're referring to primarily ethnic, religious, or some combination of both?

**Hassan:** It is primarily ethnic. The RSF has been accused of committing atrocities along ethnic lines, particularly targeting non-Arab groups. They have carried out mass killings, sexual violence, and displacement of civilians in towns and villages. If this were purely a conventional military conflict, we might not be standing here today. However, this war has targeted civilians. Armed fighters have entered homes and killed people based on ethnicity or perceived affiliations. Anyone can be accused—whether they are Islamist, part of the former regime, or have no political ties at all.

Ordinary people, with no involvement, are caught in the violence. Initially, we had no involvement in politics. We focused on humanitarian work. However, after witnessing the scale of suffering, we felt compelled to act and understand the underlying causes. We tried to mediate and open a dialogue. In doing so, we discovered that external actors may also be influencing the situation. There have been credible reports that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has provided support—either material or political—to the RSF.

The UAE has commercial interests in Sudan, including agriculture, mining, and port access. These relationships complicate the situation further. Sudanese authorities have welcomed foreign investment, but the involvement of foreign powers in this internal conflict is deeply concerning. It appears that outside actors are capitalizing on Sudan's instability.

We did not expect neighbouring countries—our so-called brothers—to play a role in fueling violence or benefiting from our suffering. Now, we stand with our people, with our institutions—not out of loyalty to any regime, but because we believe it is the only way to protect the population. General Burhan and the SAF have not been accused of the same level of ethnically targeted violence as the RSF. Even among the RSF's ethnic communities, not all individuals support the violence.

However, the RSF's actions have included indiscriminate attacks. If you enter certain areas now, you risk being targeted solely for your appearance or identity. That is unacceptable. The war has also had a profound impact on education.

Educated people within the RSF's ranks have sometimes used their positions to justify or intensify the conflict through racist ideology and the pursuit of power. They want to consolidate control, displace others, and dominate the state.

But if you see them now, they have started to fight each other as well. Even the tribes that were aligned with them are now accusing one another of collaboration. They are accusing each other of betrayal. They have turned on themselves. It has become a truly bloody conflict. I have never seen anything like this. I attempted to translate parts of some videos, but I could not continue—it was too challenging. So brutal. You cannot imagine. It is unimaginable that a human being could do such things. Maybe a machine, yes. However, can a human being cut or kill a person like that?

**Jacobsen:** You've described an immense humanitarian disaster. For Western audiences unfamiliar with the scale of the conflict, can you give us a sense—how many people have been killed or displaced, both inside and outside Sudan?

**Hassan:** Right now, over 8 million people have been displaced. Eight million. The total population is around 50 million. That is one of the countries. People have either fled the country or left their homes and communities.

**Jacobsen:** For context, that's nearly one-eighth of the population of Canada. Let's turn to the international dimension. You've mentioned the UAE's involvement. What do you believe are the most critical facts that the international public should understand?

**Hassan:** They support these groups with money and weapons. Also, some neighbouring countries support certain military elements. Because someone from the country, someone who truly feels Sudanese, would not commit atrocities against his people like this. However, the individuals I have seen—many of whom come from the same tribe that stretches from northwest Sudan to Mali. This entire region shares similar customs.

They dress alike and think alike. Moreover, many of them show extreme brutality, especially towards Black Africans. People like my brother, Abdel Jabbar, and his family—when they are seen, they are treated as if they are insects. Just kill him. He has not done anything. Just find him and kill him. Shockingly, they did not even know that people with such hatred lived among us in Sudan.

**Jacobsen:** What you're describing—this kind of brutality and dehumanization—echoes patterns we've seen in history. In the West, parallels are often drawn with the Nazis tried at Nuremberg, where many lacked any discernible empathy. Do you think the same kind of moral corrosion is at work in Sudan?

**Hassan:** The core issue here is that the Emirates has misled the leaders at the top. If the Emirates stopped their financial, weapons, and logistical support for this war, the conflict would end within a month—not because everyone would be defeated, but because the fighters would question why they are continuing.

Without external support, especially for these unofficial paramilitary forces committing brutal acts, the war would resolve on its own. There are also people from this tribe who are in Sudan. You can imagine—even in Canada, you would never expect one tribe or group to control all others while everyone else is expected to remain silent. That is not acceptable.

**Jacobsen:** You mentioned tribal dominance—one ethnic group attempting to impose control across regions. For a North American audience, especially in a country like Canada with its own history of colonialism, how would you explain the lived consequences of that kind of power imbalance?

**Hassan:** But how do you solve these problems? You solve them through power-sharing, by engaging in dialogue, and by investing in development—especially in regions that have been neglected. Development reduces conflict.

These groups causing problems come primarily from desert regions. Sudan is a vast country. Developing the entire territory, including the desert and areas near the Nile, is challenging. Combine that with limited resources, underdeveloped education systems, and ongoing external interference, and the situation becomes even more complex.

**Jacobsen:** Beyond the UAE, are there any other foreign governments or regional actors—directly or indirectly—playing a role in fueling the conflict?

**Hassan:** They have also manipulated Chad. Chad is our neighbour, and we have always believed its people are kind—and many are. However, Chad has also been influenced by financial considerations.

A lot of the logistics for this war—transporting weapons, moving people—have come through Chad into Sudan. Other neighbours, such as Egypt in the north, have stayed out of it. To the east is Ethiopia. They have not intervened either, although historically, our countries have not always had the best relations. Still, as people, Ethiopians have supported us.

When they faced conflict in their own country, they fled to Sudan as refugees. We welcomed them—we had no problem with that. We still have no issue with refugees, but we do take issue with armed groups entering our land to dominate us.

Some of our people are just farmers—straightforward people. They cannot read or write. Some do not even speak Arabic well. However, these invading forces accuse them of being part of the regime.

**Jacobsen:** It's a haunting detail: fighters accusing ordinary farmers of being regime loyalists, even when many are illiterate and uninvolved in politics. At the end of the day, most people are just trying to survive. Would you agree?

**Hassan:** And this is what happened. If they were targeting specific political figures or entities, we could understand that even if they were misusing those targets.

**Jacobsen:** So if the RSF's targets were actual regime figures or former political elites, as brutal as that still might be, at least the violence would have some twisted rationale. But that's not what's happening, is it?

Hassan: Yes.

**Jacobsen:** Apart from the Sudanese government and yourself, who else is actively advocating for human rights and peace in this conflict? Are there credible voices or organizations still operating on the ground?

**Hassan:** Yes. The government is genuinely trying its best. We can see it. Wherever people can escape from these armed groups, they flee to areas controlled by the government military. Not because they believe the military is powerful but because they feel safer there. Otherwise, they would not survive—even if they had done nothing wrong.

They could be killed on the street. It all depends on which soldier is standing in front of them. Some of these fighters even enter people's home and strip the floors—taking the tiles, the mosaic flooring. It is beautiful. They remove it to bring it back to their areas. The mattresses, the things you sleep on—bed sheets.

They take those, too. It is such a ridiculous obsession. They take refrigerators, fans, and air conditioning units. Their thinking is on an entirely different level. It is not that we oppose them

just for the sake of opposition. We oppose them because of what they are doing—because it is inhuman.

**Jacobsen:** Finally, what else should people in North America know—especially those reading this interview—about what's urgently needed in Sudan, and what kind of international action might actually make a difference?

**Hassan:** Peace requires that weapons be removed from the hands of those causing harm. The RSF are the only armed group acting like this in Sudan. If you go to my family's home—any of the areas—they only have kitchen knives in their houses. Maybe a stick, in case of a disagreement between neighbours. But not weapons. Not weapons meant for killing people or destroying buildings, airports, or banks.

To achieve peace, we need support from the people. Many Sudanese living in the West are trying to help their relatives, attempting to relocate them out of dangerous areas. However, now, when these militias catch people, they demand payment. If they know you have family abroad, they say, "Pay us." You "have to" pay—sometimes 10,000 francs, or $10,000. If you do not, they will shoot the person.

We need help. We need food. People have no shelter. Moreover, there are also problems with sanctions. For example, I, along with others, attempted to create an organization called Insane Organization—a humanitarian group similar to a charity. However, we were unable to open a bank account here in Switzerland because Sudan is subject to sanctions. However, we are not the government. We want to help the people.

When we asked how we could do that, they told us to work through a Swiss organization. However, we cannot go through them because we do not have formal offices. We send money directly into people's hands so they can buy food. Sometimes, they create community food centres where they cook all day. Neighbours from all over come to take food and return to their homes.

We support that. In areas where fighting is ongoing, we cover the costs of transporting people out—utilizing cars, drivers, and fuel.

We need the West to take this seriously. There is a history behind this—like what is happening to Palestinians now. It is the same. There is no justification. Anyone who fights, if they have any feelings at all, will recognize that this is wrong. No one should even have to tell him. If you are human, you should know—should I do this much harm to another human being? There is no need.

Thank you.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you for your time.

# Dear God and Company: Confronting Clergy Abuse and the System That Enables It

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**Clergy sexual abuse** is not confined to any one faith, denomination, or country—it is a global crisis rooted in power, secrecy, and institutional self-preservation. In this conversation, survivors, advocates, clergy, legal scholars, and researchers confront the patterns that allow abuse to persist and the systemic enablers who shield perpetrators from accountability. From the misuse of spiritual authority to the failure of church leadership to act, their testimonies reveal both the depth of the harm and the urgent need for reform. Together, they ask the questions that religious institutions have long avoided—and challenge the structures that have turned sacred spaces into sites of betrayal.

Katherine Archer is the co-founder of Prosopon Healing and a graduate student in Theological Studies, soon to begin a Master's in Counseling Psychology. Her work lies at the intersection of academic research and nonprofit advocacy, focusing on clergy abuse within the Eastern Orthodox Church. Archer champions policy reform to address adult clergy exploitation, advancing a vision of healing rooted in justice, accountability, and survivor support.

Irene Deschênes, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, first reported her case to the Diocese of London (Ontario) in 1992. Nearly three decades later—after a Supreme Court of Canada ruling—she reached a civil settlement in 2021. With a background in sociology and a career in social services, Deschênes co-founded Outrage Canada, a national, non-religious coalition demanding accountability from the Roman Catholic Church and justice for victims. Known for asking Canadians, "Where's the outrage?" she works to prevent further abuse, protect children, and keep survivor voices in the public conversation through media appearances and documentary work.

Amos N. Guiora, J.D., Ph.D., a legal scholar and former IDF officer, has made a career of confronting institutional complicity and promoting bystander accountability. Author of *The Crime of Complicity*, *Armies of Enablers*, and *The Complicity of Silence*, Guiora draws direct lines between Holocaust history and modern abuse cases. His advocacy was instrumental in Utah's 2021 bystander law, and through the Bystander Initiative, he presses for survivor-centered legal reforms. "All hands on deck," he insists.

Father Bojan Jovanović, a Serbian Orthodox priest and Secretary of the Union of Christians of Croatia, is recognized for his unflinching critiques of institutional failings within the Church. His book *Confession: How We Killed God* and his leadership in the Alliance of Christians of Croatia reflect his commitment to ethical reform and moral reckoning. Jovanović calls for transparency and open dialogue as prerequisites for restoring trust in religious life.

Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr. led Forest Hill Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, for more than three decades. Known for his passionate preaching and deep commitment to justice, compassion, and community leadership, Lentz retired in 2024 after a distinguished ministry. During his tenure, he inherited and confronted the traumatic legacy of clergy sexual abuse, guiding the congregation through its aftermath.

John Metsopoulos, a former Connecticut state representative and Fairfield's first selectman, has publicly accused two Greek Orthodox bishops—Metropolitan Athenagoras Aneste (2017–2019) and the late Metropolitan Iakovos Garmatis (1970)—of sexual and psychological abuse, as well as financial misconduct. Now living in Central America, Metsopoulos advocates for institutional accountability and supports fellow survivors through the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

Dr. Hermina Nedelescu, a neuroscientist at Scripps Research in San Diego, investigates the brain's circuitry to better understand the neurobiological roots of abnormal behavior, particularly in the context of trauma and substance use. Her current research examines how sexual trauma is encoded in the brain, with the goal of improving therapeutic strategies for PTSD and addiction comorbidity.

Professor David K. Pooler, Ph.D., LCSW-S, teaches at Baylor University's Diana R. Garland School of Social Work. Specializing in trauma, abuse, and institutional responses to misconduct, Pooler is a committed advocate for survivors. His research focuses on systemic injustice and ethical accountability within faith-based organizations.

Dorothy Small, a retired registered nurse, has been a vocal survivor advocate with SNAP for decades. Having endured both childhood and adult clergy abuse, she began speaking out long before the #MeToo movement brought wider attention to such experiences. A cancer survivor and grandmother, she now writes about recovery, resilience, and personal freedom, amplifying survivor voices and pressing for institutional reform.

Michelle Stewart is a cult survivor, author, and activist whose memoir *Judas Girl: My Father, Four Cults & How I Escaped Them All* recounts her harrowing upbringing in extremist religious groups. Now based in Colorado, Stewart advocates for survivors of religious abuse, focusing on the harms of coercive control and religious trauma in children. Through public speaking, education, and support work, she pushes for greater awareness and protection for the vulnerable.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Drawing on your experience, conversations, and research, what broad trends and facts have emerged—either definitively or with near-conclusive certainty—in international cases of clergy-related abuse? Which truths, when stated consistently and publicly, are most crucial for reshaping the informational landscape—not only around misconduct in general, but clergy abuse in particular?

**Katherine Archer:** Clergy abuse has nothing whatsoever to do with sex; rather, it is sexualized violence that, at its root, is about power and control. We are now learning that the majority of clergy abuse survivors may be adult women, but because historically adult abuse has been mislabeled as an "affair," women do not easily come forward and report their experiences. Many women delay disclosure or never disclose, and this isolation in secret-keeping exacerbates the injury.

Finally, clergy sexual abuse cannot be separated from spiritual abuse. There is significant spiritual injury before or as part of the abuse, and it is inseparable from the clergy abuse. This causes a truly profound double-injury, in that typically a victim-survivor has greater difficulty turning to a Higher Power or to one's spirituality or religion to heal from a tremendous injury. In

this way, it differs from other types of violence, wherein one might decide to turn to a Higher Power to heal. The place of healing is also a place of injury. It is like taking medicine that also feels poisonous.

There is a third, even greater injury when a religious community aligns against a victim-survivor. I would say that in most communities, congregants might understand that a priest exploiting an adult congregant is abusive as a theoretical idea. Still, when it comes to a situation in front of them, they do not view the adult victim that they know as an injured party. It's common to label the adult victim with a mental illness in a derisive, dismissive way, and this is yet another abuse. If a victim-survivor is experiencing symptoms of what is termed mental illness, perhaps the priest's actions induced depression, anxiety, or whatever it may be. The victim is not "crazy." This is ignorant, and it's unacceptable.

**Irene Deschênes:** What I have seen, not only from my personal experience, but also with working with other survivors of clergy sexual abuse, is that the church hierarchy's knee-jerk reaction is to contact their lawyers before doing anything else. One would think a moral institution that purports to offer compassion and care to the most marginalized in society would instead take a pastoral approach to survivors who come forward. Sadly, this happens more often than not. First, the Catholic Church attempts to litigate its way out of dealing with the real issue – care and healing of the victim they created. Don't get me wrong, most survivors need the monetary compensation that a civil suit might provide to deal with an interrupted work history. However, most victims merely want to hear, "What happened to you was wrong. It should never have happened to you. This is what we're going to do…and, what do you need from us?" These words were never spoken to any survivor I have worked with in the 33 years that I have been advocating for and with survivors.

Secondly, members of the hierarchy, globally, obfuscate when speaking to their flock, the media, the public, and, more importantly, to survivors that come forward. The Roman Catholic Church have staff and unlimited financial resources. How can survivors' voices, individually or even collectively, ever be heard with limited to no resources to tell our truths?

Thirdly, the secrecy is mind-boggling. Whether it be with meeting a member of the hierarchy or in litigation, a lot of information is held to the chest. Canon law even speaks of 'secret files' that must be maintained. Most survivors are told they are "the only victim," and there is no way to verify or refute it. The church hierarchy has this information but refuses to release it to the public or even to lawyers or plaintiffs. It's common knowledge that perpetrators rarely only have one victim; therefore, it's of great importance that victims know they are not alone and that there have potentially been allegations against a clergy perpetrator.

The seal of the confession is making news in the United States as of late. Roman Catholic priests who learn of a child being abused by a penitent (one confessing to a priest) are not required under canon law to report the abuse. In Canada, everyone is a mandated reporter. Everyone. However, those professionals who work with the marginalized in our communities have a greater obligation to report. Does canon law supersede civil law? The church seems to think so.

Finally, **on our website**, our values are the extreme opposite of what the church espouses vs. what they do, in my experience.

**Dr. Amos Guiora:** To fully appreciate clergy abuse requires that we recognize the critical role played by enablers. While attention is generally focused on the perpetrator of the abuse, the role of the person in a position of authority/status who knows or should know of harm to vulnerable individuals demands our attention. That is the individual I define as the enabler. In a series of books and articles, I have argued that the enabler must be held accountable for the harm they caused. It is for this reason that I have engaged with legislators, the media, the broader public, survivors, and thought leaders both in the U.S. and internationally, with the aim of criminalizing enablers by enacting legislation addressing the crime of enabling.

In examining clergy abuse, I have focused on the actor who directly protects the institution, indirectly the perpetrator. Interactions with clergy abuse survivors shed powerful light on the harm caused by the enabler upon recognition that the perpetrator had previously abused and should not have had access to the vulnerable individual.

As I learned when writing two books addressing enablers, ***Armies of Enablers***, and ***The Complicity of Silence***, and a **series of law review articles**, the impact of the harm caused by enablers was, more often than not, a revelation (the word is not used theologically) to the survivors whose primary focus, for understandable reasons, been on the perpetrators. However, when we would "reverse engineer" the interaction with the perpetrator, the survivor would come to understand that absent the enabler, the abuser would not have been able to commit the heinous crime/s they did.

While I am not a person of faith (I am a secular Jew), I have come to appreciate the powerful role of the Church as an institution and the clergy as an individual in the life of a person of faith. Undoubtedly, in the overwhelming majority of cases, this triangular relationship is positive. Of great significance to the believer, the question before us is what happens when abuse occurs and is reported to faith leaders. THAT (caps intended) is the question that demands our attention; as I have come to learn, in many cases, the report is either not believed or the abuse of clergy is "shuffled" off to another location. Both reactions are devastating for the survivor who was not only physically abused but, no less significantly, emotionally injured.

Understanding the harm caused to them would result in neither punishment of the perpetrator nor acknowledgment of the abuse to which they had been subjected, which often resulted in re-victimization. This is the essence of institutional complicity, whereby (in the faith context), faith leaders make the conscious decision to prioritize the "good name" of the church, thereby casting asunder the survivor for whom, in many cases, the abusive clergy was an individual whom they revered and held in the highest regard.

The all-but instinctual reaction to hunker down, reflective of institutional protection, is oft-repeated, almost akin to a time-tested manual with one clear purpose: protect the institution, consequences to the individual be damned. Criminalizing the enabler is necessary to address institutional complicity that protects the abuser while re-victimizing the survivor and placing in

harm's way individuals who will encounter an abusive clergy in the future. Who is the beneficiary of the act of enabling by those whose primary obligation is to protect the vulnerable?

In a clergy-faith context, failure to address the consequences of the harm caused by the enablers is akin to saying to people of faith: we knowingly abandon you, and no less egregiously, we are consciously placing other vulnerable individuals in harm's way. That, in a nutshell, is the essence of enabling.

The time to act is now, with the understanding that as the lines are written, an individual who should have been protected is in harm's way because of enablers who have committed the act of enabling. To address this, we need an "all hands-on deck" approach, inspired by a handwritten letter from a Holocaust survivor who once wrote me, "You give voice to the voiceless."

Ask any survivor: we do not have the luxury of time; given the numbers and accounts of clergy abuse, addressing the crime of enabling demands our immediate attention.

**Fr. Bojan Jovanović:** First hard fact: Abuse within religious structures is not a "failure" of individuals, but a result of a hierarchical system that enables complete control, isolation, and impunity for perpetrators. Abuse happened—and continues to happen—precisely because of the power that religious office holds: the unquestioning of authority, manipulation of conscience, and the belief that the institution stands above the law. These are not isolated incidents; they are patterns.

The handling of internal disciplinary processes, without mandatory reporting to the state, has allowed rapists to be transferred from one location to another without any punishment. These "internal proceedings" are nothing more than a smokescreen to evade legal accountability. Every such cover-up is an act of complicity, which, in legal terms, qualifies as aiding and abetting or concealing a criminal offense.

Thousands of victims never got the chance to speak out because they were threatened with spiritual consequences—that they would be excommunicated, that they would "harm the Church," that they would lose their community. This is institutional intimidation. In many cases, those who tried to report abuse were ridiculed, belittled, and their testimonies discredited.

To this day, in many countries, there is no legal framework that obligates religious officials to report suspected sexual abuse. This puts religious institutions above the law, and this must be dismantled in public discourse. Because an institution that delivers moral sermons while protecting rapists is not a sanctuary—it is an organization that must be held accountable like any other. If not more so.

**Rev. Dr. John C. Lentz Jr.:** What must be consistently stated in public discourse is the amount of clergy sexual abuse (aka "misconduct") that continues to occur. Furthermore, it is not just a Roman Catholic issue.

I think it is important to note what denominations have done in the past 20 years or so to confront cases of abuse. For example. I know that in the Presbyterian Church USA, there are now criminal background checks for every hire of pastors, Directors of CE, Music directors, and staff. Sexual misconduct trainings are held for all elected leaders of the congregation, and all

who volunteer with children (birth through 18) must have said training. Any allegations against a pastor must be reported to the Presbytery (regional governing authority,) and all allegations must be shared with all other Presbyteries if a job transfer is requested. However, it has not stopped abuse from taking place.

In the PCUSA, pastors are legally mandated to report cases of sexual abuse and misconduct. If a pastor is accused, then the Associate Pastor or Clerk of Session (ordained lay leaders) is legally mandated to report the pastor.

I think that most Protestant denominations have moved in the right direction in the matter of sexual misconduct and abuse in the past two decades. However, enabling and covering up continue. The status and perceived power of the pastor or priest continue to create barriers to reporting and accountability.

**John Metsopoulos:** It is not the fault of the abused, and it can happen at any age. It is a fallacy that it only happens to the young. The abuser uses many forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional, and financial. They may use others to degrade the victims and increase their power and control over the victims. The abuser starts building up the abused, making them feel special, and then they begin to tear them down. In addition, the abuser attempts to alienate them from family, friends, and persons who might see a change in the behavior of the abused. Once they are isolated, the abused now has no one to trust, and the abuser now has complete control over the victims. The abused feels totally alone emotionally and mentally. The abused is further confused as they may enjoy the physical aspect of the abuse, as the body tends to respond to the abuse.

The abused hunt their victims, and seek out victims for the innocence of a person and their depth of faith. The stronger the faith, the greater the opportunity for the abuser. The abuser seeks out individuals whose family is going through turmoil. The abuser seeks out victims whose families have deep faith and would never believe a member of the clergy would abuse anyone. They make the victims feel that what is normal in their lives is abnormal and only they can bring normalcy. Abuse is a total, all-consuming devastation that leaves them alone and deprived of self-respect.

**Dr. Hermina Nedelescu:** The first truth is this: accused sexual offenders employed as “clergy” by Church institutions often remain in ministry—unimpeded—unless they are criminally convicted and physically imprisoned. Church administrators routinely go to extraordinary lengths to shield or reassign these individuals, often prioritizing institutional reputation over victim safety. This persistent pattern is exactly why enabling behavior must be criminalized, as law professor Amos Guiora has argued through his extensive work on the “enabler” phenomenon.

There is a noteworthy trend. In the Russian and even in Romanian Orthodox churches in Russia and Romania, sexual perpetrators are held accountable at higher rates than sexual perpetrators in Orthodox churches in the United States. Our preliminary data show that more accused clergy are defrocked or penalized by the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia compared to other jurisdictions.

The second truth is even more grotesque: victims of clergy sexual abuse are frequently blamed for their abuse. Church officials often reverse the roles, casting the victim as the perpetrator and the perpetrator as the misunderstood "man of God." The immense power differential between clergy and laity suddenly disappears from their moral calculus.

We are talking about a crime—so, lacking any legitimate defense, they default to blaming the victim. I read about a case that involved a 4-year-old child accused of "encouraging" an adult man by wearing his boxer shorts. If defenders can stoop to blaming a toddler, they certainly won't hesitate to call the abuse of an adult woman an "affair" or something "consensual." That word—"consensual"—has become a favorite among Church apologists, conveniently ignoring the inherent coercion that comes from spiritual authority. But sexual abuse cloaked in sacraments is still sexual assault, which is a crime. Calling it "consensual" doesn't make a crime any less criminal.

The third truth is a demographic pattern that should raise immediate red flags: clergy sexual abuse cases often involve victims who are decades younger than their abusers. Many of these clergy are well beyond retirement age, yet inexplicably remain in active ministry—exempt from both moral scrutiny and mandatory rest.

And finally, at a recent academic conference on religion and sexual abuse, we presented findings from our research into hundreds of clergy sexual abuse cases within Orthodox Christian communities. The data is clear: the Orthodox Church has a clergy sexual abuse problem. This is not hearsay. This is research-based.

Among U.S.-based Orthodox jurisdictions, the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America stands out for having the highest number of reported sexual misconduct cases in the public domain. Oddly enough, this American jurisdiction answers to a high-ranking official based in Istanbul—who was even honored this year with the Templeton Prize for his climate change advocacy.

I find it deeply troubling that a man can be celebrated while disregarding the suffering of women and children who were, and continue to be, abused by clergy under his spiritual authority. There can be no climate justice without social justice. Yet while victims suffer here at home, ultimate decision-making power remains half a world away, seemingly more invested in liturgical pageantry and accolades than in justice for the abused.

**Dr. David Pooler:** In public discourse around clergy sexual abuse, we must first name it as a phenomenon that is about the abuse and misuse of power, role, and position of a religious authority. The responsibility for the safety of people in interpersonal relationships is on the professional in a position of power. And this is especially true in relationships where someone with more power represents God.

This religious authority does not have to be a pastor or priest only. It is far more about the way the person has power in any given religious system. Even a volunteer who is given much authority and power can use their position to have sex with someone they support.

When the victim is an adult, we must unequivocally state it is not an "affair" and the person being targeted is not "participating willingly." We must smash the idea that the victim in adult clergy sexual abuse wants this or should be responsible for stopping it. The harm done to a

victim is profound and complex. The reason this is so urgent is that officials and spokespersons within religious systems continue to use the idea that it is an unfortunate case of consenting adults who had an inappropriate relationship. The longer we tolerate a false and misleading narrative like this, the longer clergy sexual abuse can be done with impunity, and the harm done to survivors overlooked or minimized.

**Dorothy Small:** The firm facts and broad trends—based on my personal experience and on conversations with other survivors of clergy-related abuse, whether as adults or as children—are consistent across international cases: dismissal, disbelief, victim-blaming and shaming, retaliation and ostracism after reporting, loss of faith or religious community, and the protection of clergy perpetrators and institutions over the needs of the abused. Silence is rewarded; speaking out is punished, often for the very reasons I've listed.

Victims frequently struggle with the emotional impact of grooming tactics. Trauma bonding formed through intensive grooming creates a powerful attachment, akin to an addictive mood-altering substance on brain chemistry. This bond gives the illusion of being "in love," fostering an addictive pattern that overrides rational judgment. Pursuit behaviors—chasing after what once felt good—are fueled by intermittent reinforcement, alternating "love-bombing" with withdrawal and emotional coercion. This cycle drives the exploited person to dismiss the pain in search of the next emotional high. The victim often falsely believes their involvement was "consensual," when in reality it was the result of manipulation, not genuine care or love.

Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, or culture, human beings tend to respond similarly to such abuse, though specific factors can create unique challenges. For example, males sexually abused by males often experience heightened embarrassment and shame, which can adversely affect sexuality. Adults abused by clergy frequently feel responsible not only for what happened but also carry the guilt and shame projected onto them by their abuser.

**Michelle Stewart:** While most Eastern Orthodox clergy are not abusers, the hierarchical structure creates an environment in which abuse can flourish. Though the majority of clergy are likely well-intentioned, the system of spiritual authority within the Eastern Orthodox Church often acts as a petri dish for misconduct. Allegations must typically pass through multiple layers of hierarchy, where, in my experience, the benefit of the doubt is more often given to the accused than to the victim.

A well-documented example is the case against my former brother-in-law, Fr. Matthew Williams. Another is St. Innocent's Academy, where reports of student abuse were ignored or minimized for years. In both cases, the Church's delayed response not only obscured the misconduct but effectively enabled it.

The Church frequently resists external oversight, minimizing legal accountability. When it does respond to allegations, legal action is often delayed or actively resisted. My first encounter with this came nearly twenty years ago in the case of Christ of the Hills Monastery, when ROCOR (Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia) vigorously defended monks accused of child sexual abuse—even supplying character witnesses. As the then-spouse of one such witness, I overheard private conversations in which participants acknowledged the allegations could be credible. Yet

the institutional response prioritized church sovereignty over victim protection, with statements like “this is a matter for confession” or, more bluntly, “this is none of the legal system’s business.” Similar dynamics are now playing out in the Fr. Matthew Williams case.

Confession and the authority of the spiritual father are often weaponized to silence victims. In Judas Girl, reflecting on my own experiences and broader patterns of abuse—particularly within ROCOR—I wrote: “There is no greater predator than the one who convinces you they have power over your soul.” Those unfamiliar with Eastern Orthodoxy may underestimate the influence of the spiritual father, especially within the sacrament of confession.

While I do not advocate eliminating confession for those who find it spiritually meaningful, it is important to note two critical points: In many states, clergy are mandatory reporters; however, the seal of confession often exempts them. Many Orthodox believers are taught that obedience to one’s spiritual father is essential for salvation—even when that guidance is ethically or spiritually troubling.

In my own case, when I disclosed emotional or spiritual abuse by my husband or clergy during confession, I was rebuked and told I was spiritually deficient for harboring resentment. I was told such matters were not mine to speak of, but rather the abuser’s to confess. This pattern is not unique to me. Several victims I’ve spoken with shared that after disclosing sexual abuse during confession, they were advised not to speak publicly—reinforcing a culture of silence and spiritual coercion.

**Jacobsen:** What question is the most crucial to ask about clergy-related abuse to you?

**Archer:** The most urgent question is why all 50 states do not have legislation holding criminally liable clergy persons who misuse their position of trust and authority. A clergyperson is in a position of trust and power relative to their congregant. A doctor or therapist cannot sexualize a relationship with a patient because professional ethics and state boards recognize the power differential and expressly prohibit this behavior. It is known to be abuse. There are no state boards for clergy. Why is it that clergy get a “pass” on ethical standards, when I would argue that there is even more implicit trust and intimacy in a relationship of soul-care?

I view this from the perspective of an Orthodox Christian, with an understanding of the long history of soul-care within Orthodox Christianity; however, the spiritual intimacy between clergyperson and congregant holds within many other faith traditions as well. Orthodox tradition recognizes a long history of psychotherapy, or care of the psyche. This is different from mental health therapy as it is practiced with a superbill and a co-pay, but truly no different ethically if a priest sexually abuses a man or woman who has gone to him for help. It should be criminalized so that a victim-survivor can gain some understanding of the injury, and a priest cannot continue to pastor.

In the absence of this kind of law in every state, many church bodies “investigate” these abuses as though they were affairs. There may be substantial evidence of what we term misconduct, but it is viewed through the lens of it being an “affair.” This is a reprehensible protection of the institution over a human person who has experienced severe injury. Church investigating bodies, which include attorneys and clergy, inflict greater injuries when sexualized violence is

mislabeled as an “affair.” As a society, we should demand that all clergy understand this issue–even if religious seminaries are not addressing this subject well enough for clergy to use the correct language.

**Deschênes:** The hashtag I used on Twitter was #thechurchcantpoliceitself—and that’s exactly what has been happening for a long time. There is no transparency, only secrecy. All matters are handled internally, leaving victims unaware of what discussions take place or what decisions are made. Many survivors are told the offending clergy is no longer serving their community. Yet, in reality, they often remain in place or are quietly transferred to another parish—sometimes across provincial or federal borders—where new victims can be found.

The Roman Catholic Church, as many can attest, has changed little in its thinking or modus operandi. The few changes that do occur happen over a lifetime, not years or decades. The Church should reevaluate how it responds to victims. One member of the hierarchy once said, when told that most victims simply want an apology, “That can’t happen, because then we set ourselves up for litigation.” Survivors who have endured litigation know how arduous, re-traumatizing, and drawn-out the process can be—delaying healing, if healing is even possible.

My question is: why not evolve and change your approach when a victim of sexual assault by one of your members comes forward? Why is litigation the first response? Why protect your “brother” instead of a member of your flock? What do you lose by treating victims with compassion and care?

I believe the secrecy exists to protect the Church’s reputation. It may have worked in the past. But with the internet, survivors can find one another, offer mutual support, and learn—often through the media—about credible allegations against clergy. What is the Church’s real reputation today? Person A: “Our parish priest was charged with sexual assault.” Person B: “Another one? Well, that’s the Catholic Church for you.” That is the reality now. What institution would want that?

**Metsopoulos:** What is the true number of cases of abuse by clergy? It seems that a true figure does not exist. It is important to get a true number, as it is a lot higher than the churches or their attorneys admit. They do not want to face the problem, as it is a problem that is at the core of the church’s organization. The abusers in the churches are the majority of the institution. The clergy all have incriminating evidence on each other and blackmail each other to silence each othe,r preventing the truth from coming out. To get a true figure would decimate the churches, and it would become apparent that the rot goes all the way to the top.

Also, the legal professionals associated with the churches are not concerned with the truth coming out, but with protecting the church, allowing the abuse to continue.

The attorneys and churches, under the pretext of wanting to end clergy abuse, seek victims to share their traumatic events to bring justice, when in fact they are attempting to cover the tracks of the abusers and discredit the victims of abuse. The goal is not to achieve justice for the victims but to evade the law. The attorneys play both sides against the middle. They are the worst of the legal profession and, in some ways, worse than the abuser, by providing false hope for the abused.

Why are victims afraid to come forward?

The victims are victimized by the church, the public, friends, and family. They feel isolated, empty, and guilty for coming forward. They feel shame and guilt for allowing it to happen and allowing it to continue. They may confuse healthy sexual relations with abuse. In the end, the victim is victimized and left alone.

**Nedelescu:** The most urgent question is this: Why are church officials who knowingly enable clergy sexual abuse not held criminally liable?

People including Melania Sakoda and Cappy Larson have spent decades cataloging the crimes of abusive clergy within the Orthodox Church (all jurisdictions), and while that work is continuing by Katherine and I, it is no longer enough. A new frontier of accountability must now target the enablers—the bishops, chancellors, general counsels, and senior administrators who receive complaints, suppress evidence, intimidate victims, move or cover for perpetrators, and then dare to call themselves "spiritual leaders," "protecting the Church," or seeking "truth."

These enablers rarely touch the criminal justice system. Why? Because our legal frameworks still treat institutional cowardice and bureaucratic cover-up as unfortunate oversights rather than as deliberate acts that perpetuate harm. And yet, without the enabler, the perpetrator cannot persist. The real scandal is not just the abuse—it's the system that sustains it.

We must stop pretending these enablers are merely misguided managers. They are collaborators. Their silence, their memos, their settlement clauses—all of it—forms the infrastructure of abuse. And until we criminalize enabling behavior, the Church will continue protecting predators while branding survivors as "unstable," "sinful," "temptress," or "misunderstood."

The urgent question is no longer "Who abused?" but "Who knew—and did nothing?" And if the answer is a bishop or a synod or a patriarch, the next question must be: When will that enabler be indicted?

**Pooler:** To further advance the study of justice in clergy-related abuse, the most crucial question to ask is what barriers stand in the way of churches setting up rigorous protocols to prevent abuse from happening and responding well when abuse is discovered or reported? One answer is Clericalism, the invisible force at play that teaches people to trust a spiritual authority and distrust themselves blindly. Religious leaders benefit from this arrangement, and therefore, religious systems appear impervious primarily to outside feedback and seem to struggle to reflect and accurately appraise how well they train leaders, develop useful processes to deal with abuse, and respond to survivors. In my observation, churches are largely ineffectual in addressing these issues and cannot admit it to themselves or others. And truly, one of my most profound questions is "why"? It would seem to me that churches could lead the way and model to society the virtues of kindness, generosity, care, and create robust and thoughtful responses when a leader injures someone in their care. But churches appear to fail at this repeatedly and often. And a second question is, why aren't churches asking this question for their own sake? The fact that there isn't a great answer to either of these questions deeply troubles me.

**Small:** The most urgent question about clergy abuse is this: Why is it still an issue today, given the decades of documented complaints, known victims, and our expanded understanding of the

serious, lifelong health consequences? Addiction, for example, is one such consequence, with far-reaching effects. It is a global epidemic, and research has long shown that at the root of addiction often lies complex post-traumatic stress and other severe mental health conditions, frequently stemming from abusive relationships and relational traumas.

In other caregiving professions, abuse has been met with legal consequences—heavy fines, imprisonment, and loss of licenses—effectively removing offenders from positions of trust. Yet in religious institutions, whose reach and influence are vast, the problem persists. This is a public safety crisis of epic proportions. The data clearly show the profound damage such abuse inflicts on mental and physical health. The most powerful institutions have the capacity either to heal and unify, as they were meant to, or to cause lasting harm, as history has shown.

Why, then, is it so difficult for religious institutions to sanction and remove offenders instead of shielding them—often by transferring them to new locations where they can prey on the vulnerable again? The Catholic Church's global presence, for instance, allows abusers to be relocated to other countries, where they continue to exploit trust. Vulnerability is universal; trust itself makes anyone susceptible. While minors are the most at risk, vulnerability spans all ages.

Why is immediate corrective action so rare when credible accusations arise? At the very least, institutions could remove the accused from active roles and make their names public. By the time a survivor fully recognizes they were abused, decades may have passed. Concealing an abuser's identity only leaves others at risk. During the grooming phase, a victim may sense something is wrong, but the perpetrator—armed with authority and institutional backing—can manipulate, plant doubt, and gaslight the target into confusion and compliance. This dynamic not only weakens victims but also enables escalating abuse.

**Stewart:** The most urgent question is: How can external accountability be meaningfully enforced within the Eastern Orthodox Church, particularly among the clergy?

Abuse can occur in any organization and may never be fully eradicated. However, the decisive factor is how institutions—especially those in positions of authority—respond when abuse surfaces. Their response determines whether the organization actively works against abuse or inadvertently becomes a breeding ground for it. In hierarchical systems like Eastern Orthodoxy, abuse is not merely the result of individual misconduct; it is often facilitated—and concealed—by the very structures designed to provide spiritual guidance. The rigid church hierarchy, combined with the protections of confession, can allow perpetrators to avoid legal scrutiny, while internal mechanisms have consistently failed to safeguard victims.

As documented abuse cases accumulate, the Church—and those responsible for holding it accountable—now stand at a critical crossroads. Raising awareness is an essential first step, but the next imperative is to implement enforceable mechanisms of accountability that address and dismantle the systemic enablers of abuse. While some within the Church hierarchy may resist what they perceive as external intrusion, there is, hopefully, a broader majority of clergy and faithful who are willing to support reform. Their participation is not only desirable—it is likely essential to achieving meaningful change.

**Jacobsen:** Everyone, thank you for taking a little time to discuss this straightforward topic with complex derivatives. I appreciate the courage, forthrightness, and honesty.

# Alexander Hinton on White Nationalism's Long Arc

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Alexander Hinton is a distinguished professor of anthropology at Rutgers University and director of the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights. A UNESCO Chair on Genocide Prevention, he is a leading scholar of political violence, white nationalism, and atrocity crimes.

In ***It Can Happen Here***, Hinton traces the continuity of white power movements in the United States and situates them in global patterns. He shows how grievance, demagogic rhetoric, and social-media ecosystems mobilize fear, draws resonances with Nazi propaganda and other extremist ideologies, and warns of democratic backsliding. His earlier book, ***Why Did They Kill? Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide*** probes the historical roots of extremism and structural racism.

Hinton earned his Ph.D. from Emory University in 1997 and lectures internationally. Professor Hinton, thanks for joining us today.

**Alexander Hinton:** Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to meet you as well.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** When you map the evolution of white nationalism in the United States, what through-lines stand out? Today it sits at the center of cultural and political debate, even though it hasn't always been named as such.

**Hinton:** Yes. The context depends on where we are in the world, as historical connections and interactions exist. One example is Nazi Germany, where ideas moved back and forth, influencing white supremacist ideology.

More recently, in relation to my book *It Can Happen Here*, I testified at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia. This UN-backed hybrid tribunal consists of both UN and Cambodian personnel. I testified there in 2016, around the same time that Donald Trump, then a presidential candidate, was running for office. Much of his rhetoric echoed themes I write and teach about.

I am not suggesting that Trump was comparable to Pol Pot or Hitler in any way. However, his rhetoric—including dehumanization, references to enemy invaders, and discussions of migrant caravans—is part of a historical pattern. These narratives frequently appear in contexts of mass violence, genocide, and atrocity crimes. Recognizing this, I thought, "This is something to watch closely."

At the same time, many people were making the false equivalence of claiming that "Trump is Hitler." At one point, this was a viral meme while I was testifying. These discussions were circulating widely, and I was already working on a book about my experiences at the tribunal, which later became *Anthropological Witness*.

Of course, Trump won the election. We entered what I refer to as Trump 1.0, followed by events such as Charlottesville and the Unite the Right rally in 2017. That rally was a turning point in public perception. Richard Spencer's "Heil Trump" salute was widely seen, and people began to recognize that elements of the white power movement had gained visibility within his support base.

During Trump 1.0, most of his supporters tended to be older, white, religious, and less formally educated. It is always important to specify formal education because education exists in different forms, but this was a demographic where he had substantial support.

He also received backing from figures such as David Duke, though it is crucial to clarify that this was not the core of his support. However, the white nationalist element was present. This became undeniable in Charlottesville, where marchers chanted, "Jews will not replace us" and "You will not replace us."

These streets—whose streets? Our streets. But the discourse of "Jews will not replace us" caught everyone's attention at the time. It was a while back.

Some people may not even know about it at this point. Still, it was certainly an international event as well as a domestic one. A series of white power shootings then followed that.

We had Robert Bowers and the Tree of Life synagogue attack. We had the Walmart shooting in El Paso. There was one in Southern California. Moving forward into the present, we had the Buffalo Tops shooting. Suddenly, there were multiple attacks. Bowers' shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue, in particular, drew much attention.

So, I decided to take a deep dive into my book, *It Can Happen Here*, which argued that what many saw as a spectacular aberration—embodied by Trump 1.0 and Donald Trump—was, in fact, not at all discontinuous with U.S. history. I don't go into this in great detail, but obviously, it also ties into global history.

The first part of the book traces the history of white power in the U.S., going back to the founding of the country and, moving forward, examining how systemic white supremacy has operated.

Later, I wrote an article discussing one way to conceptualize this history: through the lens of micro-totalitarianism. This framework helps capture the reality that while the U.S. has functioned as a democracy for a significant portion of its population, within that same system, there have been people who have lived under conditions resembling totalitarian rule.

For example, enslaved peoples—and later, Black Americans during Jim Crow—experienced a level of control over their lives that mirrored regimes like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. The state and local authorities exercised overwhelming power over what individuals could say, do, think, and learn.

The book's argument is that it can happen here. It has happened here. Can it happen again?

Of course, it can happen again.

If you think about it, only in the 1960s did the U.S. begin to break away from predominantly white power structures. Of course, the U.S. is not a monolith—there is a great deal of variation within it. However, the civil rights movement ruptured this historical pattern. Ironically, some gains from that era are now under attack in the U.S.

The vast majority of U.S. history has been characterized by white power and white supremacy. If you visualize it on a timeline stretching from Jamestown in the early 1600s to the present, the

overwhelming portion of that history consists of enslavement, the dispossession of Native American peoples, and systemic racial injustice.

I emphasize that acknowledging history means looking within ourselves. All of us have good aspects and flawed aspects. The U.S. has achieved many great things, but there is also a shadow side.

To invoke Carl Jung, we all have a shadow, and nations do as well. One of the most disconcerting and bizarre arguments I've encountered is that we should ignore or avoid engaging with this side of history. However, just as an individual's healthy growth requires acknowledging their strengths and flaws, nations must do the same to move forward.

This debate continues to play out in the U.S. today.

It was interesting, coincidentally, to see Elon Musk recently argue that Germany should forget about the past. The argument that people should not feel guilty or personally responsible as a major part of their lives makes sense. However, the idea that we should ignore the fact that certain groups have been dispossessed—while attempting to remedy past abuses without placing blame—is more complicated.

In the U.S., much of this has played out with younger white male voters. That is a longer discussion. But ultimately, we have to confront the shadow side of history. To answer your question, yes, this has been a reality in the U.S. for most of its history. While some aspects remain interwoven with society today, things are much better than 40 or 50 years ago.

Trump is not an exception. He is certainly spectacular because he knows how to control a crowd and command attention. However, what he represents is not a break from U.S. history—it is continuous with it.

**Jacobsen:** In your view, how does political rhetoric—the themes you've outlined—work to legitimize white-nationalist movements and animate what you call their Jungian "shadow sides," bringing once-fringe ideas into mainstream conversation?

**Hinton:** Yes, that is an interesting question. Of course, this is obvious, but it bears repeating: the advent of social media and global interconnection has amplified and accelerated ideas that existed long before.

White power groups were among the first users of the Internet, and many people are unaware of this. They made global connections early on and were well-positioned by the time we entered the smartphone era, starting with the iPhone in 2007, which brought massive changes.

The reason I mention this is that we now have different ideological "bubbles"—though "silos" might be a more accurate term—where communities gather and reinforce one another's views. One well-known example is 4chan, a notorious hub for white power extremists.

These groups develop their own coded language and references, and we often see ideas move from these underground spaces into mainstream discourse. A clear example is how language from platforms like 4chan, Telegram, and Gab gradually surfaced on larger platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

For instance, during the last election cycle, there was a JD Vance "pedophiles" trope that emerged. That narrative originated in extremist circles on 4chan and Telegram before surfacing in public demonstrations—such as marches in Springfield—where it gained visibility. Eventually, it bubbled up into mainstream conservative discourse, reaching figures like JD Vance himself.

This phenomenon is tied to a broader strategy within far-right and white power extremist circles: shifting the Overton Window. The Overton Window refers to the ideas considered acceptable in mainstream discourse. Over time, what was once considered fringe or extremist can become normalized through repeated exposure.

Much of the rhetoric that is now common in political discourse—including on platforms like X—was once confined to far-right extremist spaces. Elon Musk, for example, frequently tweets narratives that align with these ideas.

Take the concept of the "Great Replacement." It has been phrased in different ways, but at its core, it suggests that non-white immigrants are intentionally replacing white Christians in the U.S. There is a factual element in the sense that demographics in the U.S. are changing, and the white population is projected to lose its majority in the next 20 to 30 years.

However, in extremist circles, this demographic shift is framed as intentional—as if there is a coordinated effort behind it. That naturally leads to the question: Who is orchestrating this?

At the mainstream conservative level, the answer tends to be "Democrats." But within white power extremist discourse—going back to Charlottesville and earlier—the belief is that Jews are orchestrating it.

Everything ties into the belief that there is a plot to subvert white power and ultimately destroy white people. This brings us to the idea of white genocide, which predates much of the recent discourse.

In 2015, during the European immigration crisis, we began to see the widespread circulation of replacement theory narratives. This rhetoric was later imported into the U.S. Still, the underlying trope had been there long before in the form of the white genocide theory.

By the time we get to Robert Bowers, the perpetrator of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, he has fully embraced this ideology. His motivation was the belief that Jews were helping immigrants "pour into" the U.S. That was his key justification.

On his Gab homepage—a far-right extremist platform with strong Christian nationalist leanings—Bowers had several disturbing elements. Among them was an image of a radar gun, which prominently displayed the number 1488.

At first, this number might seem odd, but once you examine its symbolism, a pattern emerges. 1488 is a combination of two elements: 14 Words – A white supremacist slogan coined by David Lane, a member of The Order, a white nationalist terrorist group from the 1980s. 88 – A reference to "Heil Hitler" (H being the eighth letter of the alphabet).

*The Turner Diaries* deeply influenced the Order itself. This novel has been called the "bible" of white supremacy. The book tells the story of white people rising against what they see as an existential threat, forming a group called The Order to eliminate non-whites and so-called "race traitors."

This novel inspired real-world actions. The actual Order, a violent extremist group, emerged in the 1980s, robbing banks and engaging in other criminal activities to fund their white nationalist cause. There was even a film adaptation of *The Turner Diaries* released at the end of 2024.

David Lane, one of The Order's members, was arrested and imprisoned, where he later wrote the White Genocide Manifesto. In this document, he ends with 14 Words, which I will not repeat here, but the essence is a call to protect white children from what he describes as a nefarious plot to wipe out the white race.

So, when Bowers displayed 1488 on his Gab profile, he was signalling deep ideological alignment with this extremist lineage. This illustrates the connection between extremism and political discourse.

What has happened in recent years—intentionally—is that far-right groups have sought to mainstream these ideas. This includes groups one step removed from the "hard" far-right, such as the so-called alt-right, which gained visibility during the Charlottesville rally.

The alt-right has heavily promoted the idea of metapolitics, which argues that the battle is not fought through physical violence but through the control of hearts and minds. This is where cultural narratives come into play.

A major talking point within these circles is cultural Marxism. This conspiracy theory claims that Jewish intellectuals from the Frankfurt School came to the U.S. with the intent of brainwashing the population. This theory, like many far-right narratives, often ties back to anti-Semitic tropes about Jews orchestrating societal change.

The goal of these extremists is to shift the Overton Window—the range of socially acceptable discourse—by normalizing once-fringe ideas.

This tactic has been highly effective. Using humour, irony, and gradual exposure, ideas once confined to extremist circles have entered the mainstream discussion.

For example, replacement theory, which was once framed explicitly as white genocide, has now been repackaged and is widely discussed. The core idea remains the same, but the language has been adapted to make it more palatable for broader audiences.

I can go to Telegram right now and find videos of far-right extremist groups protesting immigrants in hotels. There is one group, in particular, I am thinking of that carries signs explicitly referencing "replacement."

At the same time, this rhetoric appears at the highest levels of government. JD Vance, for example, has alluded to the idea of "Haitian immigrant invaders." He did not explicitly use the term "replacement." Still, his language framed these immigrants as savages—suggesting that

they eat pets, that they do not understand American customs, and that they do not belong. The implication was clear: they are not fully human.

We have seen this kind of rhetoric before and know where it leads. While Vance himself may not have made direct connections to white nationalist narratives, far-right extremist groups certainly did. They took his remarks and amplified them within their communities.

This is part of a broader strategy. By shifting the Overton Window, you gradually make formerly unacceptable ideas more mainstream. From the perspective of these groups, that is how you advance your cause.

**Jacobsen:** We've covered history and ideology, but what about risk factors? Given today's rhetoric and the broader ideological climate, how likely is it that this discourse escalates—not merely into mass protests, a constitutionally protected right in the United States—but into targeted intimidation, violence, vandalism, destruction of property, or Americans doing harm to other Americans?

**Hinton:** That is a great question; the answer depends on when you ask it.

If you had asked in 2020, in the lead-up to the Biden-Trump election, the warning signs would have been there.

For those of us who study atrocity crimes—a term encompassing genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing, as well as broader political violence—many indicators of potential mass violence were present.

At that time, the U.S. was experiencing: a global pandemic created instability, an economic crisis further fueled public unrest, and the mobilization of heavily armed far-right groups.

One key catalyst for political violence around the world is a contested election. Historically, contested elections frequently lead to violence, especially in fragile or polarized democracies.

Two of the biggest risk factors that can escalate political violence into crimes against humanity are: a contested election—which we had in 2020, and democratic backsliding also occurred at the time.

Authoritarian regimes tend to be more stable in this regard—unless they deliberately target specific groups. However, democracies are not immune. Suppose you look at the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples in the U.S., for example. In that case, you see state-backed violence occurring within a democratic framework.

The greatest instability occurs when a country moves between political systems—either sliding into authoritarianism or undergoing democratic reform. In 2020, the U.S. experienced significant democratic backsliding, which heightened the risk of political violence.

At that time, I wondered: What if Trump had not been banned from Twitter? Before the January 6th insurrection, Twitter was his primary tool of communication. When the platform removed him, he temporarily lost his direct channel to millions of supporters. There was no Truth Social then, so his ability to escalate tensions was reduced.

I wrote about this in an article for Project Syndicate, analyzing the high potential for violence at that moment. And indeed, we saw January 6th unfold—a violent attempt to overturn a democratic election.

Fast forward to 2020—isolated attacks by mass shooters were, and still are a reality. Undoubtedly, such attacks will continue, even though the U.S. government has ramped up efforts to combat them. However, I expect that response to diminish under Trump 2.0—but that is a different discussion.

During the last election cycle, there was renewed concern about election-related violence and the potential for political conflict. The movie Civil War was widely discussed in this context, and multiple think tanks conducted war game simulations to explore possible crisis scenarios in the U.S.

The potential for unrest was real—not necessarily large-scale mass violence, but certainly protests, civil strife, and individual acts of violence. But then the election happened.

Democrats hesitate to call it a blowout, but that is essentially what it was. While the Republican candidate did not win most of the popular vote, that did not matter—he won all the battleground states. He made massive inroads with nearly every demographic.

Some key numbers: He secured most of the Latino vote, especially among Latino men—around 56-58%. There was a major swing among young white voters. His base expanded, even though his core support remained the same.

This time, the opposition was defeated and unable to regroup significantly—at least for now. That will likely change over time. The primary mobilization against his policies has been through court cases, which are currently the most effective avenue for opposition.

However, the Democratic Party lacks a clear message. They are struggling to articulate a compelling narrative after what happened. One key shift has been in rhetoric around race.

For many conservatives, being called a racist was one of the most politically damaging accusations. That label stung, and it became a unifying grievance among MAGA supporters.

Having attended MAGA events and read numerous MAGA-related books, I can confirm that this sentiment frequently arises. At rallies, Steve Bannon and others openly dismiss accusations of racism, saying things like, “They can call us racist or not racist—who cares?”

The Republicans, using the metapolitics strategy, leveraged this effectively. They weaponized cultural issues, including wokeness and critical race theory, and launched a devastating political attack against Democrats.

When they folded trans issues into this broader critique, it created even greater challenges for the Democrats.

At the same time, inflation and immigration became major voter concerns. The immigration issue, in particular, had shifted geographically—it was no longer perceived as a crisis only at the southern border. Instead, the impact was being felt in cities, including places like New York, where I live.

The rhetoric around immigration shifted from policy to economic resentment: “why are we giving money to immigrants when we need it here?” and “crime is increasing because of immigration.”

This bread-and-butter combination of economic and immigration concerns was a major factor.

However, what consistently received the loudest applause at MAGA rallies—which I attended as a researcher—were statements about “woke” issues, particularly trans rights.

This became a huge political problem for the Democrats.

One of the major strategic shifts within the Democratic Party over recent years has been a greater focus on identity politics. However, that strategy backfired in this election. Now, the question is: What happens next?

Will Democrats return to their working-class roots? That remains to be seen. Of course, they will continue to advocate for the rights of people of colour and marginalized groups, but the political landscape has shifted.

In many ways, Democrats now face the same kind of political tarnishing that Trump supporters once experienced.

So, there we are. I mention this because there is no immediate threat that Trump needs to deal with—he is in total control. He is sailing along, calling this the golden age, as he puts it.

He says there is now a “light” over the United States and the world because he holds power. So, this is the political reality at the moment.

The risks, aside from mass deportations, include sending people to Guantanamo Bay, detaining individuals in handcuffs, and various other abuses that, according to reports, are already unfolding.

To recap, I explained that this is not a static issue—you have to look at it over time because the situation constantly evolves.

It depends on the context. In 2020, we had one scenario and in the 2024 election, we had another.

However, the threat of election-related violence is now lower—primarily because Trump has consolidated power. He has also expanded his base by adopting a broad anti-DEI, anti-woke, American Marxist discourse, which has politically damaged the Democrats.

As a result, the Democratic Party is in a weakened position. They lack a clear message and are still trying to recalibrate. This means there is no real opposition right now.

There is always the possibility of white power extremist attacks or isolated incidents. Still, there is not much concern in terms of a civil war or large-scale protests escalating into violence.

However, looking ahead to 2028, the situation is far less predictable.

As I mentioned, politics is fluid—things change depending on unforeseen events. We cannot predict the future, but we can anticipate potential risk scenarios: a contested election in which Trump remains in power, but a Democrat appears to have clearly won led to actions that impede

a peaceful transfer of power. Trump is running as J.D. Vance's vice president, mimicking Putin's political model in Russia.

I do not think that Trump will attempt to secure a third term, as some fear. However, the broader concern remains: what happens during the next power transfer? That is where things could get ugly.

So, in response to your question, I expect more episodic violence, rather than sustained, large-scale unrest. Regarding systemic issues, we will have to monitor the ongoing mass deportations, which have already begun and are expected to escalate.

But here is the key point: Trump's opposition is now significantly weaker.

It is difficult for his critics to label him and his supporters as "racist" when he has just won the majority of Latino voters. That fact alone diminishes the credibility of those attacks.

With no strong opposition, we will unlikely see any major upheaval soon.

**Jacobsen:** You've described how social media and digital platforms have widened the reach of white-nationalist rhetoric, white identity, and related discourse. For this conversation, I want to draw a clear line between two groups: first, people who regard "white identity" as a cultural descriptor—say, someone of French or Dutch ancestry who values French or Dutch traditions; second, those who adopt a race-based, identitarian political ideology, which is qualitatively different from the first.

These are distinct categories and deserve different analyses. With that distinction in mind, how do social platforms and the broader online ecosystem—recommendation engines, engagement incentives, monetization schemes, influencer networks, and moderation gaps—amplify white-nationalist ideas, shuttle conspiracy theories into wider circulation, and accelerate the slide from cultural identity talk into overt political extremism?

**Hinton:** Massively.

That is the one-word answer.

This is the "secret sauce," so to speak. And it goes far beyond white nationalism—it applies to everything.

Rumors spread rapidly.

For example, there have been cases where false rumors involving Dogecoin (Doge), USAID, or other topics have spiked online, gaining momentum even though they are completely untrue.

People exist in silos, where they consume headline-driven information without fact-checking sources. These narratives spread like wildfire, sometimes being deliberately planted by populists and at other times being adopted and amplified by populists after they gain traction.

So, where are people gathering now?

Many left-leaning users have migrated to Bluesky, which means that X (formerly Twitter) has shifted further to the far right than it was before.

I used to have to go to Telegram to find certain extremist content. Now, I can find it quite easily on X—sometimes even amplified directly by Elon Musk himself.

For example, the South African "white genocide" narrative has resurfaced recently. That was a controversial talking point during Trump 1.0, but today, it is not controversial.

Why? Because the Overton Window has shifted, and there is no significant opposition to it. So yes, your question speaks to a larger issue—the question of information consumption.

Where do people get their information?

One of the educators' main objectives is teaching media literacy. Education should never be about promoting a left-wing, right-wing, or centrist agenda—it should be about teaching people how to critically evaluate sources and information. It should be centered on critical thinking, allowing people to apply it in whatever way they choose.

One way to foster critical thinking is to encourage students to evaluate their news sources and ensure that their media diet is not one-sided.

For example, I always tell my students: I read The New York Times, but I also read The Wall Street Journal. Use platforms like Tangle or similar aggregators that present what the left and the right are saying about a given issue.

I have contributed to The Conversation in some of my more recent public-facing writing. This academic platform makes research accessible.

I also make an effort to explain the perspectives of the MAGA world to people on the left, who often do not fully understand it and tend to reduce it to a simple narrative of fascist authoritarianism. Ironically, in the MAGAverse, many people mirror this perspective—except they believe there is an impending takeover by authoritarian Marxists.

Both sides are locked into these narratives. This kind of binary thinking happens all the time. Each side sees itself as resisting authoritarianism and gravitates toward easy explanations.

This division is particularly evident when comparing platforms: Bluesky vs. X (Twitter)—two completely different realities. Many groups use Telegram, but it is frequently associated with fringe ideologies. Truth Social—a political echo chamber.

We are increasingly living in bubbles.

For educators, the key challenge is teaching students not to take everything at face value: just because you see something on TikTok, it does not mean it is the news. Do not immediately retweet something without questioning it. Always be critical, think twice, and examine different perspectives.

Because, in reality, things are never as simple as one-line answers make them seem.

This ties back to an earlier point about how the left often characterizes the MAGA world as racist—just as MAGA supporters frequently label the left as radical Marxists.

Both of these are caricatures—stereotypes that obscure reality. It is easy to define the other side with a one-word smear. Taking a deep dive, analyzing the issues critically, and engaging with nuance is much harder.

That kind of deep thinking is challenging for many people. Now, that is not to say the words racist or Marxist should never be used. However, people should apply critical thinking when using them.

One final point—when people use words like racist or hater, they individualize the issue. This shifts attention away from the larger historical and systemic problems. For example: saying "structural racism" focuses on systems and institutions. Saying "a racist" focuses on an individual's character.

However, individuals are raised within these larger social structures, and people need to think critically about this. This applies to both sides because it is part of how human beings understand the world.

The philosopher Theodor Adorno, a member of the Frankfurt School, described this as reification—or "thingification." This is when we reduce complex social realities to fixed, simplistic categories.

The goal of critical thinking is to resist this tendency, unpack complexity, and move beyond surface-level labels.

**Jacobsen:** How do white nationalism and other far-right movements in the United States and Europe compare with parallel extremist ideologies—Islamist militancy, Hindu ethnonationalism, and beyond? Where do their logics overlap—in recruitment, grievance, mythmaking—and where do they distinctly diverge?

**Hinton:** Yes. So, you are asking an anthropologist—which makes this a tricky question.

Anthropologists emphasize the importance of understanding historical and cultural contexts in depth. Because of that, I do not want to dive too deeply into contexts outside my expertise; I will stick to the ones I know best.
That said, I study these movements comparatively and examine their larger macro-dynamics. There are many continuities between them.

For example, the "replacement" discourse we discussed earlier does not exist solely in the United States and Europe. It also manifests in India.

The notion that an external or internal group is "invading" and threatening to take over is widespread. This fear-based formula appears in many societies.

Recently, I was re-reading for my classes about Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels, among other Nazi leaders. While imprisoned, Göring was interviewed by a psychologist, who asked him about the past and how things had unfolded in Nazi Germany.

Göring's response was striking: he said that people do not naturally want war. But if you tell them there is an evil enemy—one that is threatening society, contaminating the nation, or

destroying its values—Then they will go to war.
This logic is deeply effective and has been used across history.

Of course, it is not the entire story. Still, mobilizing grievance and fear—whether about "outsiders" or even "insiders" who are framed as existential threats—is a universal tactic in extremist movements. One case that is slightly different in South Africa.

The history of colonialism and land ownership creates a unique dynamic. Unlike in replacement narratives, where the fear is about "invaders," the tension in South Africa is framed differently.

The Black African majority is reclaiming land that was historically taken. The white minority, which still owns significant land, perceives this as an existential threat.

That is where the conflict emerges. It is not about outsiders coming in—instead, the perception is that the existing population is being "targeted" for destruction.

This is why Elon Musk recently tweeted about a rally in South Africa where someone called for action against white landowners.

The reality is that white South Africans still own vast amounts of land. However, the far-right framing of this situation revives the "white genocide" narrative.

This same existential fear—the idea that "they want to destroy us"—exists in many different extremist movements. It is a deeply resonant message for people who feel their identity, culture, or way of life is under siege.

Earlier today, while preparing for my class, I reflected on Göring's words. His strategy was simple: Make people afraid. Tell them there is an enemy. They will go to war for you.

This pattern repeats across history—and we continue to see it today.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you so much for the opportunity. It was great to meet you.

**Hinton:** Yes, great. I hope this discussion was helpful. Thanks for your interest.

# The Scientist Who Thinks Our Brains Might Doom Us

2025/08/24

**Thomas Homer-Dixon**, one of the world's foremost social scientists, has spent his career probing the forces that push societies toward crisis and collapse. As director of the Cascade Institute, a Canadian research center dedicated to understanding and mitigating global threats, he applies the lens of complexity science to phenomena such as climate change, economic instability, and political polarization. His work examines how seemingly small shifts in complex systems can unleash outsized consequences, eroding resilience and accelerating humanity's precarious trajectory.

Homer-Dixon has written extensively on the destabilizing effects of rising authoritarianism, from Donald Trump's radical influence to the ways artificial intelligence deepens epistemic fragmentation. He has also explored the unsettling possibility that intelligence itself may carry the seeds of self-destruction—yet he remains committed to identifying pathways toward a sustainable future. His research combines scientific rigor with a willingness to engage big, unsettling questions, whether drawing on the Drake Equation or the Peter Principle to illuminate the paradoxes of human progress.

An accomplished author and public intellectual, Homer-Dixon's work has appeared widely, from academic journals to The Globe and Mail. His insights bridge science, politics, and leadership, offering frameworks for navigating the complex crises of our time. The Guardian has praised him as "one of the most informed and brilliant writers on global affairs today."

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** I'm grateful you could join me today—it means a lot. To start us off, how can complexity science help us make sense of immense global challenges like man-made climate change and widespread economic instability, and what tools does it give us to confront them more effectively?

**Thomas Homer-Dixon:** Right, you're getting straight to the point. That's a terrific question.

As most people do, I came to complex systems science somewhat indirectly. However, within my discipline—political science, conflict studies, and international relations—the conventional ways of thinking about causation didn't help me untangle what was happening in my study areas. They didn't adequately explain the underlying causal dynamics.

Over about 15 years, I transitioned into complexity science and developed a much clearer understanding.

At its core, complexity science helps us understand non-linear phenomena—situations where relatively small changes in a system, whether in an economy, climate, geopolitical structure, or ecological system, can lead to significant and sometimes unexpected consequences. Conversely, it also helps us understand why, in some cases, considerable interventions appear to have little or no impact.

The proportionality of the relationship between cause and effect in complex systems breaks down. In our everyday world, we think of small changes causing minor effects, small causes

having minor effects, and significant modifications producing significant effects. So, there's a proportionality.

But in complex systems, that breaks down. This means that complex systems—again, we're talking about everything from ecologies to economies to the climate system to even the way the human brain works—have the capacity to flip from one state to another, from one equilibrium or stability zone to another, often in quite unpredictable ways.

The business of complexity science is identifying the various possible stability zones, what configuration of an economy or a political system will be stable, and what factors can reduce that stability and cause it to flip to another state.

To give a contemporary example, we've just seen a flip in the United States political system—a reconfiguration—from one equilibrium to something else yet to be determined. Mr. Trump generates enormous uncertainty, so the nature of that new equilibrium isn't entirely clear yet. We have some ideas, but that is a classic example of non-linearity.

In an ecological system, a non-linearity would be something like the cod fishery collapse off the east coast of Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That was one of the most productive ecosystems in the world, and it has wholly reconfigured itself. It will never return to its previous level of productivity, which was incredibly abundant in biomass production.

The 2008–2009 financial crisis was another example of non-linearity. Complexity science aims to identify the factors that produce these sudden changes—these flips—and anticipate them. However, the other side of this work is that once we understand those connections and causal relationships better, we may be able to induce changes in a positive direction.

We might be able to cause positive flips—positive in a value sense—good flips instead of bad ones. At the **Cascade Institute**, we divide our work into two areas. One focuses on anticipating pernicious cascades or harmful non-linearities, and the other on triggering virtuous cascades that benefit humankind. We then drill down in these areas to identify threats and opportunities using complexity science.

**Jacobsen:** Around the world, ideological polarization seems to be intensifying, not only in the United States during the Trump years but across a range of societies. Complexity science suggests that when several tipping points are reached—whether all at once or in succession—they can unleash powerful non-linear effects. Do you see today's deepening polarization as one of those moments, where competing ideologies could drive us into a new wave of unpredictable, destabilizing dynamics beyond the recent election?

**Homer-Dixon:** Yes. So, part of the framing of complexity science—and it's almost inherent in complexity itself—is the recognition that a lot is happening. Within conventional social science, or even conventional science, there's a strong emphasis on parsimony—identifying relatively straightforward relationships between causes and effects.

Within complexity science, there's less emphasis on parsimony. There's an initial recognition that the world is complex, with numerous factors operating and interacting in ways that are, at least at first, difficult to understand. You won't develop a good understanding by focusing on

single variables or isolated factors. You have to examine multiple elements simultaneously. That is the foundation of how all complex systems work.

Frankly, that's what initially attracted me to complexity science. I was grappling with the broader issue of the relationship between environmental stress and violent conflict. As I studied factors like water scarcity, forest degradation, and soil depletion—and how they interacted with conflict—it became clear that multiple causal pathways were involved. Many interconnected factors had to be taken into account. So, I needed a different framework rather than a simplistic approach that looked at single causes and effects.

That's the background. Now, you can find more details on polarization on the Cascade Institute website. We have developed a set of hypotheses about the factors driving social polarization and deepening social divisions—factors that are far more complex than standard analyses suggest. We use a four-pathway model to explain polarization. The first pathway consists of economic factors—rising inequality and economic precarity- fueling polarization.

The second pathway involves social and managerial factors, precisely the decreasing capacity of societies to address complex problems. Our technocratic elites and experts are increasingly perceived as incompetent in handling crises, whether related to healthcare, climate change, or managing the pandemic. This leads to a delegitimization of expertise and expert governance—a growing rejection of specialists and institutions.

The third pathway is connected to our information ecosystem—social media, information overload, and how these influence communication. These dynamics amplify emotional negativity, making people more inclined to engage only with those who share their views rather than those who think differently.

The fourth pathway is more fundamental: epistemic fragmentation. People increasingly live in their knowledge bubbles, developing their versions of reality and dismissing alternative perspectives on truth. This fragmentation fuels a breakdown in shared understanding.

We have four distinct pathways and are studying how they interact. These interactions can create precisely what you suggest—tipping points in people's attitudes.

However, these four pathways can be considered underlying stresses in our social systems. Over time, these economic, managerial, cognitive, informational, and epistemic factors make our social systems less resilient. They make people angrier, more afraid, and more distrustful of institutions.

Many of these changes can occur gradually, but then suddenly, you get a significant event—like the political shift in the United States—where the institutional arrangement of an election triggers a system-wide flip.

The best way to think about these polarization processes is that they have drained resilience from our social systems, making them more vulnerable to abrupt shifts that ultimately harm people. In this case, the flip was an institutional one. However, the long-term changes in people's attitudes, ideologies, and belief systems haven't been so much a flip as a gradual erosion of resilience.

That erosion manifests in institutions where a radical right-wing regime comes into power in the United States. This is a clear example of non-linearity—where long-term trends, or stresses, accumulate relatively linearly over time, much like tectonic pressure before an earthquake. Once they reach a certain threshold—bang—you get the quake, and the system flips to another state. In this case, that flip was a shift in control of federal institutions in the United States.

**Jacobsen:** Let me put this in two parts. First, do you think President Trump will go down as one of the most consequential presidents in American history? Second, there's now a massive nine-figure investment on the table for artificial intelligence. AI has moved well past being just a trendy buzzword—it's become a driving force for high-tech firms, major investors, software development, and breakthrough innovation. Do you see these areas steering the development of AI, or is it more accurate to say that AI will end up reshaping them instead?

**Homer-Dixon:** Yes, 100%. These are related but distinct questions. Let's talk about Trump first.

The answer is clearly yes—he is already one of the most consequential presidents in American history, alongside Lincoln and Washington. In a recent piece in The Globe and Mail, I argued that he would also be one of the most consequential figures in human history, and I laid out the reasons for that.

One reason is that he is one of the most influential individuals in the world—perhaps alongside Elon Musk. However, he and many people around him are profoundly ignorant of how global and national systems function, even at a basic level.

For example, he doesn't understand how tariffs work or their economic consequences. That ignorance is deeply consequential because there will be moments when deep system knowledge and strategic intelligence are needed to navigate an acute crisis.

I often point to John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis as an example. He surrounded himself with top experts, forming what he called ExComm, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, to carefully think through the U.S. response to the Soviet placement of nuclear-capable missiles in Cuba.

I can't imagine Trump doing anything remotely similar. He has surrounded himself with individuals who are radically ill-equipped to manage the complex systems they now control.

They have their hands on the levers of these systems, yet they are radically ill-equipped to know how to position those levers effectively. So, that's point one.

Point two is that Trump's relationship with his followers drives him in a more radical direction. I won't go into all the details, but if he fails to implement his agenda, he will become more radical, not less. He will seek out more enemies, attempt to attack them, and crush and destroy both perceived enemies within the United States and those outside it.

Point three is that multiple global systems—climate, geopolitical structures, and more—are already highly stressed and near tipping points. Trump could push them past those thresholds in various ways. One prominent example is climate change. He is actively rolling back climate action.

Essentially, his policies amount to humankind giving up on addressing the climate crisis. That alone could change the trajectory of human history and civilization.

If he escalates tensions into a nuclear conflict, which his actions significantly increase the risk of, that too would mark a defining inflection point for humankind. So, when you take these three factors together—his radicalization, the fragility of global systems, and the existential risks he exacerbates—Trump is among the most consequential figures in human history.

That's a controversial position, but it was interesting to see the response to my article, published three days before his inauguration; three weeks later, people are already reassessing and saying, "No, that view wasn't exaggerated."

Now, on artificial intelligence, which is equally relevant. AI dramatically accelerates what we call epistemic fragmentation. It enables the creation of multiple contradictory realities and allows for the substantiation of false narratives. People can manufacture evidence at will using AI, making it difficult—if not impossible—to discern whether information has any real-world grounding.

This is all part of the more significant shift toward anti-realism. Increasingly, people live in massively multiplayer game-like realities, and AI enhances the ability to generate convincing but completely false realities. Worse, these fabricated narratives can be weaponized against groups or political opponents.

So, regarding your point on AI, I am deeply concerned. I have been in contact with many experts who are central to this debate and the development of AI itself. One of the fundamental issues with our world today is that we don't know. Due to the inherent complexity of our systems, we are witnessing an explosion in possible futures.

Take, for example, DeepSeek, a breakthrough that dramatically changed AI energy consumption estimates overnight. We previously assumed AI required massive energy and material inputs into server farms, but suddenly, DeepSeek cut those estimates by 90%.

Yet, despite these developments, we don't fully understand the pathways AI will take. There are still enormous unknowns across technological, political, and social dimensions. This uncertainty offers some potential for hope. Within that very uncertainty, there will be positive outcomes—opportunities we can't see yet, even from AI.

However, I am profoundly concerned about AI's ability to exacerbate epistemic fragmentation, further entrenching the creation of multiple conflicting realities. These alternative realities will not only shape the way people see the world but will also be weaponized against one another. AI is likely to worsen polarization rather than help us overcome it.

**Jacobsen:** Your comments call to mind the perspectives of two intellectual figures who represent strikingly different traditions of thought—Margaret Atwood, the Canadian novelist, and Noam Chomsky, the American linguist. Each has reflected on the relationship between ignorance and intelligence, and Atwood once distilled her view with a stark observation: "Stupidity is the same as evil if you judge by the results."

**Homer-Dixon:** That's very good. That's true.

**Jacobsen:** I've been thinking about the points you've made so far, and they bring me back to a question that Chomsky once raised—though it actually traces to Ernst Mayr. He suggested that "intelligence is a kind of lethal mutation." It's an unsettling thought when you consider that beetles and bacteria are thriving quite well without it. So when we look at AI and its implications, the question still lingers: could intelligence itself prove to be a lethal mutation?

**Homer-Dixon:** Yes, we are modifying our environment to such an extent that we may ultimately cause extinction. You've encountered this in your discussions—the famous estimate regarding the longevity of intelligent life in the universe, which is embedded in the Drake Equation.

Frank Drake was the head of SETI—the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. I once visited the SETI offices in the Bay Area. At least at one point, Drake had a custom license plate that read something like "IL = L," "Intelligent Life = Longevity."

In his equation, Drake included a series of factors that could contribute to the development of life: the size of planets, their distance from their stars, whether water exists on Earth, and other standard variables.

But the final factor, L, stood for longevity—essentially, the question of whether intelligent life would survive long enough to reach a stable and enduring state. That factor dominated everything else for him because intelligence might ultimately destroy itself.

I don't think they are.

Human beings—and this is where I have a soft spot for accelerationism, people like Thiel and Musk—are extraordinarily creative, especially in moments of crisis and extreme stress. Things don't look real right now, particularly existential problems like climate change.

***The Peter Principle*** by Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull was published in 1969.

The basic idea is that within bureaucracies and organizations, people get promoted to their level of incompetence—they rise until they reach a position where they can no longer do their job effectively, and then they stop advancing.

What we may be witnessing with problems like climate change is that humanity has reached its level of incompetence. We have solved everything up to this point. Still, eventually, we will face a challenge too complex to overcome.

It's an open question.

I'm not prepared to count humankind out yet. I have two kids—one is 19, the other 16—and they are very worried. But I keep returning to this: the world is so complex that we don't know its game.

There may be an explosion of possibilities, but we can't see the adjacent possible. These could be technological, institutional, ideological, or belief-system shifts. We don't know. That is precisely why the Cascade Institute exists. We are trying to identify those possibilities and which ones can be leveraged.

**Jacobsen:** Thank you very much for your time. I appreciate it. It was nice to meet you.

**Homer-Dixon:** Great questions.

# Inside the Porn Economy: Gail Dines on Bodies, Profit, and Power

2025/09/04

Dr. Gail Dines is the founder and CEO of **Culture Reframed**, as well as a professor emerita of sociology and women's studies at Wheelock College in Boston. Drawing on more than three decades of scholarship on the pornography industry, she is widely regarded as an authority on how porn shapes culture, sexuality, and social norms. She has advised government agencies in the United States and abroad—including in the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, and Canada—and in 2016 launched Culture Reframed, which develops education aimed at building resilience to porn's harms.

Dines co-edited the best-selling textbook ***Gender, Race, and Class in Media*** and wrote ***Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality***, translated into five languages and adapted into a documentary. Her work has appeared across major outlets such as ABC, CNN, BBC, MSNBC, The New York Times, Time, The Guardian, and Vogue. A regular presence on television and radio, she is also featured in documentary films, including *The Price of Pleasure* and *The Strength to Resist*.

In her research and public advocacy, Dines argues that decades of evidence show a strong association between pornography consumption and violence against women. She contends that mainstream porn cultivates harmful sexual attitudes, lowers empathy, and normalizes misogyny, racism, and sexual violence. Distinguishing a radical-feminist, harm-based critique from conservative moralism, she focuses on measurable social effects rather than questions of private morality.

According to Dines, porn distorts how men and women understand sex, relationships, and consent. She calls for comprehensive, "porn-resilient" education for young people and for broader social responsibility in addressing the industry's outsized influence.

**Scott Douglas Jacobsen:** Today, I'm here with Professor Gail Dines, the founder of Culture Reframed. My first question, Gail: what is the connection between pornography and violence against women?

**Gail Dines:** We have over 40 years of empirical research from different disciplines that show that boys and men who consume pornography are more likely to engage in sexually aggressive behaviour, more likely to accept rape myths, more likely to develop harmful sexual attitudes toward women, and may experience increased anxiety, depression, and reduced empathy for victims of sexual violence. This happens because they are repeatedly exposed to depictions of sexual violence and objectification. Most mainstream Internet pornography today is hardcore—it's cruel, brutal, and dehumanizing toward women.

As men and boys watch and become aroused by it, they internalize the ideologies embedded in these images. A key point about pornography is that it portrays women as always consenting, no matter how degrading or violent the act is. This gives the impression that women enjoy being mistreated, which is often far from the truth, as they may be coerced or paid to act in these scenes. This reinforces the harmful idea that it is acceptable to dehumanize and abuse women.

We have substantial peer-reviewed research from fields such as psychology, sociology, and media studies that corroborates these findings.

**Jacobsen:** What research links pornography to sexual aggression?

**Dines:** Regarding the research linking pornography to sexual aggression, our website is a good resource. One in particular, titled "**Understanding the Harms of Pornography**," lists many studies. Additionally, our academic library contains over 500 peer-reviewed articles on this topic. Scholars such as Paul Wright, Chyng Sun, and Jennifer Johnson have contributed important work. The strength of social science research is not in isolated studies but in the coherent pattern that emerges when we review a large body of work. The research shows a clear correlation between pornography consumption and violence against women.

**Jacobsen:** How does hypersexualized media align with human rights violations, particularly regarding youth?

**Dines:** Hypersexualized media, even content that isn't classified as pornography, and pornography itself can be viewed as violations of civil rights because they infringe on young people's ability to construct their sexuality. The multi-billion-dollar media and pornography industries are shaping the sexual attitudes and behaviours of young people worldwide, which strips them of their autonomy in this area. These industries commodify and monetize sexuality, taking control away from individuals and turning it into a product.

Young people deserve the opportunity to develop a sexuality that is meaningful to them, not one dictated by the interests of pornographers seeking profit. Additionally, there are significant human rights violations against women in pornography. The treatment many women endure in the production of hardcore pornography can be likened to torture, violating international human rights conventions. If the same acts were done to any other group, they would likely be recognized as torture. That's how extreme much of mainstream pornography has become.

**Jacobsen:** What are the social and health consequences of pornography consumption?

**Dines:** Basically, pornography is shifting how we think about women, men, sex, relationships, connection, and consent—all of these issues. What you see in society is that when pornography becomes the "wallpaper" of your life, as it does for young people today, it becomes the main form of sex education. This shifts the norms and values of the culture, and it's happening internationally. This is not a local problem. Any child with a device connected to the Internet is being fed a steady diet of misogyny and racism—there's an incredible amount of racism in pornography—and the idea that men and boys have a right to ownership of women's bodies, regardless of what women want. There's also the notion that women's bodies exist to be commodified and used however men wish. This sets up women and girls to be victims of male violence. Meanwhile, we are trying to build a world of equality between men and women.

Pornography shreds that possibility—not only in terms of sex but also in employment, the legal system, and more. It sends the message that women exist only to be penetrated, and often in the most vile and cruel ways possible. So, pornography undermines women's rights across multiple levels and within multiple institutions.

**Jacobsen:** You raised an interesting point about the nature of consent. What is the framework of consent in pornographic imagery and in the industry itself?

**Dines:** First, let's start with the imagery because the industry is slightly different. In the images, she consents to everything. The one word you rarely hear in pornography is "no." It's rare. If you go onto Pornhub or any other adult website, where most men and boys consume pornography, you won't hear "no." Now, there are some rape porn sites where the woman says "no," but those are at the far end of the spectrum. I study mainstream pornography, such as what's on Pornhub. In terms of consent, we often question whether a woman truly consents; this is where the industry comes in. While they might sign a consent form, we don't know under what conditions it was signed.

Also, pornography is where racism, sexism, capitalism, and colonialism intersect. The poorer a woman is, the more likely she is to be a woman of colour with fewer resources, and the more likely she is to end up in the porn industry. These are not Ivy League graduates lining up to do this. These are women who have had few choices. When you have limited options in life, especially due to economic hardship, it is challenging to argue that consent is fully informed or voluntary.

**Jacobsen:** For those able to exit the industry, what are the ways they manage to do so, and what are the psychological and emotional impacts, as well as the physical effects?

**Dines:** It's extremely hard for women to leave pornography. First of all, we know that women in pornography experience the same levels of post-traumatic stress disorder as prostituted women. Many of them are also under pimp control. The psychological, emotional, and physical tolls are severe, making it difficult for them to leave the industry.

And also, where are they going to go? Especially in pornography, where your image is everywhere, women who have been in the industry, even if they get out, live in constant fear that their employers, children, and partners will find their content online. The issue becomes extremely difficult. You never really escape pornography once you've been part of it. Even if you leave the industry, you're never fully out of it because your image remains online. It can take many years to recover emotionally and physically.

Many women endure severe physical harm—STIs and injuries to the anus, vagina, and mouth due to the hardcore nature of the acts. What's interesting is that, in the case of prostitution and trafficking, there are many survivor-led groups helping women exit the industry. This support isn't as prevalent for women in pornography, and the reason is that these women feel so exposed. They feel vulnerable even after leaving the industry because their images remain there.

Remember, an image on Pornhub can go viral, spreading across all the porn sites, so you never know who has seen it. You never know if the person you meet has seen it, which creates a constant feeling of vulnerability.

**Jacobsen:** You made an important distinction between liberal feminism and radical feminism. Can you clarify that distinction about pornography?

**Dines:** Yes. The critical distinction is in the ideological framing. Radical feminists were among the first to highlight the violence of pornography—both in terms of the harm to women in the industry and the impact on women in society. Radical feminism grew out of a focus on violence against women. Over time, they recognized that pornography is part of that violence.

Liberal feminism, on the other hand, tends to be more neoliberal, emphasizing individualism. The argument often centers around the idea that "she chose it," that it's about sexual agency. But what we know about these women is that this is not a true sexual agency. If anything, it strips them of their sexual agency and does the same to all women. Women often look at pornography to see what they should be doing for the men who consume it. Radical feminists are anti-pornography because they see both its production and consumption as a major form of violence against women, and they understand that it contributes to real-world violence as well.

**Jacobsen:** What are the industry's tactics, and how do they compare to those of the tobacco industry?

**Dines:** The pornography industry employs tactics similar to the tobacco industry, such as bringing in pseudo-academics to argue that there's no harm, framing research in ways that downplay the issues, and lobbying. The pornography industry has a powerful lobbying arm, much like the tobacco industry did. They know the harm their product causes, but they're not interested in liberating women from harm—they're in it to make money.

And so, all predatory industries will do whatever it takes to make money, irrespective of the incredible social impact it will have. The United States is known for not having as strong a FACTED (Family Life and Sexual Health Education) program as Canada. However, Canada, at its best, still has its gaps.

**Jacobsen:** So, how does pornography act, as you mentioned earlier, as a filler for sex education and a particularly poor one for young people, and potentially for older people?

**Dines:** Let's focus on younger people. Developing an interest in sex is a natural part of development, often starting from puberty. But because we don't have good sex education, the content is outdated and doesn't speak to the reality that kids live in today. So, where are kids going to turn when they have access to devices and a vast amount of free pornography? Pornography fills that gap, but poorly.

What is needed, and what Culture Reframed provides, is a porn-critical sex education curriculum. If you visit our website, we have a program for high school teachers (and some middle school teachers), which includes PowerPoints and detailed instructions on how to teach it. We don't show pornography, obviously, but we focus on building porn-resilient young people. Unfortunately, in many cases, sex education isn't prioritized, and many sex ed teachers aren't even specialized in the subject.

They might be math or physical education teachers, told a month before, "You're teaching sex ed." We frequently hear from people who are unprepared and have no idea where to start. Interestingly, studies show that students immediately pick up on this lack of expertise. Research indicates that students are aware that their sex ed teachers don't know how to teach the subject,

don’t want to do it, and aren’t addressing issues relevant to their lives. As a result, sex education has effectively been handed over to pornographers.

**Jacobsen:** A question comes to mind. We’ve discussed liberal feminism versus radical feminism in framing the issue. But within radical feminist discourse, are there any internal objections or disagreements on this critical view of pornography?

**Dines:** Radical feminism tends to agree widely on this topic. Are you asking about internal conflicts?

**Jacobsen:** Yes, specifically within radical feminism.

**Dines:** Any disagreements are quite minor, mostly centered on how to define the issue or address it. But there’s a strong, unified belief within radical feminism that pornography is violence against women, both in its production and consumption. We have major arguments with liberal feminists, Marxist feminists, and socialist feminists. We don’t tend to have many internal debates about pornography within radical feminism. However, we do have disagreements on other topics.

**Jacobsen:** There may be surface-level critiques from traditionalist, conservative, or religious groups that object to pornography on moral grounds, often based on a transcendentalist or ethical view of sin. Yet, they seem to reach a similar conclusion as you do.

**Dines:** Yes, but the conclusions, although they may appear similar, are quite different. Right-wing moralists are often concerned with what pornography does to the family, particularly how it affects men. They argue that it may cause men to stray or damage family cohesion. Radical feminists, on the other hand, have a critique of the family as the place where women are most at risk, as we know from the evidence. We are concerned with the harm to women, children, and society in general, but our stance is not based on moralism.

We refer to this as a harm-based issue, not a morality-based issue. That’s not to say some right-wing organizations don’t adopt some of our arguments—they do—but the core driving force behind our opposition to pornography is different. They oppose it from a moral perspective; we oppose it because of the real harm it inflicts on individuals and society.

**Jacobsen:** What would a healthy societal view of sexuality and sex education look like?

**Dines:** Much of what we’ve built on Culture Reframed is what that should look like, to be honest. A healthy view of sexuality begins with the individual owning their sexuality. It evolves naturally as a person grows. Of course, it’s rooted in equality, consent, non-violence, and genuine connection and intimacy.

This doesn’t mean that sex is only for marriage or long-term relationships, but that there is some level of connection and intimacy involved. That’s what makes sex meaningful in the end. If you don’t know the person you’re having sex with, as is often the case in pornography, you become desensitized. That’s why the industry constantly escalates the content.

If you were to film regular people having sex, most of the time, it would be so dull that you’d fall asleep watching it. The fun and excitement come from actually having sex, not watching it. So,

for pornography to hold viewers' interest, they have to keep ramping up the adrenaline through more intense and bizarre acts.

**Jacobsen:** Is part of the core issue the dehumanization and depersonalization that comes with pornography? It seems like there's a disconnection—people go to their computers, consume pornography, and then return to their regular lives as if nothing happened. It's like their day becomes fragmented and disjointed.

**Dines:** Absolutely. That's a great point. There have been studies done on this. One interesting study showed two groups of men: one group watched a regular National Geographic movie, while the other watched pornography. Afterward, they were asked to interview a female candidate for a job, and the chairs were on rollers. The men who had watched pornography kept rolling their chairs closer and closer to the woman. They also found that these men couldn't remember the woman's words.

This kind of behaviour shows how pornography impacts the perception of others, particularly women, and how it disrupts their ability to interact meaningfully in real-life situations.

So you're right. When you think about it, much pornography is consumed at work. Then you leave that cruel world where men are depicted as having every right to women's bodies and go back to working in a world with women where you don't have those rights. It's interesting because we have the #MeToo movement on the one hand, which is crucial for explaining what's going on. On the other hand, pornography is working against everything the #MeToo movement is trying to say about consent and women's bodily integrity. Even men's bodily integrity is compromised in pornography—nobody has bodily integrity.

In pornography, the body is there to be used in any way possible to heighten sexual arousal, usually involving high levels of violence. I haven't seen many films where this wasn't the case.

**Jacobsen:** We've already covered building porn resilience in children, or at least how important it is. How far do gender inequality and sexual violence reflect each other in women's rights movements, particularly within the frame of pornography?

**Dines:** Let me make sure I understand. You're asking about the relationship between gender inequality and sexual violence and how this plays out in the context of movements like #MeToo, correct?

Jacobsen: Yes.

**Dines:** I addressed some of this earlier when I talked about equality in other areas of life and how pornography undermines it. Gender inequality and sexual violence are deeply intertwined. If there were no gender inequality, sexual violence would be unthinkable. Sexual violence is typically used to destroy and control women and to show power and dominance. That's why we must call it "sexual violence"—because it weaponizes sex against women.

Without gender inequality, this kind of violence wouldn't even be conceivable. It's built into the very structure of gender inequality, and in turn, it perpetuates and exacerbates that inequality. It's a vicious cycle. Gender inequality fuels sexual violence, and sexual violence deepens gender inequality.

**Jacobsen:** Just to be mindful of that, then. We talked about the psychological impact earlier. What are the similar psychological impacts on boys and girls, rather than the differences?

**Dines:** Similarities around what, specifically?

**Jacobsen:** In terms of pornography consumption and its impacts.

**Dines:** We know very little about girls. There aren't many studies at all on girls' exposure to pornography, and, as in many areas, girls and women are often under-researched. One of the few studies by Chyng Sun, Jennifer Johnson, Anna Bridges, and Matt Ezzell does show a few things. Some girls and women go to porn not to masturbate but to see what boys and men are doing, so they can reproduce that behaviour.

They also found that girls and women who become addicted to pornography, similar to men, lose interest in real-world sex, preferring pornography. They become isolated and depressed. So, if they do go down the route of addiction, the impact is quite similar to that on men, except they don't become violent.

**Jacobsen:** What are the key points of feminist and anti-pornography activism, particularly in your book *Pornland*, intersecting with issues of gender, sexuality, and human rights?

**Dines:** That's what the whole book is about. *Pornland* was written to explain the modern-day pornography industry in the age of the internet. People were talking about pornography as if the Internet hadn't happened. I take a radical feminist perspective, using research to back up the claims and focus on how pornography undermines women's human rights.

There are chapters addressing racism, showing how women of colour are especially targeted, both for their race and gender. I also discuss how mainstream sites are increasingly making use of images of young-looking women—sometimes they could be children, it's hard to tell. So, they might be underage or made to look underage.

The main argument is that we live in a world that is completely inundated and infested with pornography. As a sociologist, I'm interested in the sociological impact. I borrow from psychological literature but focus on the macro level. How is pornography not just shifting gender norms but cementing the worst aspects of them? It hasn't invented misogyny, but it has given it a new twist and continues to reinforce it across various institutions.

**Jacobsen:** Gail, any final thoughts or feelings based on our conversation today?

**Dines:** We've buried our heads in the sand for too long. For people who weren't born into the internet age, it's hard to understand just how much pornography is shaping young people. There's been a massive dereliction of duty on the part of adults in helping kids navigate this world they've been thrown into, often left to sink or swim on their own—and many are sinking. The kids I talk to feel overwhelmed by pornography, and studies back this up. Many wish there were far less of it because they recognize the adverse effect it has on their sexuality, their connections, and their relationships.

So, it's time we step up and take responsibility as adults.

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

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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.