

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

LISA GRAVES: THE EXTREMIST REVOLUTION & DEMOCRACY HANGING BY A THREAD

LAURA FLANDERS: It's hard to find consensus among 300 million people. It helps to have a founding document. But consider any one of the really big, important words in ours, in the US Constitution, and you'll find no agreement. Speech, happiness, freedom, justice, even person — all those words have been debated since the founders' ink was dry. And "We the People", we haven't finished debating yet. Indeed some of our biggest debates are about the tiniest word, we. Lisa Graves has been following the to and fro her entire career. A lawyer and researcher, she's advised every branch of the federal government. She's the President of the Board of the Center for Media and Democracy in Wisconsin where she headed up investigations into the corrupting power of big money on elections, science, education, and most especially, our courts. A few years back, Graves created True North Research where she currently serves as its Executive Director and Editor in Chief. As the House Select Committee investigating the January 6th insurrection prepares to hold hearings throughout June and the Supreme Court approaches the end of its first term with what you could possibly call its Trump majority, and as CPAC, a global convening of influential, radical right wing activists, prepares to hold its annual conference this time, not in Texas or Florida, but in Budapest, Hungary with Putin ally, Viktor Orbán as a featured speaker, well, everybody at The Laura Flanders Show thought that this might be a good time to sit down with Lisa Graves. She says what we're facing is the beginning of the next chapter of the extremist revolution. What does that mean? And because this is a show where we like to talk about how change is made, if a determined group of billionaires could bring us to this place, I want to know, can the process also work in reverse? We're also going to hear from January 6th Committee Member, Jamie Raskin, who says:

JAMIE RASKIN: The hearings will tell a story that will really blow the roof off the house.

LAURA FLANDERS: I won't say I'm relieved to be speaking to you, Lisa, but I'm always excited to hear what you have to say because it makes me feel that someone is paying attention. So as we start our conversation, perhaps just to center us, where are you? I don't mean physically, although that's interesting, but what's on the top of your mind in terms of this particular moment and what's at stake for whom?

LISA GRAVES: I'm thinking about a number of things. One is the just ongoing revelations by the tremendously important House investigation into January 6th and the great work of Jamie Raskin and the other members there to really unearth these messages and communications of this coup that was attempted by Donald Trump and his most ardent followers and aids. And that is

certainly top of mind because we have never seen anything like that in the history of our republic. And we know that Trump's allies and Trump himself, they are working hard to try to shut down that investigation through the 2022 midterm elections. If they take the House, they will end that investigation, that vitally important investigation into this effort to overturn our democracy to basically have a coup. And to have a violent coup at that with what was happening on the Hill on January 6th. But I'm also thinking a lot about what's happening with the Supreme Court and the sort of silent coup that has happened there in terms of the way this right wing faction now dominates our highest court and what they are planning to do to our rights in these coming months. So those are the two things that are most on my mind. And then I also worry quite a bit about Steve Bannon, his continued efforts to seed a global sort of nationalist, white supremacist type of movement and how that CPAC conference that's coming up in May feeds into that narrative of indoctrination of Republicans to go along with this assault on fundamental democratic principles in America.

LAURA FLANDERS: In their promotional video, CPAC's Hungarian host organization say that American and Hungarian conservatives are united by ideas of home, God, family, all ideas that they claim are under attack.

MIKLÓS SZÁNTHÓ: We are really proud that in cooperation with the American Conservative Union, we will bring CPAC to Hungary next spring. We can see and feel that American, European and Hungarian conservatives are united by the idea of God, home, family, and we can also see and feel that these values are under attack.

LAURA FLANDERS: Hungary is a country where Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister has conducted purges of gay people and Jews and anybody smelling of leftism of any kind. There've been horrendous assaults on Roma people, on the so-called, Gypsy people, in the region, and of course the treatment of immigrants that we've seen. By moving their conference, the Conservative Political Action Committee, to Hungary, what are they signaling? And what do those words, home, God, family, mean to them and the Hungarians?

LISA GRAVES: That terminology, that sort of fatherland, homeland rhetoric is well known in history from the 1930s. And to embrace such a repressive leader of a country as someone to be followed by Americans here is genuinely astonishing. American generations earlier fought against that, that sort of fascistic type of government, fought in World War II against fascism. But now we're seeing this fascism redressed as some sort of modern form of democracy when it is antithetical to true democracy. This notion that Fox, that Tucker Carlson, the Swanson TV dinner heir, would give his platform to Viktor Orbán, that CPAC would give their platform to Viktor Orbán. It really signals a determination to try to move this country away from having a thriving democracy and to sort of normalize a sort of almost dictatorial type of presidency.

LAURA FLANDERS: And going to Hungary in the middle of a war in Europe where Viktor Orbán is on the Putin side, it speaks to, in a sense, a restarting of a century, going back to a period before World War II, before the legislation of the 1960s. Hungary's never seen that kind of liberal legislation and it does seem to me that the organizations that you follow fancy rolling back the clock on all of that. How far have they succeeded in rolling back the clock? And what role does today's Supreme Court play?

LISA GRAVES: The judges that Donald Trump has put on the United States Supreme Court which now form a faction, a majority faction on that court that is genuinely extreme. And they were chosen not to be fair judges. They were chosen with the hope with the intention that they would reverse a century of legal precedents, precedents that Americans rely upon. All the other courts basically have to take the cases that come to it and issue rulings on it. The Supreme Court chooses which cases it hears. It receives thousands of appeals every year and it chooses only 90 cases, about 90 cases to rule on, to have oral argument on and issue a written ruling on. And it has chosen that Citizens United decision to pick that case out in order to destroy campaign finance law or anti-corruption law in this country in ways that are consistent with what Charles Koch wants. They picked out a case about the Voting Rights Act in order to destroy the enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act in 2013, which has spawned these hundreds of repressive bills to make it harder for Americans to vote that have been fueled by Trump's lies about the election, the big lucrative lie. They picked out a decision, a case involving gerrymandering, or the map drawing, in order to take away and limit the power of federal judges to set aside these unfair maps that install minority rule in states and basically have overrepresentation of Republicans in Congress, despite the fact that they do not hold those same majorities in state registration. And now they've chosen decisions like a decision involving *Roe v. Wade* with the view toward overturning 50 years of precedent, and another case that is coming out this year to attack and limit the power of the EPA to regulate climate as we're witnessing with our own eyes documented, demonstrated consequences of the climate changes that are underway and we desperately need to have a federal government empowered to do something about it.

LAURA FLANDERS: What would that take?

LISA GRAVES: Well, that's going to take having substantial progressive majorities who are willing to make sure that our courts are staffed with people who are fair and who do not have this regressive, repressive, narrow view of our Constitution, who do not have an agenda to roll back the rights of American women, LGBTQ rights, to roll back our regulatory rights, the power that we have and justly have to regulate corporations, which are artificial creatures of the state who do not have the same rights and should not have the same rights as actual human beings. We need to have the willingness to, I think, expand this court. It's nine justices, it's not set in the Constitution that it be nine, it could be 15. The court should look more like the American people. It shouldn't just be a bunch of Ivy League judges

LAURA FLANDERS: Does the confirmation of the court's latest justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, make a difference?

LISA GRAVES: It absolutely makes a difference to have her on the court because in part, this court has never had a Black woman serve as a judge. I think it's really important from that standpoint. And she's someone who is, who's shown herself to be someone devoted to facts and law and fairness. But it doesn't change the majority. It doesn't change this faction. But it holds off the expansion of that faction and gives us a toehold for pushing back that faction and outnumbering them ultimately.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's an inside and an outside strategy as Jamie Raskin and others on the House Select Committee into the January 6th insurrection have said.

JAMIE RASKIN: This was not a coup directed at the president. It was a coup directed by the president against the vice president and against the Congress. No president has ever come close to doing what happened here in terms of trying to organize an inside coup to overthrow an election and bypass the constitutional order. And then also use a violent insurrection made up of domestic violent extremist groups, white nationalists, racist, fascist groups, in order to support the coup.

LAURA FLANDERS: There was both the attempt to bypass the constitutional order at the level of the elections and counting the votes and alleging fraud when there wasn't any. And there was the sort of fueling of an outside the Capitol mob of white supremacists and others that you've mentioned. What we're hearing from Jamie Raskin now is that the findings that we're all going to, with any luck, get to hear more about in June will, as he put it, "blow the roof off the house." What are you most listening out for? And are you still able to be shocked by what you're hearing?

LISA GRAVES: In terms of what's happening with that investigation, I mean, more documents, audio, we're already seeing some of that in the revelations about Ginni Thomas's role in using her power to try to influence Mark Meadows and Trump to overturn the election, who was paying her salary, who was paying her consulting fees, who has been paying her all these years as she has played this significant role in trying to influence who gets into the Trump White House and who gets fired from it. This is the wife of a justice on the United States Supreme Court who was actively fomenting insurrection in this country. And she's part of that outside-inside, I suppose, component. My hope is that those sorts of revelations will break through the sort of fog of just malaise and fear and worry over the economy and of the pandemic to really help wake more people up to the fact that our democracy is hanging by a thread. And there are people in the Republican Party who want to cut that thread. Donald Trump is chief among them but he's not

alone. He has extreme partisans who have very extreme views, who are willing to do whatever they can to help themselves stay in power and help him stay in power and that includes fundamentally destroying our very democracy.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's hear from Congressman Jamie Raskin.

JAMIE RASKIN: It is a mistake to think that the right wing, by which I mean the Republican Party, by which I mean the extreme right wing 'cause it's all the same today. It's a mistake to think that they don't operate on ideas because they do. They operate on very elaborate, detailed minute conspiracy theories. It's a race between the popular will and their control over anti-democratic instruments like voter suppression, the gerrymandering of our districts, the filibuster in the Senate, court packing, right wing judicial activism. We need to be mobilized like hell for the 2022 elections. It's either going to be a Democratic majority or Republican majority, that majority is going to be sitting in Congress in 2024 when the electors come in.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that's what the Congressman has to say. Back to you, Lisa, we are in the run-up to midterm elections. Jamie got himself elected. I believe that the vote still matters, even if our democracy is hanging by a thread. But you do have to wonder, if we have seen a popular movement over our lifetimes and in the last few years around equal justice for people of all races, around gender justice for people of all genders, around the climate for urgent action now, even at the level of corporate boards, how have a minority, albeit with a lot of money, managed to influence so many to believe that their lives are on the line to the point where they would go and rush the halls of Congress as they did January 6th? And more benignly around the country, feel as afraid as many of them do, as angry as so many of them do, enough to sign up and get active at school boards and libraries and boards of elections, and none of that has actually turned out to be benign, how do they do it? And what do they have that the other side doesn't have?

LISA GRAVES: This circumstance that we're in is really fueled in part by Fox and OAN and these right wing outlets that have no fairness doctrine, that basically Charles Koch and his buddies helped wipe away so that they can basically preach propaganda without giving any alternative or reality to it. And so you have these entities that masquerade as news outlets. And the related pieces, as we've learned from some of the analysis of Facebook, is how potent anger is in motivating people. How anger is something that spreads like poison. And what you've seen now is that someone like Donald Trump who I personally believe is not just amoral but immoral, someone who is so venal, so selfish, so unworthy of any public office that he has now seen that he can basically use hate and anger like an ATM, to just keep pushing that button to get more cash, to get more money in order to fuel his own vanity and fuel his very dark vision and his lies

about this country and our world, and how so many people can be preyed upon or are gleefully embracing those lies because it fits their own bias, their own bigotry.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm reminded though, Lisa, it wasn't always this way. I mean, there was a period when you and I were much younger and people on the right, including many that you've named, were in the wilderness. And they, at that time, and I'm talking about the 1960s, came together to envision how they would get from where they were then to where they are now. They may not have plotted it exactly, but they identified the need to influence the media, to influence policy. They created organizations to do all of those things, many of which you have tracked. Is this a process that can work in reverse? Do people on the progressive side need to look very closely at what the right did? Because it could be reverse-engineered.

LISA GRAVES: I say it takes a lot of money to sell a lie but they have spent a lot of money to sell those lies. It's not as costly to tell the truth although it can be costly at times. But in some ways it's sort of amazing that it's taken them this long to get to this point because they've spent so much money. And that's because I think that they continue to genuinely be at odds with the will of most Americans, what most Americans want. For example, abortion is very popular in terms of women being able to make their own decisions. It's supported by 60, 70, 75% of the American people. Abortion is more popular than President Biden or President Trump. Abortion is a more popular right or more popular thing than many politicians. And yet because there are some right wing funders, hedge funders and others who are so anti-choice, who have put so much money into these elections, backing these right wing politicians, put so much money into putting, helping to install these extreme anti-choice people on the Supreme Court, we are at a moment where the Supreme Court may well reverse Roe and these state legislatures that are beholden to these same billionaire interests may well expand the opposition to Roe to even take away the right of abortion in the case of rape or incest. But it's not because the majority of people want it. It's because a very few number of wealthy people who are spending their money very strategically have put those pieces in place.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what do we do?

LISA GRAVES: Yeah, so, that's right. So my hope is that as these decisions come down, this decision this summer on Roe v. Wade, the people, even if you're momentarily discouraged and outraged by it, that you not give in. That we not give in, that we use this as organizing, vital organizing to repel these extremists. That we use these moments coming up to really organize and to insist that the majority, the progressive majority, the majority in favor of equality, the majority in favor of great public schools, the majority in favor of making sure that women have reproductive rights and right to privacy, that we dominate in our elections, that we are able to elect people at every level of government who support these values and are not beholden to these

super rich regressive billionaires and are not beholden to this repressive point of view that's just out of step with human rights and basic rights in this country.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do you think is at stake for whom in this moment and why do you care so much?

LISA GRAVES: What's at stake is our democracy and our future. And it's not just this idea, this abstract notion of our democracy, it's really our freedom. Our freedom to pursue our dreams, our freedom to marry whom we love, our freedom to make sure that our friends and colleagues and family are treated equally and fairly and not attacked because of their race or because of their sexuality. What's at stake is our ability to defend and protect this planet. Democracy is not just a structure in and of itself that's valuable, it is, but it's a structure that is devoted or at least supposed to be devoted to human freedom, to human opportunity. And to making sure that human beings, not corporations, and not just a few human beings, a few rich human beings, can make decisions about our lives. And so, it really is, I guess, at the end of the day, Laura, it's about love and love for our fellow humans and love for this planet which is why we cannot give up. If we have a setback, we cannot let it defeat us. And as my hero, Frederick Douglass, said, "Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has, and it never will." And we just have to make our demands louder. More forceful, more determined than some of these squeaky wheels who are being fed lies by this billionaire-backed lie machine. If these repressive forces come to power in the presidency, in Congress, in the court, and we allow them to dominate us, I don't think we'll ever get our democracy back. And I think we will not just lose our freedoms but we'll lose this beautiful, amazing, gorgeous planet we live on because greed and selfishness will be the predominant value.

LAURA FLANDERS: Lisa Graves, thank you so much for your work. Thank you for spending this time with us. Really appreciate it.

LISA GRAVES: Thank you so much, Laura. It's an honor to be on your show. Thank you so much.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's hard to have a conversation about democracy without sounding awfully partisan. After all, one of our two major parties has the word democracy right there. But I think having traveled as much as I have around this country and the world that there are all sorts of people who vote in all sorts of ways, who care about themselves and their families, and the places they're from, and their histories, and their futures, and their water, and their air. And they care about having a say in all of those things. And to me, that's what democracy means. So I will quibble with Lisa Graves about one thing. You know where she says that it costs a lot of money to sell a lie? She's right. But it costs a lot of money to make space for a more complicated story about truth too. Which is why I'm so glad that we have public television and public media

and places that aren't accountable simply to corporations or to the government, but places where viewers and listeners can have their say in the conversations that take place and get heard. So if you think democracy isn't just for one party or another, or if you want to complicate the picture of our society today, I'm glad you're watching this program and I thank you for your support. You can find all the information that you need about how to sign up for our podcast and receive my full uncut conversation with Lisa Graves at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us. For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org.