

## **THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW**

### **THE FORGOTTEN COUP, JANUARY 6TH & THE SMALL TOWN AMERICANS ON THE FRONTLINES OF DEMOCRACY**

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The congressional hearings into the events of January 6th, show that just a handful of election officials in several key states stood between Donald Trump and the overturning of the 2020 elections. Many Americans were shocked — armed mobs don't overthrow legally elected governments here. But a successful coup did happen in the US once in Wilmington, North Carolina.

A healthy democracy requires that people don't just run for office, but feel that they can register and cast a vote without living in fear for their lives. That has never been a sure thing for African Americans in North Carolina. Take this city of Wilmington on the state's Southeast coast. In the years after the Civil War, the African American community began to start successful businesses and vote and elect one another into city office. A disgruntled minority of whites decided that they were going to organize to restore white supremacy by force. And that's exactly what they did. Using the media of the time propaganda, cartoons, and demagogic speeches, as well as the militia force that was called the Red Shirts, kind of like a version of the KKK, they unleashed a massacre in this place in 1898 that led to the banishment of countless African Americans and the overturning of the city government in this building. The story has been buried for more than 100 years but in the last 20 or so years, more and more people have been learning of the 1898 massacre and many are struck by the eerie resonances that story has today.

**CEDRIC HARRISON:** We're actually at 6th and Red Cross at the historical Shaw Funeral Home, Shaw Funeral Home is one of the oldest still standing operating Black-owned businesses in the state of North Carolina, founded by the Shaw family.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Cedric Harrison leads Black Heritage Tours.

**CEDRIC HARRISON:** The community was very much organized. They had a lot of resources during that time. It was a lot of foundations that was able to lift other people up and put other individuals in positions. During that time a street like this would be occupied by prominent individuals, business owners and it was like that village mind community where everybody kind of looked out for everyone.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The men behind the coup used the media of their day, newspapers and mass rallies, to spread lies about government corruption and false threats of Black violence.

**CEDRIC HARRISON:** There was a lot of propaganda during that time here in Wilmington. The reason why I really believe that they felt like it was a threat was for two different reasons. One of those reasons was from education. Black males actually were more literate, they outsmarted, they outorganized the white community during that time. And that scared them. What really sparked the coup d'etat actually happening was the thought of Black male and white female interracial couples.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** The 1898 massacre and coup reinstated strict segregation and discrimination and imposed new voting tests and rules that suppressed the Black vote for years. Sonya Bennetone has led the push for reparations for victims' descendants. The resolution passed in 2014 but is still waiting to become law. She talked with us in front of an empty lot, the site of the town's influential Black newspaper which was burnt to the ground in the coup. There wasn't another for a generation

**SONYA BENNETONE:** Today, we still have not healed. The African American community was affected economically, socially, politically, and psychologically. And a lot of the things that were imposed in 1898 are here today. For example, they didn't have a public official that was African American, just 70 years later. Today, we still have never had a Black mayor and you can count the number of public officials over that period of time to today on two hands. We have a New Hanover County Board of Education that has no African Americans on it as well. We don't have any representatives currently in a state house and historically we've only had two, Senator Jordan and former Representative Sandra Spaulding Hughes. During that time, we had 60% African American, today is less than 20%. Socially, economically, we still have not recovered.

**DEBORAH DICKS MAXWELL:** And this is the 1898 Memorial.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** North Carolina NAACP President, Deborah Dicks Maxwell, sees a danger of history repeating itself in the rise of militant groups, like those who raided the Capitol.

Talk about who the Red Shirts were.

**DEBORAH DICKS MAXWELL:** They were a group of people, sort of like the Proud Boys we have today, who are sort of militia-minded, that wanted to subvert the progress that was made and wanted to downplay Black people within this city.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Not just downplay.

**DEBORAH DICKS MAXWELL:** Kill, they wanted to kill. And they did succeed on November the 10th, 1898 of killing scores of people. If you look at the census records of 1890

and then 10 years later, 1900, you will see a dramatic decrease in the African American population of this city.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Starting in 2020, a focal point of Oath Keeper organizing in North Carolina was rural Columbus County in the south. You don't have to go back a hundred years to talk about white supremacy and violence and questionable elections in North Carolina. We're just 50 miles west of Wilmington, in Whiteville in Columbus County. A little place about 6,000 souls right here, population about 57,000 in the county. Sheriff Jody Greene was elected in 2018 in this place and he went on to acquire \$3.8 million in decommissioned military hardware for use right here. Why? We came to Whiteville to find out and without being here more than 10 minutes, two police cars were surrounding us and the sheriff had passed by. What's going on? We went to talk with some concerned citizens about what they fear and what they're doing. Thank you so much for doing this, really.

**CAROL CALDWELL:** A pleasure. Welcome.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Carol Caldwell hosts what are called, courageous conversations in her historic family home.

**CAROL CALDWELL:** This is what I call the family wall. And this is granddaddy Lloyd Best. He was the one who built this house in 1894. And then underneath granddaddy's picture, you'll see his teacher's certificate. He taught first grade.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Can you talk about what happened with the election of Jody Greene, as you understand it?

**CAROL CALDWELL:** When he first came into office, this was right after the George Floyd murder. And he put in a request to the county commissioners for \$85,000, I think, to purchase military gear, riot gear. And I've lived here all of my life in Whiteville in Columbus County. There's never been a need for any type of military gear and never been a need for any type of riot gear. So the question in the Black community was why do we need this? It's not needed.

**JEREMY SIMMONS:** I know Wilmington had a protest too in response to George Floyd. And you saw a lot of those officers out there wearing the military grade equipment. So I'm assuming that it was in response to that as well but still, when you see officers kind of gear up in that manner, think it's inappropriate, highly inappropriate.

**CAROL CALDWELL:** And it's intimidating.

**JEREMY SIMMONS:** And it's intimidating. And it's intentionally specific to a specific group. It's targeting a specific group of people. And for us, I mean, for me, it makes me feel unsafe.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How was Jody Greene voted into office in the first place? There's ample evidence he wasn't, says former Columbus County Sheriff, Lewis Hatcher, a Democrat first elected in 2014, with nearly 80% of the vote in a county where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one. Hatcher was surprised by the results of the 2018 election which he lost by just 37 votes. He contested the results.

**LEWIS HATCHER:** We went through the course with the Board of Elections here in Columbus County and it was determined that it was at least 180 some provisional ballots that were not accounted for. So my question was, where are these ballots? Nobody could account for them. And to today, I don't know if anybody has ever accounted for them, but I learned that people were going around collecting absentee ballots. And the absentee ballots, some of them were never showing up at the Board of Elections as they were supposed to. So it was contested. The residency of the current sheriff came up. It was contested. The Board of Elections here, the County Board of Elections, ruled that he didn't live in the county. I went out to this site where the Sheriff was supposedly living. It was growed up. There was no evidence of anybody living anywhere on those premises. So it ended up at the State Board of Elections. And of course the State Board of Elections ruled that he did live in this county.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How did that happen? Sheriff Hatcher isn't sure. But in the course of the investigation, it emerged that Greene hired the Red Dome group to help with his election. That same year a consultant at Red Dome was indicted in the county, right next door. Leslie McCrae Dowless was convicted of ballot tampering but died before sentencing and the investigation stopped there. As the January 6th hearings began, many in Columbus remained concerned.

**ROSA BOLDEN:** I kind of feel like you saw what happened there, and the head person that is sort of like what's slowly happening and going to happen here. We know that Jody Greene, it's like this is his country. This is his territory. And what he wants, what he says, goes. And if you try to go against me, there's going to be consequences to pay.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Sheriff Greene's done little to assuage community concerns about his commitment to the democratic process. In addition to acquiring more military gear than any other county in his part of the state, Greene's had nothing critical to say about local Oath Keepers. Even after the US Department of Justice named the group in an early indictment, accusing the North Carolina chapter head of hosting a caravan of armed Florida Oath Keepers at his home on January 4th on their way to Washington. The indictment further alleges that North Carolina Oath Keepers rented a hotel room in Virginia where weapons were stored, ready for use inside D.C., if for example martial law had been declared. Greene denies any association with

the group, but his Facebook page once identified him as an Oath Keeper member since 2020. So far, 21 North Carolina residents have been charged in relation to the events of January 6th. Special forces veteran, and Whiteville resident, Doug Smith, who led the North Carolina Oath Keeper chapter denies all association with violence and claims to have broken with the national group now. Still the presence of so many armed men dedicated to reinforcing police is intimidating, especially given the history of white violence here.

If somebody brought you today, a list of Oath Keepers and Proud Boys and their names and pointed out that they seem to have the same names as some people that own some influential institutions in this county, would you be surprised?

**ROSA BOLDEN:** No, no, because-

**CAROL CALDWELL:** It's always been that way.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Just two miles up the road behind me, up a dirt track between high corn fields on property owned by the Columbus County Law Enforcement Officers Association, Jody Greene is holding the kickoff event for his reelection campaign as sheriff. It's being hosted by the county Republican party and they have absolutely forbidden us access. He won't give us an interview either, although we have asked. But there are young people running for office here too. Why do they still believe it's worth doing? Well, Marcus Norfleet who ran recently for County Commissioner here, met with us and explained why.

**MARCUS NORFLEET:** I ran because there wasn't anybody else who was willing to stand up at the time, just to be honest with you. It wasn't necessarily something that I felt I was eager to do, but I felt it was necessary.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Was there a particular incident that really gave you the impetus to run for office?

**MARCUS NORFLEET:** People were suffering here. I was slowly watching schools get closed down in minority neighborhoods. I became incensed, so to speak, whenever we had the George Floyd killings and I felt like our current administration took this as an opportunity to flex and buy all kinds of militarized gear and parade them down the streets. And in the age of Trump, to see those kinds of things in my community, and to see someone I think who might have wanted to be a demi-Trump or something, to bring that kind of energy here unnecessarily, we've never been a violent people in this area. To see that out of all the things we needed in our community we would put energy, even if not funds, just energy into military grade weapons in Columbus County was just insane to me, it's just a hostile takeover. It's that take it by force kind of thing

that we're seeing happening subtly, maybe not as demonstrative as you saw it in Washington, but there's a subtle and hostile takeover here in Columbus County.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Norfleet didn't win. But back in Carol's home, organizers from across the state are clear that the key to defending democracy at the national level is building multiracial democracy locally. Keith Rivers is the President of the NAACP in Pasquotank County, where a young Black man was killed by Sheriff's deputies in 2021.

**KEITH RIVERS:** Yeah, I guess we have sheriff problems all across the state. In Pasquotank County is very similar location-wise as it is here in Columbus County. Pasquotank County sits in the Northeastern part of North Carolina. It's about 20 miles from the Virginia line. And on April the 21st of 2021, Sheriff's deputies shot, murdered Andrew Brown Jr, a man that was fleeing in a vehicle. He was shot in the back of the head by a high powered rifle in a school zone, 8:30 in the morning, 8:30, 9 o'clock in the morning on a Wednesday. One bullet went across the street into an individual's house. Two other deputies fired handguns as he was fleeing. And those deputies get up and go to work every day. And I think it's important to note when it comes to the sheriffs, their power, okay, the sheriff is elected and they write their own policy. When we looked at what it took to remove a sheriff, you had a better chance of trying to remove the governor. You actually have to have local judges and a district attorney and so forth in order to remove a sheriff. The sheriff has armed deputies that he can move and determine what is right and what is wrong with very little consequence. And we saw that.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Serena Sebring heads up Blueprint North Carolina, a coalition comprising pro-democracy groups throughout the state.

**SERENA SEBRING:** We understood when we were all watching on the news as the insurrection was unfolding. We have to wonder, if that's what it looks like in D.C., what does it look like at our County Board of Elections? What does it look like at our polling places? And the answers to those questions are also built on top of a past in which the racism and the white supremacist practices of those institutions in our communities have been a consistent challenge to an inclusive and anti-racist democracy. So I see the insurrection at home and I hear from our partners, the impact of that on local decision making about safety, and how can we participate even? How can we participate in a democracy when it's not safe to go vote because there have been coffins placed outside of the polling place to intimidate folks. When our law enforcement, instead of protecting elections, often scares people away from voting and doesn't respond to problems with voting in a way that actually increases participation. We have to build from the ground up because the system itself is old. The system is over 400 years old, as is this crisis in democracy. This crisis is not a new one. It is old, as old as our country and it is local, not far away.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Mab Segrest is a long time anti-racist author and researcher based in Durham.

**MAB SEGREST:** Well, I have to start in 1949, born in Alabama, Tuskegee, in 1949 on the cusp of the end of apartheid, basically in the South and in my state and born into what I politely call a very conservative family. I had Klan great grandfather, another great great grandfather helps steal an election from a populist insurgency in the 1890s. And I had enough experiences getting glimpses and then the sharp impact of that culture when I was a child, to be very determined that I will never go back to it. I'll never go back to it. And I recognize enough the markers of what people are trying to go back to, to be more than alarmed.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Curtis Hill heads up the NAACP chapter in Columbus County.

**CURTIS HILL:** I know the only way to make these changes is to change the voting, to empower people to go out to the polls and vote, right? I think that's critical for us in this era but also realizing that gerrymandering and all that kind of stuff is a direct relationship to this white supremacy thing that's growing in our nation.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** If the congressional hearings have taught us anything, is that the fate of US democracy may well be decided in places like these, far away from the public eye.

**KEITH RIVERS:** Political power is created at the polls. And that's one thing I am so proud of our community. We took protesting to the polls. With the help of Blueprint, we were able to organize rallies. And this election, in our city elections we saw them elect a new mayor. We saw four new council persons, and three of them were at the head of the protests. So we took protests to the polls, to political power which in turn will change policy.

**MAB SEGREST:** I would invite people into these conversations to take risks because you'll get your life. And if you think you can wait it out, you have about two years, and then you are going to be in a situation where you're going to need to do it even more and you're going to have less space to organize. So you better do it now.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We've had moments of expanding democracy, expanding the franchise, moving forward in a progressive direction towards this multiracial project that is America. And we've always had sort of backlash, retrenchment. Where do you think we are right now, Curtis?

**CURTIS HILL:** I would say that we are at a pivotal point in American history right now. Who would think would be full circle here doing this fight again, right? This is the soul of America. This is what we're fighting for is the opportunity for not just for me, but for children, for Keith's daughter and everybody's child to have an opportunity to really enjoy the richness of what

America can be, what is written down to be in the expansion of it, is not just African-American's rights, it's women's rights, LGBTQ people's rights, it's people with disabilities, I sit here as a person with a disability, my rights are being assaulted. So when you think about it this is a full assault on everybody's rights in America, and I believe that we have the power as individuals to transform our communities one person at a time having real courageous conversations and not just talking about it but empowering each other and understanding it being a leading voice.

**SERENA SEBRING:** It has to be all of us and this is a chance for that to be real. This is a chance for, for those words to mean the same thing in Columbus County and in Pasquotank County, as they do in Durham County or in North Carolina, as in the rest of the nation. We cannot leave the South behind.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Back in Wilmington, Deborah Maxwell and her colleagues are alert to the warning signs.

**DEBORAH DICKS MAXWELL:** The Proud Boys walked the streets of this park a few months ago. Someone called me and showed me a picture. They've sat at school board meetings. That is the art of intimidation, but we shall not be moved and we shall not be suppressed by them. We are sick and tired of them like Fannie Lou Hamer said, but we aren't going anywhere.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And Columbus County residents say what happens here needs more attention.

**MARCUS NORFLEET:** This kind of thing isn't limited to just Columbus County, it's happening all around. And if you don't respond to it in one place it's a green light for it to happen in others.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Our history is etched into us, whether or not we choose to learn from it. A generation after the Civil War, a powerful white minority used repeated lies about violence and wealth and sex to launch a massacre and a coup. In their actions, in their writings, they were explicit that along with Black people and their white allies, they sought to kill and banish an idea, the idea that even with our individual histories, Americans could come together and build a better future, the sort of future that was beginning to emerge in Wilmington. Today, a minority still find that idea of a multiracial democracy, with good lives for all, contentious — but it's the sort of future that a majority are waiting for and a whole lot of people are working for. And history, with any luck, will tell that story too. From Wilmington, North Carolina, I'm Laura Flanders. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining us.



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