

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

THE DEFUND MOVEMENT IN 2024: FRONTLINE REPORTERS SEPARATE MYTH FROM REALITY

LAURA FLANDERS: In 2020, millions of people came out into the streets to protest racist policing. Many called for redirecting public resources from policing to public health. Four years later, corporate media tell us that voters have turned on the defund police movement. Well have they? And what is the state of that movement itself? Today we have three powerful journalists who have been reporting from the front lines on issues of policing and prisons to share their view. Cerise Castle is a Los Angeles based journalist who has reported for Vice, NPR, the Los Angeles Times, and many more. She created "A Tradition of Violence", not the tradition, but a podcast about gangs inside the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. It's based on an extensive investigation into more than five decades of terror, murder, and abuse. From Durham, North Carolina, Lewis Raven Wallace is joining us. He is the author and creator of "The View From Somewhere", a book and podcast about the problematic political history of journalistic objectivity. Lewis is also the Abolition Journalism Fellow at Interrupting Criminalization, a multi movement resource hub for advocates and organizers that's led by former show guests, Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie. Joining us from Chicago, we have Kelly Hayes, a Menominee author and organizer, a movement educator, who's also a photographer and the host of the "Movement Memos" podcast from the independent progressive news site, Truthout. She's also co-author with Mariame Kaba of the book, "Let This Radicalize You" and she writes a weekly newsletter, "Organizing My Thoughts" to which I just subscribed. Welcome all for this important conversation. I'm very glad to have you with me. I guess because it may have raised the biggest questions or most questions in people's minds, I'll start with you Cerise, talk about it, gangs inside the LA Sheriff's Department? What do you mean?

CERISE CASTLE: Most people are not at all familiar with this concept of criminal gangs inside of the Sheriff's Department, but it is a longstanding tradition that dates back to at least the early 1960s according to my research. Now, these gangs inside of the Sheriff's Department are just like the gangs that we typically hear about functioning on the streets. They are sharing tattoos that identify them to each other. They participate in gang activity such as robbing people, harassing people, and other members of the Sheriff's Department that do not go along with their so-called programming. And they have even been known to kill people as a means of entrance into these gangs.

LAURA FLANDERS: We'll come back to the implications of your reporting and I thank you for it and encourage people to check out the podcast. Lewis, coming to you, there at Interrupting Criminalization, you deal with journalists trying to cover this issue among other things. Talk a bit about what are the questions, comments, concerns, needs that people have as they continue to

cover this issue at a time when so many in corporate media are saying, oh, that was then, this is now, we're in a new moment.

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: A lot of journalists for the last few years who are trying to bring their ethics and values into the newsroom have been super, super challenged by that corporate leadership, but also even in the field of public media where I used to work, public media leadership, kind of regulating this idea of objectivity and neutrality based on the thought of the day. So there was a window of time where it became okay for journalists to say Black Lives Matter. Prior to 2020, that hadn't been okay. And now we're seeing kind of a backslide where journalists who are pushing for a racial justice frame or who are pushing for a trans liberation frame on the work that they're doing in their newsrooms or who are just trying to report honestly about cops and policing and police violence are facing accusations that they are biased, that they're left wing, that they aren't credible.

LAURA FLANDERS: Kelly, your "Movement Memos" podcast is specifically about organizing and I'd love you to tell us what you're seeing out there in terms of organizing around these issues today.

KELLY HAYES: Well, our movements are very active and the idea that defund has become unpopular or is over in some way, I think that's a very reactionary point of view and it's a view that's being marketed in the same way that the idea that the Democrats were so severely harmed by the defund movement in elections was an idea that was being marketed to the public. It had no basis in reality. Folks who were energized and who were organizing to bring life-giving services to our communities, to shift funds away from punitive carceral measures and towards the kind of care that we need in our communities are very active. And we are actually seeing progress in that on those fronts in some places. In Chicago, Treatment Not Trauma is a very popular campaign that has continued to build steam. We have here a progressive mayor who was elected under the power of movements. So the idea that what we've lost ground, that our organizations have become weak, this is false.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tell us a little bit more about that. I mean, Truthout is a national outlet. You are there in Chicago, though, the election of Brandon Johnson as mayor as you mentioned, is very wrapped up in all of this. Is he an outlier and how would you contest that notion that this issue was bad for Democrats?

KELLY HAYES: Obviously we have a different situation here than folks are facing in a lot of cities because there is nothing inherently liberatory about the Democratic Party. We have cop cities being built in Democratic run cities. We had a siege laying for hours to protestors at UCLA where the Los Angeles police and the Democratic mayor of that city did nothing for three hours while protestors were being attacked by counter protestors, basically vigilantes. And so there is a

lot of harm that is going on and there are certainly critiques to be made of Brandon Johnson as well. But the fact is that this mayor exists because our movement's organized, because our people organized, that shows us that this is possible. That when we build together, when we practice the craft of organizing at the community level, we can shift power dynamics and we can win unlikely victories.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you Cerise, on this, I mean the story in LA as Kelly just described it, of what happened in the encampments, intersects with your reporting in lots of ways and I wondered what struck you the most as you watched what was happening, having done the reporting that you've been doing?

CERISE CASTLE: What I saw when I was watching the events unfold at UCLA is how we've seen police function, not just in Los Angeles County, but across the United States for decades. And as I found in my reporting, a lot of these police agencies, individuals, are aligned with right-wing people in their free time. At least one LASD member was a part of the insurrection on January 6th, 2021. You can go into LASD stations and see stickers, t-shirts that are celebrating membership in organizations like the Three Percenters and the Oath Keepers. And a lot of those same tenets are upheld by these white supremacist deputy gangs that are proliferated throughout the department. And this isn't just deputy entry level people that are engaging in this stuff. Our current Undersheriff, April Tardy, who herself is a Black woman, is a self-admitted member of a deputy gang. Just a few months ago the Sheriff's Department admitted that they promoted another deputy gang member to be a senior level executive. So this is ideology that is embraced throughout the structure and LASD is one of the foremost trainers of police departments and sheriff's departments throughout the United States and across the world.

LAURA FLANDERS: And we know that there have been international training exchanges as well between the LAPD among other police departments and the Israeli Defense Force. I'd love to hear from you, Kelly on that too because you've been writing in your newsletter a little bit about how these issues are connecting in your view as you look at movement mobilizations on different fronts. Fronts that we're often told are divorced and distinct and in their separate silos when we look at the rest of the coverage.

KELLY HAYES: When I look at what's happening in Palestine and I see the AI targeting that's being used to select targets for assassination at an inhuman pace. And when I look at the mass surveillance apparatus that Palestinian people are subjected to, and most importantly the normalization of this mass annihilation of people, I see threats to all of us. We have the idea of ethno-supremacy, of closed borders, of using technology to ensure that people are not only not admitted into our countries but not rescued when they are imperiled, while trying to enter our countries. When we look at the ecocide of militarism, these intersections, they're everywhere.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Lewis, I come to you on that. Obviously North Carolina didn't need any Israeli advice on how to be an ethnonationalist kind of a place, going back into US history and we've done some reporting on the relationship between sheriffs in the eastern part of your state and groups like the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys and so on. You are there at the intersection of reporting, researching, organizing. What do you see that you are excited about when it comes to making change or making a shift in the consciousness around these issues and more?

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: I do want to say in North Carolina, defunding the police is a very popular idea. A majority of people when polled without that language want to see money moved out of policing in my city in Durham. Durham was actually the first city in the US to ban police collaborations with the Israeli military. So we're in a place where people are acutely aware of the connections, the historical and present day connections between the Black Lives Matter movement, anti-Black violence, white supremacist organizing, and Zionist organizing and where folks have been rallying around that I think in a tradition of southern solidarity organizing for many, many years. And so something that's been remarkable just in the last few months has been seeing how mobilized the city of Durham, the students at Duke University and at UNC Chapel Hill, how mobilized people have been around Palestine and how quick to make those connections between Israeli militarism and the kind of militarized police presence that we see in our cities here.

LAURA FLANDERS: Durham was one of the cities to set up an alternative helpline for people to call. Can you tell us a bit more about how that works and how it's been working?

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: So yeah, we have to some extent defunded the police here in the city of Durham and moved money out of the police budget, that was done somewhat passively, but nonetheless, moved money out of the police budget and into a whole new city department that is geared toward community safety through non-police responses. So now in Durham, because of this organizing, over the last few years since actually before 2020, people who are in an urgent emergency situation and don't want a police officer to come, can call an alternative number and have trained crisis responders show up, help them, and problem solve and connect them with mental health resources if that's what's needed and come without police.

LAURA FLANDERS: And it should be said based on our reporting, there are a lot of people within the police department who are happy not to be responding to mental health crises calls and support the shifting of some of those resources. It's not a monolith, but we know it's roots. Coming back to you Cerise on the LA front, we interviewed in 2020 Melina Abdullah from Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, about the people's budget that had been developed through a survey of Los Angelinos about where they'd like to see their money go. Where does that

movement stand today and what do you think journalists are getting right and what are they getting wrong about their coverage of defund?

CERISE CASTLE: There's still a hunger in Los Angeles to see our policing forces, both the Los Angeles Police Department, which is responsible for the city of LA as well as the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, which is responsible for unincorporated Los Angeles County as well as several contract cities defunded. Each of these institutions are receiving about \$4 billion annually. And that's taking away resources from things like social safety nets that are contributing to much larger problems that we have in Los Angeles. It's no secret that we have one of the country's largest unhoused populations and there is no means to do anything about those issues because all of our funding is going to the police. Voters time and time again, come election season, are voting for candidates that are running on platforms of reallocating police resources into social welfare programs to tackle the huge issues that we're dealing with in the city of Los Angeles as well as the county. But what we also see happening is that when these people get into power, they backtrack on those campaign promises. What I see journalists getting wrong about when things like that happening is not taking the calls of the voters of Los Angeles, of the citizens of Los Angeles seriously. For the past four years, voters have been surveyed by colleges, universities, by the city itself about what their priorities are. And time and time again the word is said, we do not want to see these huge amounts being dedicated to police.

LAURA FLANDERS: So you have real alternatives, you have real preferences stated by the public and then there are some real convictions that are getting overturned. And you wrote about one of those recently, Kelly, and that was when the Texas Governor Abbott overturned the sentencing of Daniel Perry, the guy convicted killing the 28-year-old Black Lives Matter protestor back in 2020. That is more significant than the coverage would suggest. How?

KELLY HAYES: So in a number of states, we've seen the passage of these anti protest laws that legalize vehicular assaults and other violence against protestors and in at least a dozen more states where these laws have not passed, they've been forwarded. So we have a climate of politicians delegating violence, basically making plain their reactionary solidarity with people who would harm protestors. And so we're seeing a legitimization of violence against people who have a more transformative practice of solidarity, against people who are fighting for things like racial equity, who are fighting for things like curbing state violence. And this is a fascistic development that we're witnessing. This should be seen as a very frightening expansion of the police state and also of a philosophy of violence that is being enacted and that is being shared across our society.

LAURA FLANDERS: I want to come back this question of normalizing because you just hit on something Kelly that I want us to return to. But first, what's got you excited in terms of reporting these days, Lewis?

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: One of the most powerful shifts that I've seen over the last few years has been this major period of growth in local nonprofit media outlets who are approaching, covering police and covering so-called crime and covering safety in a completely different way. So there are outlets like the Kansas City Defender, which was started by a group of Black Lives Matter activists who in 2020 realized that the most strategic move for them as young, Black queer activists would be to have their own news outlet. MLK50 is an outlet in Memphis, also Black-run that has made a transition over these last few years from kind of holding police accountable to exploring questions of abolition and really looking at police funding and bringing a really, really critical eye to that reporting. Another outlet also in the south is Mainline zine, which is an online outlet and podcast based out of Atlanta that's done a bunch of the most kind of on the ground nuts and bolts reporting about the Stop Cop City movement as well as the Atlanta Police Foundation. And following the money, making the connections between the largest newspaper in Atlanta and The Police Foundation.

LAURA FLANDERS: I want to come back to your book and in fact pick up on this question of normalization. In "The View From Somewhere", you talk so poignantly about your own place in this reporting and that question of objectivity. You have a fantastic line at the end of the book where you imagine yourself reporting on a flood, maybe Katrina, could be any climate induced flood. You say, if I'm standing in rising water, am I too close to the story?

LEWIS RAVEN WALLACE: I do think the climate story is such a poignant example because it is close to all of us. Nobody can claim sort of an outside status in relationship to ecosystem destruction. Another area where I've been really influenced around this is of course, trans liberation, coming up as a young trans person without any models of what a trans journalist would be, and with this kind of narrative that being trans made me inherently biased around trans issues. The shift in framework for me has been to say actually, everyone is biased around gender issues. Everyone has a gendered experience and in fact trans people have a special view of that, an inside view, not a monolithic view, not a view that overrides, for example, racial bias that I might bring as a white trans reporter, but a view that might give us a certain kind of access to sources and stories and a certain depth of understanding of the implications of those stories. And so I think trans journalists, Black journalists, Indigenous journalists have been saying and sort of teaching this truth that our proximity and kind of conscious proximity to a story can be a form of wisdom and a deep resource in a way that has been in direct conflict with kind of the dominant mainstream view of what makes an objective journalist. And I think that's not coincidental. I think that's actually kind of an ideological frame that developed, if not consciously, at least in some sense intentionally, to exclude organizers, activists and people speaking on behalf of our own communities and say they're not credible because they're too close. We're all close. And I think the best thing we can do is be conscious of that and then work with it and make something complex out of it in the stories that we tell.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, I read Cerise that the LA Sheriff's Department, the LASD wouldn't respond to your reporting. How does that affect you and did you think about your own vulnerability in doing this reporting? And if so, how did you address that?

CERISE CASTLE: Absolutely I thought about my own vulnerability when doing this reporting. Well, I was still reporting my initial series on deputy gangs, I received several messages from people inside the department that they were in fear for my life because photos, personal photos of mine were being passed around stations, the license plate number of my car was showing up in internal memos, and I faced harassment. I've received death threats, I've received rape threats. I was doing a story just a few weeks ago after meeting with some witnesses to some potential deputy misconduct. I was pulled over. So the repercussions have been very real for me, but it is not anything that would ever stop me from doing this work. We are in a moment now. It is time to take action and history will remember those that did and those that did not.

LAURA FLANDERS: Kelly, coming to you and thank you for that, Cerise, appreciate it. You wrote in your book with Mariame Kaba about what it is that actually moves people when the facts fail, when simply telling people how bad things are or how high the incarceration rate is, how low the violent crime rate is, doesn't move anyone, what does?

KELLY HAYES: I think we rely on fear a lot because some of us are compelled to act out of fear. And so we get this notion that if other people are afraid like we are, they'll want to do something. But a lot of people withdraw from fear, they recoil from fear. And so we just have to remember that there are a lot of other that we have access to, admiration, disgust, the need for belonging, the desire to engage with something that we perceive as beautiful or important, the need for fellowship that we have. I think that there are so many angles by which we can invite people into a story that is worth being part of. And I believe that we are doing that work.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you so much, Cerise, Kelly, Lewis, it's been a pleasure having you with me. Thanks everyone for joining us. You're watching "Laura Flanders & Friends".

These are complicated times for our criminal justice debate and they were made a bit more complicated by the conviction on all 34 felony counts of former President Donald Trump on the hush money and election meddling case out of New York. What have been the talking points since? Well, for some it's been the system works to which I'd simply say for most people it doesn't. People without the power and privilege of Trump would have been sitting behind bars long before now on counts similar to the ones he faces. Others will say it works because look, justice has caught up with Trump, but has it? Not for a lot and not quite yet. Will he serve time? Well, that's complicated too. He is, after all a first time convict on a nonviolent offense. Are we really going to say that all such people should be sent off to prison? We can think more

complicatedly than that, can't we? I'd like to suggest that where we need to focus is on those billionaires still ponying up millions of dollars of support for this guy, even since the verdict and on that party that stands ready to throw its wholehearted support behind this candidate. What does that say about our political system? Political system, criminal justice system, I think it's all a call for complex thinking, for thinking more carefully, for behaving more bravely, and for perhaps thinking more about those jurors and a little bit less about that candidate. I'm Laura for "Laura Flanders & Friends", thank you for joining me for some complicated thinking. We'll be back with more next time. In the meantime, 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.