

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 327 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: It's the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*.

♪ Stand up, stand up. You've been sitting way too long ♪

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan, along with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello, David.

David Feldman: Hello there.

Steve Skrovan: Nice to have you, and it's also nice to have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody, and listeners, you'll see again why what you hear today, you won't hear on NPR, not to mention commercial radio stations.

Steve Skrovan: You are correct, sir. With political rallies, and possibly even in-person conventions eliminated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this has been a relatively quiet presidential campaign season. For a while there, Donald Trump was using the Coronavirus Task Force press conferences to get his political message out to the public, but then he got tired of answering embarrassing questions and abruptly ended that. This puts greater pressure on communicating one's message through political ads. Joe Biden's campaign has spent more than \$5 million in recent days on Facebook ads, and since the national shutdown, campaigning has turned digital, and the spending for political ads is higher than ever. So, if ads are going to be the deciding factor for this election, could the ads be better? I'm going to play you a short clip. This is a famous ad from Ralph's presidential campaign in 2000.

Advertisement: Grilled tenderloin for fundraiser, \$1,000 a plate; campaign ads filled with half-truths, \$10 million; promises to special interest groups, over \$10 billion. Finding out the truth? Priceless. There are some things money can't buy. Without Ralph Nader in the presidential debates, the truth will come in last. Find out how you can help. Go to votenader.com. Vote Ralph Nader for president.

Steve Skrovan: That ad ended up making a big splash because when MasterCard sued the Nader campaign for doing a parody of their slogan, "Priceless", it was replayed over and over again on the news. The campaign got much more bang for its buck. That was 20 years ago; today, you'd call that "going viral". That ad was created by North Woods Advertising. North Woods, based in Minnesota, takes the unconventional approach of being funny and creative in political ads. They have run many very successful ad campaigns for third-party candidates and underdogs. Our first guest on the show is the founder of North Woods Advertising, Bill Hillsman. *Slate Magazine* called him "The World's Greatest Political Ad Man", and he'll be able to tell us his thoughts on

Democratic candidate, Joe Biden's current ads. After that, we'll talk to Susan Clark, who is an expert on town meetings. Town meetings are pretty unique in Vermont. They happen once a year. People get together to discuss the town's business, and they can debate any issue. This is direct democracy in practice. Many view it as democracy in its purest form. Today, as we well know, there is a tremendous amount of debate about the relationship between police forces and the communities they're supposed to be serving. Could some of this conflict have been avoided if town meetings had been more a part of our political and social fabric? Well, Ms. Clark is going to help us understand what the town meeting can achieve. As always, in between, we'll take a short break and find out where the real looting of America is happening with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. And if we have some time left over, we'll try to answer some listener questions. But, first let's hear about what makes an effective political ad. David?

David Feldman: Bill Hillsman is a writer and an expert on independent voters. He is the founder and CEO of North Woods Advertising in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He ran award-winning political advertising campaigns for Senator Paul Wellstone, Governor Jesse Ventura, and our own Ralph Nader's presidential campaign. North Woods Advertising has won numerous awards for creativity in advertising, including an Emmy and multiple Pollie Awards. Mr. Hillsman authored the book, *Run the Other Way: Fixing the Two-Party System, One Campaign at a Time*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Bill Hillsman.

Bill Hillsman: Thanks. Good to be here.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, Bill. David just mentioned your prescient book, which came out in 2004, and you called it *Run the Other Way: Fixing the Two-Party System, One Campaign at a Time*. I just want to give a little framework for our listeners before we get into what you want to talk about and an excerpt from your book, which you talk about in Chapter 1, "Election Industry, Inc." And you say it's made up of political parties, pollsters, political consultants, fundraisers, media-mavens, junk-mailers, spammers, special interest groups, lobbyists, and various other meretricious sorts that profit handsomely from our current political system. Who pays for it? You and me, and of course any candidate brave enough to run for public office. And you go on to say, you're talking about the election industry, "They represent our politics at its worst--from party operatives, to pollsters, to direct mail merchants, to media consultants, to general strategists--the overwhelming majority of political consultants are a craven and narrow-minded bunch who would be failures in nearly every other field. They are disloyal to a fault, as quick to turn on a candidate or a cause as they are to be hired by one. Collectively, I, meaning Bill Hillsman, call this monolith 'Election Industry, Inc.', like the infamous military-industrial complex, but not nearly as productive, it is an inside the beltway collective of toadies, fakes, crooks, character assassins, racketeers,

party apologists, false scientists, phony experts, self-aggrandizers, backscratchers, and backstabbers, often embodied in the same person. Election Industry, Inc., drives up the cost of our elections and drives down the number of people participating in them. The people who populate it concern themselves with only two things: their own self-generation, their own self-preservation, and money." So listeners, obviously Bill Hillsman does not engage in soft talk, but he can back up everything based on his experience. Welcome, again, Bill, and now we go to the present situation. You have a rather pessimistic appraisal of whether the Democratic Party can beat the most impeachable, ignorant, ego-obsessed, incompetent, slanderous president in American history, Donald Trump. Why?

Bill Hillsman: I think they always seem to make the same mistakes, don't they. If you think back to the last two Democratic presidents that came from outside of the system, it was Bill Clinton, who was not really the chosen one by the party machinators, and Barack Obama, who had to defeat Hillary Clinton in order to become the nominee. If you look at the others that we've had, it's been Al Gore, who completely kicked away an imminently-winnable race in 2000; it's John Kerry, who was measuring the drapes for the White House, when he found out that somebody should have paid more attention to Ohio. And it's Hillary Clinton, who was so far ahead by every feasible poll that was out there. We can talk about the deficiency of polling at some point too, but she lost a race that was impossible to lose. It seems like the Democrats, every time they think they're in a position to win, figure out a way to lose.

Ralph Nader: Certainly, Bill, Hillary Clinton gave us Donald J. Trump, and he wants another four years. As Bill Curry, who was formerly a councilor to Bill Clinton in the White House, and then became a critic of the Clintons once said, "Message precedes policy by the Democrats when policy should precede message." Although the polls are higher for Biden against Trump right now, why do you think the Democrats are unable to answer the question that all kinds of people ask, including Democratic voters, [which is] What does the party stand for?

Bill Hillsman: I don't know. That's something that the party has been flailing about trying to answer for at least the last few decades since I got involved in politics. It shouldn't be that hard. I mean everybody understands what the Republicans stand for. They stand for lower taxes; they want you to have more money in your pocket, and they stand for law and order in times like this. That's a pretty easy mission statement to get people to understand. Democrats, on the other hand, have a wealth of things they could be talking about that impact people every single day, yet they fail to understand who they're talking to, what issues are important to the people that they're talking to, and the best way to talk to those people.

Ralph Nader: A good example of that was in the 2000 campaign when Gore would not come out for a stronger minimum wage, which was Franklin Delano Roosevelt's vintage proposal in the 1930s and was very popular among millions and millions of lower-income voters who were making less in inflation-adjusted wages than workers made in 1968. That's just one example, and they've been fiddling around with health insurance since President Truman proposed universal health insurance to a rejecting Congress. How do you think things will change? They keep saying, Barack Obama says it, [and] all the other politicians, that they've got to beat Trump. And they think it's just a matter of voter turnout and fighting voter suppression. You add other reasons why the Democrats might blow it.

Bill Hillsman: They're not very smart. If you think about it, where the Democrats lost the last election were in three states, basically. It's Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, all of which they should have won going away. Those are easy states for Democrats to win, but somehow, they ignored what was going on in those states so that they could expand their message into Texas, North Carolina, Arizona, and places that were anything but slam dunks. In order to beat Donald Trump, you have to figure out: number one, how and where to beat him, and number two, where the possibilities exist to run up the score. The last time, the Democrats looked at the electoral map and decided they were going to run up the score. This time, I think it's imperative for them to understand that you have to win Wisconsin, you have to win Pennsylvania, and you have to win Michigan. If you win all of those and you carry the states that Hillary Clinton carried last time, it doesn't matter what happens in Ohio; it doesn't matter what happens in Florida, you win! If you can wrap that up and pay enough attention to it, then you can talk about expanding the map. Personally, I think Donald Trump not only has to be beaten, he has to be truly, truly defeated. Because, if there's any way for him to hang onto power, unless this is a 15, 20-point deficit, he is going to try to hang onto power. I think it's imperative that Donald Trump not just be defeated, but be defeated by one of the largest margins that we've ever seen a president defeated by.

Ralph Nader: I agree, and they don't seem to have those high expectations. They're perfectly willing just to try to squeak by the most vulnerable president, politically. I mean look at the way he's been behaving lately: how about taking in bleach? Look at what he's done in terms of the walk across Lafayette Square. He turned the military-retired people against him, the former heads of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [and the] former Secretary of Defense. He is stumbling his way into the arms of the Democrats, but yet you say, and I want to say it in your words, "Trump's campaign is running rings around Biden in terms of digital communications. How the Biden campaign is making many of the same mistakes the Gore and Hillary Clinton campaigns made, and how this recent civil unrest is making Minnesota much more winnable for Trump." How do you explain all that?

Bill Hillsman: Because the Democrats take people for granted. It's very close here in Minnesota. In fact, if the election were held today, I don't know that Joe Biden would win, especially based on current events and all the civic unrest that's taken place. But, that's also a function of Democrats taking minority voters for granted. They take certain states for granted. They think that they are "Democratic states", and that they will always be Democratic states, and then you end up losing Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, and damn near losing Minnesota the last time. They take African American voters for granted, they take a large majority of minority voters for granted. I don't know what they're doing. I honestly don't understand what they're doing. Joe Biden is facing a very dynamic candidate in Donald Trump. You can love him, you can hate him, but he's a dynamic candidate. Joe Biden is not. The Biden campaign has to figure out some way of getting Biden in the mix. I think their strategy is: Let's sit on the ball, and let's let Donald Trump destroy himself. That didn't work in 2016. They pretty much sat on the ball, said nobody in their right mind could vote for Donald Trump, and look what ended up happening. You have to go out and you have to engage this guy. I don't know why Biden, if he's trapped in his basement, isn't doing a press conference every day in his driveway. Why aren't they doing more things? They just started to ramp up their digital buys, but they need to go beyond Facebook; that's not where all their voters are. They need to make bigger statements. They need to run a more asymmetrical type of campaign instead of just going back to the basics of: we've got a terrible opponent; everybody is certain to recognize how terrible he is. All we have to do is keep Joe Biden breathing and Donald Trump will lose.

Ralph Nader: That really does seem to be the approach so far. But, how would you, if you were the Democratic Party, not take African Americans and minorities for granted?

Bill Hillsman: I think it starts with party leadership, to a large degree. I don't think they've done a great job, especially in areas where minorities are not a majority or increasing. I think they've done very little to pay attention to minority candidates in certain states that are predominantly white. They don't really try to cultivate black candidates in areas other than black areas. It seems to me that they need to be much more imaginative in what they're trying to do and what they're trying to say to some of their key constituencies. They've been fairly lousy with working people for a long time too. That could be a major reason why they lost Michigan, why they lost Pennsylvania [and] why they could do it again.

Ralph Nader: You mean the trade issue, exporting jobs?

Bill Hillsman: Yeah, I think they're just not listening to what's really concerning people. They're stuck in Washington; they're stuck in an echo chamber. I don't think they get out very much, and they're all so self-satisfied and convinced that they know what they're doing that it just shocks the hell out of them when they don't know what they're

doing [and] they find out they don't know what they're doing. But they never change. They don't change!

Ralph Nader: They have the same political consultants; they don't return calls from people who can give them ideas and be a little critical of what they're doing. They're very, very self-absorbed that way. And to top it off, they're not creative at all. You're a communications specialist, and you know you have to reach people where they live, work, and raise their families. What kind of ads would you put on? It's clear that, from the ads I've seen from the Democratic Party, they're very forgettable. I mean who can remember Hillary Clinton's ads? Who can remember John Kerry's ads even a few days after they were seen? What would you put on in terms of ads that would reach regular, working people? You know, they've lost over a third of union members who voted for Trump in 2018. Be very specific. How would you reach people and get them motivated to turn out the vote before we talk about the GOP's voter suppression?

Bill Hillsman: It's hard to be very specific unless you're really looking at exactly who the people are you're trying to communicate to and with. If we're talking about working families, there's plenty of evidence that what Donald Trump has done has been outright harmful to you and your family on a day-to-day basis, outright harmful. But, the Democrats haven't done a good job of connecting the dots on that. I think it's incumbent upon Democrats upon their communicators to show people exactly what Donald Trump has done, what his policies have been, how those have harmed your family, outright harmed your family on a day [interrupted by Ralph]

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Bill Hillsman who is a communications strategist from Minnesota. You know Bill, this is the first time I've caught you in understatement. You said the Democratic Party hasn't done a good job telling the people what Donald Trump has done to harm them. I mean, he has, in the last few months, and his henchmen, who run the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], the Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA] and all these other agencies that deal with the health, safety and economic protections of the American people--they've announced they've shut down enforcement, no vagueness. They just said, "Well, it's COVID-19 time. You can forget about the federal cop on the pollution control beat; you can cheat, steal; you can do whatever you want. You can eliminate reporting requirements to regulatory agencies. You can import stuff because we're not going to examine imports that could be dangerous medicines from China or products that are coming in." They actually said that, and you'd think the Democrats would have made a huge hullabaloo about this, because, this is giving more asthma to the kids; this is giving more cancer to people; this is ripping off their already squeezed budgets with the financial industry, the credit card companies, the rent-to-own rackets, and the shark loans for workers who are pressed to pay their bills. It's just unbelievable! They've got their head in the sand. It's because they

are in the upper-income brackets; their checks never bounce; they are living in nice houses with health insurance, and they still don't seem to understand that they can't win by just saying, "Trump is unfit for service," which was about the bulk of the huge ad buy of Hillary Clinton. So, what do we do about this?

Bill Hillsman: And worker safety issues, I mean Trump is so committed and so tied to the notion that only the economy can save him. At this point, we're in the middle of a pandemic, and there should be even more safeguards and overseers of worker safety, and yet they're throwing out regulations right and left. Any chance they have, if you can open a business, it doesn't matter to them how you go about opening up your business. It really doesn't. They're putting lives at risk by doing that; they're putting workers' lives at risk, and the Democrats, I haven't heard a peep from on this particular issue.

Ralph Nader: It's truly amazing. Just take the impeachment arena. After Nancy Pelosi impeached Trump on the Ukraine matter, it was an important issue, but it wasn't exactly a kitchen table issue for most Americans. She had at least 11 other impeachable offenses, some of them real kitchen table issues, like shutting down the health and safety and economic protections laws of the U.S. Government. And she had one that was totally airtight: Trump has destroyed the separation of powers; he has defied over 70 subpoenas. Nixon was recommended for impeachment by the House Judiciary Committee, before he quit, because he defied one House subpoena. Basically, the Democrats, after the Ukraine matter was defeated by the Republicans in the Senate, inoculated an ongoing impeachable champion, Trump, from any further accusations under the Constitution. It's just unbelievable to see it. So, do you think it's all down to getting out to vote? Because if Democrats can't motivate many people with their message, they've got their heads in the sand.

Bill Hillsman: Well, it's going to be hard to motivate people when you've got a candidate like Joe Biden. He's just not a very dynamic candidate. He's not Barack Obama; he's not Bill Clinton. In many ways, he isn't even Hillary Clinton who had the advantage of possibly becoming the first woman president to drive voter turnout. So, I'm exceptionally worried. We have a candidate that reminds me much more of Al Gore or John Kerry than of a Bill Clinton or Barack Obama. It's a huge concern, and the Democrats are turning to their usual suspects to hire to get the word out instead of looking for more imaginative types of communicators. It's the same old, same old.

Ralph Nader: That's true. They are good at scapegoating people like the Greens, they never look at themselves in the mirror after they lose to the worst Republican Party in history in election after election, and not just at the national level, but at the governor's level and the state legislative level. It's amazing how they never flunk. They never get new replacements, and they beat back the Bernie Sanders challenge again in ways that

weren't entirely savory. And unfortunately, this country relies on this corrupt Democratic Party as the only available way to replace the Republican brigands and Donald Trump in Washington, D.C. Are they asking you for any advice? Do you have any clients who are in the Democratic candidate race at whatever level, Bill Hillsman?

Bill Hillsman: No, we generally work for challenger candidates. The types of candidates that we work with, even on the Democratic side would, more likely than not, be somebody who's challenging an incumbent. We generally work from our progressive candidates. We work for candidates that really want to change things, not just do what the D-Triple-C tells them to do. We've been trying to do more and more with outside organizations, with independent expenditures, and causes like that to try to bring some type of effective communications to bear on this particular election. But you're absolutely right, the most creative the Democrats ever get is trying to figure out excuses for losing winnable elections. They get very creative then.

Ralph Nader: What do you think about the vice presidential pick by Biden? Do you have thoughts on that?

Bill Hillsman: I think I have favorites that I would probably prefer over other people, but I don't think the vice presidency... vice presidential candidates don't really bring as much to the table as people think. Sometimes people believe that if you pick the right vice presidential candidate, that would deliver a certain state. I don't know that Biden **is** really looking at a lot of candidates that'd have the capability to do that.

Ralph Nader: How about the Governor of Michigan [Gretchen Whitmer]?

Bill Hillsman: I think she's a mixed bag. I don't think she's been in office quite that long. She's a little bit of a lightning rod. I think she's good and I think she'd be a really pretty good vice president, but I don't know if that's the person you want to take out on Michigan right now.

Ralph Nader: How about Elizabeth Warren?

Bill Hillsman: I think Elizabeth Warren would be very interesting. She's certainly much more progressive; she's certainly very capable of handling the job and then some. I think Elizabeth Warren would be a good choice. The question is what sort of new voters does she bring? I don't really know where Biden's campaign has identified their weaknesses. And I'm not particularly certain that if they have identified the weaknesses that I suspect they have, that Elizabeth Warren is the answer to those particular weaknesses.

Ralph Nader: Well, she's tested. She's been campaigning for almost two years. She doesn't stumble very often, and she really irritates Trump and brings the worst out in him, especially misogyny. That alone can be quite significant, and she can push Biden,

who is still stuck in corporate Delaware. I call him "Delaware Joe". And he's too close to Wall Street. That's why; she is very articulate and knowledgeable, and can persuade Biden perhaps better than some of the others. What do you think of this politically correct stuff? It just seems to be going off the wall.

Bill Hillsman: I can't imagine being on a college campus anymore because it's hard to get a broad scope of viewpoints. But, going back to Elizabeth Warren, I think it would be incumbent upon the Democrats to let people know that Elizabeth Warren actually would be great for every single family in the country. She'd be great for kitchen table issues for every single family in the country, because she understands what's going on in Wall Street; she understands how necessary overseeing the way businesses work in America is to protect families, not only in their pocket book, but in their overall health and welfare.

Ralph Nader: I think you put your finger on it. She can't be the choice to win a state or two states, but for working families, it's hard to find a better candidate. I'm quite sure that Bernie Sanders, who hasn't yet come out for her for vice president, at least publicly, supports her because she's his only legacy. After two sweaty, torturous presidential campaigns where he was done in by his own party, or the party that he ran under, even though he's independent, she's the only legacy left for all his labors.

Bill Hillsman: Yes, unfortunately, I think people tend to form opinions of the image of someone, and Elizabeth Warren, being from Massachusetts, having been a Harvard professor, it's hard for communicators to explain to people at their kitchen table how good somebody like that can be for you. But, it doesn't defy the notion that, in fact, she would be a really, really good choice for practically every family in the country.

Ralph Nader: She has great personal skills. Boy, can she ever relate to people. Who has ever taken over 100,000 selfies? Just think of the stamina after a long day of campaigning and speaking, and she has that kind of touch, which is, I think, much more authentic than Joe Biden's touch. If listeners think that my definition of legacy was too narrow, let me elaborate. Bernie Sander's substance of legacy, apart from carrying it on in an electoral campaigns through someone like Elizabeth Warren, was tremendous. I must say, he picked up on a lot of the campaign issues that we ran on, Bill, in 2000. And he supported those issues long before 2000, but he did really shift the balance of dialogue. He did throw a lot of Republicans on the defensive. And now, with the COVID-19, not many people are talking depreciatingly about socialism because big capitalism is hanging by its fingernails on big socialism bailing them out with trillions of dollars out of Washington, the Federal Reserve, and the Congress. Don't you think, though, that Trump's blundering, mishandling, sneering, deriding, wasting eight weeks that could have prevented tens of thousands of deaths in the COVID-19, don't you think that's going to continue to hurt him, regardless of how inept the Democratic Party is?

Bill Hillsman: Absolutely. We also did the race for Jesse Ventura when he became Governor of Minnesota. And one of the great things when you run as an independent or outside of the two-party system is that you can then hire, if you're fortunate enough to get elected, absolutely the best people for the job. So in Ventura's cabinet, he always picked the best person. It didn't matter if it was a public sector person, a private sector person, a Democrat, or a Republican; he got the best cabinet that Minnesota has ever seen put together in a government, because he wasn't on one side or the other. That's the type of thing you really want to have go on at the federal level as well. Trump was outside the Republican mainstream. He ran as a change agent. He could have really upset the apple cart and gone out and hired whoever he wanted. He comes from business, so he could have hired the best people for the job, but he didn't. He hired family members; he hired cronies; he hired flatterers. He hired a bunch of people who weren't doing a job so much as the main part of their job wasn't doing their job as it was making the President feel good about himself. That's where the rubber meets the road. That's when a pandemic is on the horizon and it should be visible to everybody, particularly in government. And then all of a sudden, it's not. Nobody sees it for a month, two months in advance, which is critical time lost, and that's why we're in the situation we're in right now.

Ralph Nader: Well you know They ought to learn from the Paul Wellstone campaign. Paul Wellstone was a professor at a college in Minnesota when he decided to run for the U.S. Senate. Almost nobody had ever heard of him and he retained you as political strategist. Why don't you briefly describe, in the time available, which is short, how you took on that campaign and why Paul Wellstone won that campaign.

Bill Hillsman: Paul had done a lot of work in terms of organizing, especially saving family farms, protesting against banks that were trying to foreclose on family farms in Minnesota. He was an activist from the word go, but he also had the ability to inspire people. The problem for Paul was that he wanted to emphasize organizing so much that he thought he could win a statewide campaign on the basis of organizing when nobody had ever heard of him. In a situation like that, you have to take what is best in a candidate and be able to put it out there in communications so that everybody in the state can see what you see so everybody in the state could see what the people he was helping could see. Everybody in the state needed to see what the activists that would go along with him and help him on these missions could see. That's really the art of communications is taking people who are very good at what they do, who are very well-meaning, and finding a way for that to get to enough people so that enough people can understand that and elect that particular person.

Ralph Nader: Tell our listeners about your famous ad where you took a political liability of Paul Wellstone and turned it into a spectacular ad.

Bill Hillsman: Paul had a tendency to talk about... he had to cram as many issues, once he got your ear, into the conversation as he possibly could. What we did not have in that race was money. We were outspent at least 8 to 1 versus the Republican incumbent. What we did was a 30-second commercial where Paul went from setting to setting and spoke as quickly as he could to the camera about a particular issue. The people in Washington were congratulating us on how we were able to get so many issues into a 30-second TV spot. But the reality was the commercial wasn't about that at all. The commercial was really about how he had to talk fast because he didn't have enough money to afford very many commercials. Fortunately, that ad worked on a number of levels, not just creatively, in terms of getting people to pay attention to it, not just in terms of raising Paul's name recognition, but in terms of fundraising. It was amazing how many people, all of a sudden, said, "I like this guy; I want him to be able to compete on as close to an even level as possible." And we never did get anywhere near close to what the opponent spent, but we got enough money to get the message out.

Ralph Nader: And he traveled all over Minnesota, up and down the state in that famous bus, and he knew what he was talking about, because, as you say, he had been a longtime activist and he knew what issues resonated with working people, regardless of what political labels they put on themselves. How can people get more of Bill Hillsman? Do you have any social media you want to convey?

Bill Hillsman: A lot of our work is up on YouTube. If you just go to North Woods ads, you'll find a number of our commercials up on YouTube, and our website is northwoodsadvertising.com. If anybody wants to visit it, contact us, tell us what we should be doing better, or tell us where we should be working for their particular candidates.

Ralph Nader: Last question. If the Democratic National Committee came to you in the next two months and said, "Bill Hillsman, we're not doing well. Save us." Would you take that retainer?

Bill Hillsman: Probably, maybe. [Ralph and Bill both laughed.] I've been in the business long enough to know that you have to know what the ground rules are, because you can be brought in by anybody, but if they're not going to let you do what you want to do and what you're good at, then it doesn't matter that they bring you in. In some ways, that's the biggest weakness of the Democrats. They hire a lot of people, and they keep hiring the same people, but somehow, nothing ever gets better.

Ralph Nader: Well, on that note, we've been talking with Bill Hillsman, author of a book you should all read. Even though it came out in 2004, it could have been printed this year, called *Run the Other Way*. Bill, we're going to continue this in the next few weeks because there's a lot more to say. And I hope that we can develop a real critique

of this practice by the Democrats where they put message before policy and end up with empty messages, a lot of wasted money, and tons of TV ads that are forgettable. Thank you very much, Bill.

Bill Hillsman: You're welcome, Ralph, and I'd be happy to come back. If we want to start doing something where we look at particular Democratic ads and pick them apart, I'd be happy to do it. Maybe it will be instructional.

Ralph Nader: That would be wonderful, because people listening to this program will probably have seen these ads. They're very repetitious, and you would recommend how these ads could be replaced with more authentic narratives that reach people where they live, work, and raise their family. That's when you get left-right support for so many of these bread-and-butter issues. I don't think many conservative families want to deregulate clean drinking water standards, or safe food standards, or want to allow the insurance companies to deny benefits that these families have already paid for in their premiums when they need healthcare. Thank you very much, Bill Hillsman. To be continued.

Bill Hillsman: My pleasure, Ralph. Any time; it's great to talk to you.

Ralph Nader: Likewise.

Steve Skrovan: We have been speaking with “the world's greatest political ad man,” Bill Hillsman. We will link to his book at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Let's take a short break now. When we return, we will talk about the long-standing tradition in Vermont of town meetings. First, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute for Friday, June 12, 2020. I'm Russell Mokhiber. The Federal Communications Commission proposed a \$225 million fine against Texas-based health insurance telemarketers for making about 1 billion illegally-spoofed robocalls. This is the largest proposed fine in the FCC's 86-year history, reflecting the seriousness of the apparent violations by John Spiller and Jakob Mears, who used business names, including Rising Eagle and JAS Telecom. Rising Eagle made approximately 1 billion spoofed robocalls across the country during the first four and a half months of 2019, on behalf of clients that sell short-term, limited-duration, health insurance plans. Spiller admitted to the US Telecom Industry Traceback Group [ITG] that he knowingly called consumers on the [National] Do Not Call list, as he believed that it was more profitable to target these customers. For the Corporate Crime Reporter, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. Should pigs be allowed to run free? Should people be allowed to get smallpox vaccines? These were important questions back in the late 1700s. Before Vermont became a state, people held town meetings to collectively address these kinds of problems. Can this system still be used to address the problems of the 21st-century? Our next guest will help us answer that question. David?

David Feldman: Susan Clark is a writer and facilitator with a focus on community sustainability and citizen participation. She's a radio commentator and former talk show host. She served as a communications director for the Vermont Natural Resources Council. And Ms. Clark co-authored the books *All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* as well as *Slow Democracy: Rediscovering Community, Bringing Decision Making Back Home*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Susan Clark.

Susan Clark: I'm very glad to be here.

Ralph Nader: Susan, let's talk about town meetings. People in New England know what they were all about, but around the rest of the country, they're not that well-informed. It's a unique New England institution. Back in 1835, no less a skeptic than Henry David Thoreau said, "Town meeting is a true Congress, the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States." And I've always thought the town meeting system is about the most democratic institution in the world--very close to the people, and literally of, by, and for the people. Your book on town meetings trying to get more people interested in turning out and setting up town meetings is called *All Those In Favor*, and the subtitle intrigues me. It's *Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community*. What are the secrets, and how viable is the town meeting in towns and cities in New England?

Susan Clark: Sure, great questions. I think that it's important for listeners to understand that when we say "town meeting", we're not talking about -- we hear a lot about "town hall meetings", and those are sort of these political forums where people just kind of sound off. But a real town meeting is a form of governance. On issues of finance and governance, town meeting is the legislative arm of our town. We are talking about hyper-local issues, but at a real town meeting, every voter comes in; we can stand up and deliberate; we can amend the budget. This isn't just a yes or no situation, like at the ballot box. We're actually adjusting and acting as real democrats, small D democrats. I think, by making these, really, hundreds of millions of dollars in Vermont every year, not to mention the other New England states, we're learning to participate directly in democracy.

Ralph Nader: Not only that, but the people at the town meeting can set the process of the people making the law even if the city council, or the selectmen, as they were called in the old days, opposed them. They can have a town meeting; they can propose an ordinance or repeal an ordinance, and they can go to referendum. That's what goes on in my hometown. Isn't that correct? So, it's a part of the government, and it's called self-governing.

Susan Clark: Absolutely, it's self-governing. In every state [unintelligible], it's the six New England states. Rhode Island doesn't have town meetings so much anymore than the other five, Maine, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Vermont. It's a little bit different in every state, but yes, on finance and governance; think of it as a legislative arm. This is a place where we make binding decisions, which changes us individually. We see that social capital is a lot higher; our sense of civility and our personal civic empowerment is higher in these places. It's pretty easy to vote down a budget when you're in the privacy of a ballot box, kind of go, "Ha, ha, we showed them." But, in a town meeting, government isn't an "us-them" situation. It's a "we" situation. It's we are here together, and we need to stay until we fix our problem. So, there's much less of this sense of mob rules and much more sense of, okay neighbors, we may not agree, but we need to come out of here with a decision.

Ralph Nader: In your book, *All Those In Favor*, it is so useful, listeners. You have frequently asked questions about town meeting: 10 things you can do now to improve your town meeting, 10 things you can do over time to improve your town meeting, and all kinds of useful things to revive the town meeting. I use the word "revive" because a lot of towns and cities in New England over the last 75 years have dropped the town meeting and put in place the city manager and more of a town bureaucracy. Can you give us some figures on that?

Susan Clark: What we know from UVM Professor Frank Bryan's data studying town meetings across Vermont is that we see much better participation, per capita participation, in town meetings in smaller communities than in larger ones. We do urge, rather than just necessarily switching to a city form of government or to, what we call in Vermont, Australian ballot--just switching everything to the ballot--we ask people to consider a representative town meeting. There are many of those in Connecticut. Greenwich, Connecticut has a representative town meeting, so the community is divided into districts and you can be elected to go to the town meeting. It's not direct deliberative democracy the way a traditional town meeting is. But at least it keeps that deliberation, and most certainly in Vermont there's representative town meetings just in one place. But across smaller communities, you at least see a very good chance that a person could be, if they wanted to be, elected to that representative body. It keeps government having a sense of "we" rather than "they". But there are other lessons that

we take away from town meetings that larger communities can learn from. One of them is really all about how important it is that keeping some power local and made in that face-to-face deliberative manner really helps build their democracy. So even in large communities, we can do things like participatory budgeting, which has been used in over 1,500 cities and towns. It's in New York City, it's in Chicago. It'd be fantastic to adopt this in places that have switched to a city form of government.

Ralph Nader: That's a good point. What struck me in Chapter 3 of your book, *All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan, you have a quote by Jefferson, 1816, in a letter to Joseph Cabell. He said, "Town meeting is the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government." Here we are in 2020 and people couldn't care less. There are a lot of empty seats at town meetings, even in small towns in New England. It's like the great majority of people have little self-regard for self-government. They can't be bothered, and a lot of them get their kicks by scapegoating their politicians or excoriating their politicians without drawing the conclusion, which is we're looking in the mirror, because we're the sovereign force under a Constitution--We the People. In this chapter, you say, and this really surprised me, "Until 2004, no book had ever been published about Vermont town meetings, ever. Only one book has ever been published about town meetings anywhere, and that was limited to a short account of the legal forms town meetings take in New England and published in 1999." You continue, "Worse, national politicians aided and abetted by the national media have changed the very meaning of town meeting from a community legislature to a public meeting, or even more off the mark, to a political campaign technique." Here's the real problem, Susan, and you know what I'm going to say. It's the old "Pogo"

Susan Clark: We have met the enemy and he is us.

Ralph Nader: If people continue to withdraw, continue to spend their time looking at screens in virtual reality, continue to decree themselves as powerless when they're not, continue to feel excluded, and disrespected, and voiceless, they won't discover an over 200-year institution that can give them back the power. Because, if the power starts at the local level--cities and towns and villages--it moves up to the state and then the national level. Your comments?

Susan Clark: Yeah, absolutely, and that's something we explored in the other book that you mentioned at the beginning, *Slow Democracy*. We looked at all the different ways that, and we defined "slow democracy" as local democracy that's inclusive, deliberative, and empowered. Town meeting is a wonderful institution, and I'm one of its strong advocates. But, if you don't have a town meeting, there are many, many ways that you can create inclusive, deliberative, empowered decision-making in your communities. And we are seeing that. I'm seeing an uptick in people's interests, certainly since

people's frustration with the current federal administration. People are asking, "How can I, as an activist, make a difference in government?" There are deliberative processes that we can use at the local level, whether it's town meeting, whether it's participatory budgeting, as I just mentioned, in places that have the initiative and referendum systems. Oregon, for example, has created what they call a citizen initiative review, because they know that just initiative and referendum is missing that deliberative part. Deliberation, when we get together to make solid decisions that are based on actually not just yelling at each other debating, but really weighing the pros and cons, like grown-ups, we come away as stronger citizens ourselves. It changes the way we think. It actually changes the outcome of decisions, and that's the kind of thing that we can weave into our local government.

Ralph Nader: You can get this book, *All Those In Favor: Rediscovering the Secrets of Town Meeting and Community* by Susan Clark and Frank Bryan. You can get it by going to vtinstituteforgovt.org. So, it's V-T, that's Vermont, Institute For GOTV.org. What do you think, Susan, in concluding, the prospect is for even a rebound in civic engagement, back to the good old days when they weren't all that good old days, but by comparison? I mean when my parents took me to a town meeting, as a little boy; the place was packed. People were proud to go there, and I once asked my dad, "What do they do there?" and he said, "Well, they start making laws there." It was a big impression on me, and now you have to beg people to even show up at the every two weeks selectmen's meeting. Sometimes, all the seats are empty except for two regular people who get up and shout. The problem is a lot of people don't go to these meetings because they don't like the shouters, and that's a problem. It's not that you don't have the right to shout; it's what they say when they're shouting, and they're like dittoheads. They obstruct and interrupt people, and that keeps some people away. You can't be blistered by moonbeams, for heaven's sake. No one has yet answered the question, how do we engage civic motivation in our democracy--local, state, and national? What is your best suggestion to wake people up?

Susan Clark: Right, well, you did a great job of describing the people's sort of slumber about their power. And I think that when we have... elected officials can do a better job describing why participation in the meeting matters. Too often we invite people to meetings, for example, a voter who attends a select board meeting has no power. That's where you get the yellers. Whereas, if you are actually part of a deliberative body that's making binding decisions at a town meeting, you're less likely to get that sort of jelly thing happening and more likely to get people making civic decisions together. I'm encouraged by the sort of 21st-century engagement strategies, things like participatory budgeting, where I think the internet has changed our expectations for public engagement. You know, people just won't stand for top-down command and control decision-making anymore. And when they see that they can actually change the

structure and invite people in, we start to see much more, I think, hopeful outcomes. Portsmouth, New Hampshire is a great example that has "Portsmouth Listens." People can also Google "everyday democracy" to see the kinds of structures that communities are putting in place so that governments are treating citizens as collaborative equals: less like a hierarchy and more like a wiki.

Ralph Nader: If I can answer my own question, partially, obviously, I haven't been able to answer that question of how do you deal with civic motivation. One is if the citizen groups in the town put up proposals for new ordinances that the town government has been ignoring, if not opposing, that tends to bring people out, and if people like in Brattleboro and some other towns in Vermont want to have municipal citizen expression on war and peace issues, like on the Iraq War, the criminal war on Iraq, or like on arms control, nuclear arms control, they can use the town meeting to pass resolutions, as many towns in Vermont did, and that brings people out. It's sort of like a referendum that are in some of the Midwest and Western states. When you have issues beside the candidates for election time, it tends to bring more people out. We're out of time. I want to really thank Susan Clark and Frank Bryan who, together, have done more to publicize challenges, the contributions, the problems of town meetings, but still retain their great respect for this original contribution by our forebears to local and direct democracy. Thank you very much, Susan.

Susan Clark: Thank you so much for all you do.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with expert on citizen participation, Susan Clark. We have a link to her books at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Let's do some questions. This question comes from longtime listener, who always asks good questions, Dale West. The subject is the Boeing 737 MAX update, and he wanted to know if you have any comment on the January 16, 2020 Department of Transportation Special Committee Review of FAA aircraft certification process, and the FAA's May 19 response to the Committee's report. It says, "Amazingly, there is no FAA reform needed to keep the flying public safe. You can't wait for more self-certification dedicated to Boeing."

Ralph Nader: Dale, your comment is very, very timely. That exchange you described was basically a sweetheart exchange. They weren't really serious. They were just sugarcoating it because the public and the media was demanding action and stronger assertions by the FAA. The problem now is that Senator Wicker, who runs the Transportation Committee for the Senate, has completely caved to the Boeing lobbyists and to the FAA do-nothing people, and he has put out a bill called the Aircraft Safety Bill, and it's nothing of the sort. All it does is tell the FAA they've got to review this, review that, or put out a report on this and put out a report on that. [It has] no teeth, no tougher regulatory authority on the FAA, no mandates, no stronger technical staff, no enhanced budget, and above all, no end to the abdication delegation to Boeing where

Boeing self-certifies, essentially, its own planes, and we know what happened there in Indonesia and Ethiopia. And we also know that the 737 MAX has almost tanked Boeing unless, and this is an ominous prediction, the FAA tries to slip it by a public that's occupied with COVID-19 and street demonstrations on police violence and re-certify and get it up in the air. That is not likely to happen, but I wouldn't put anything past the FAA, because the FAA knows it doesn't have to worry about Congress, and the FAA can do anything like that. They're very arrogant; they're very secretive; they're very cushy with Boeing. The other side is more airlines are starting to cancel their orders for the Boeing 737 MAX, and so the 5,000 orders are shrinking by the week, and with the weakness of the airlines, they are now not expanding their service, which is what the purchase of the 737 MAX is all about. They are contracting. We'll see how it turns out, but I'm glad you're right on top of it, Dale. Just spread the word.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you for those questions. I want to thank our guests again, Bill Hillsman and Susan Clark. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up".

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when we speak to Lisa Gilbert of Public Citizen about what they are fighting for in the next stimulus package. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. If you're listening in the St. Petersburg, Tampa area, or Houston, there are community radio stations, which I would love to have carry this radio hour.