

## **RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 112 TRANSCRIPT**

David Feldman: From the KPFK studios in Southern California.

Steve Skrovan: It's the Ralph Nader radio hour. Welcome to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour my name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host, David Feldman. How are you today David?

David Feldman: Very good. I know we have a lot of guests on the show today but I wanted to ask Ralph about Donald Trump. Eleven months ago on this show you said, "Don't underestimate this man." I thought you were - well I didn't believe you. And now he is the presumptive nominee for the GOP. What happens next?

Ralph Nader: Well, he's a master manipulator of the mass media, because of the experience with the Apprentice Show, and he's promising the world. He's like a father authority figure, "Don't worry, it'll happen. Believe me, trust me. We'll get jobs. We'll block the immigrants. We'll have tough trade treaties. We'll curb Wall Street. We'll get rid of Obamacare and put something much better in this place." But he doesn't say what is in its place. He talks in conclusions that make people feel a little re-assured. People have been betrayed by politicians for years. But, if I was a Republican mucky muck, I would be very worried because we're now seeing the beginning of the transformation of the Republican Party into the Trump Dump and he may take the Republicans in Congress down with him. The only thing he has going for him is Hillary Clinton. She is very vulnerable, has high, untrustworthy levels - not quite as high as his - so we've got a terrible set of choices here, assuming some scandal doesn't bring her down and Bernie Sanders rises to the nomination. He would have beat her if there were open primaries. Anytime there are independent voters voting in open primaries, he does very well. He won in Rhode Island, because there was an open primary. And he lost Connecticut, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania on the same day, because only registered Democrats could vote along with New York, earlier days. Bernie Sanders has done an outstanding job coming out of nowhere to become the most trusted and the most respected in the national polls. There's a recent poll out, David, that has him as more trustworthy, more knowledgeable, more prepared, all the characteristics you want from a president. But unfortunately, the Democratic Party has rigged it in favor of Hillary in many ways, including limiting debates and the time of the debates, and things that went in Iowa and elsewhere.

David Feldman: Let me get back to Trump for just one quick second, because earlier we were talking about Ted White. He wrote the Making of the President series, and he talked about meeting Nixon in the Oval Office for the first time. He had not been a fan of Richard Nixon's, but when he sat down in '69 in the Oval Office to interview Nixon, suddenly there was this halo over Richard Nixon's head. And I'm wondering: is it possible that Trump could suddenly, we would see a halo instead of a monstrosity on top of his head?

Ralph Nader: He's very belligerent when he's attacked, and he's going to be attacked a lot in Washington by politicians by foreign governments by anybody he steps on. If he tries to block

US companies from going to these countries - as he promised - they're going to take it lying down? The wall will create riots - a \$20 billion wall - and he says he's going to make Mexico pay for it. There are more people going back to Mexico than coming in from Mexico in the last couple of years because he ignores that. He's a counter puncher by his own words. You see he's a counter puncher. You've got to know when to keep quiet when you're the president. He thinks he's being elected to a one-branch government. It's like Congress and the courts don't exist. He's going to do this; he's going to block that; he's going to keep Muslims from coming in. He may consider closing mosques. He's going to get jobs for everybody. He's going to put terrors. There is something called Congress that has a role in that. He's turning the party of Lincoln into the party of Trump. Watch out Trump voters.

David Feldman: Where on the calendar are we supposed to stop being amused by all these?

Ralph Nader: Well, he never was amusing. If you're a student of mass media manipulation, he took the mass media for a ride, and he still does because he said the most outrageous false bigoted slurring things. He got by far the most press. The media descended into his pits instead of having a higher estimate of its own role and responsibility in American society, which its preferred positioning and the First Amendment of the Constitution. It became his bullhorn. And so ABC had him on 80 minutes up until mid-December and had two minutes for Bernie Sanders. And Bernie Sanders in a head on poll against Trump beats him readily, more readily than Hillary. So we have to do our homework, folks. Stop looking at the stage here. Stop being a spectator. Start talking to your neighbors and friends. Look at to third parties whether it's Libertarian, Green Party. Talk about electing good people to local state level and urge Bernie to go all over the country, supporting progressive candidates. He's got a great cache now, great support. He's gaffe-proof. He's honest, scandal-proof. He shouldn't just be a [indiscernible 0:05:39], Hillary should he concede to her in the coming weeks.

Steve Skrovan: That's a good segue to the top of our show. Even if it isn't a good segue, I'm going to force it into a good segue.

David Feldman: No, it is. I was thinking the same thing about how the media isn't covering Bernie.

Steve Skrovan: Right. Well, last week, we devoted the entire show to promoting the conference that Ralph is hosting well Breaking Through Power. And we featured three speakers: America's number one populist, Jim Hightower, the founder of Consumer Watchdog, Harvey Rosenfield and Michael McPherson, the Executive Director of Veterans for Peace. They are going to participate in this summit - and I'm going to call it a summit, Ralph - of public interest organizers, advocates, intellectuals and experts at historic Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. Not to be confused with Independence Hall in Philadelphia, it's Constitution Hall in Washington D.C., and it all starts on May 23rd and run through the 24th, 25th and 26th. Each day will be devoted to a different theme. And never before has there been such a gathering of people who know how to fight the good fight, over 80 speakers in all. It's going to

be an exciting four days. Day one, is entitled, "How's It's Done" and will feature organizers and advocates who have scored tremendous victories in the public interest. We're going to learn what we can learn from their strategies and tactics. Day two is about the media, which we've just been talking about, and how the people ought to be able to assert their place on the publicly owned airways. Day three we'll deal with issues of war and peace. And day four we'll cover Congress and how to make it more responsive to ordinary people.

Ralph Nader: This is a Super Bowl of civic mobilizations. It's not just talk. We're going to try to create new groups to break open the mass media for more space for serious content. It's too much entertainment, advertising, redundant this, movies, sports. They're using our public airways. We've got to have more space for serious content. And also, we're creating a group we hope called The Secretariat to bring together the high level retired military diplomatic and national security officials. Retired but speaking out against plunges into war, criminal wars of aggression, empire. They did against the war in Iraq, but nobody organized them and multiplied their numbers and got them on the media and got them into Congress. It's a huge resource for America, these retired officials. So there's a lot going on. We're going to put in your hands a citizen summons tool where you can summon your Senators and Representatives to your own organized town meetings. There will be fourteen major re-directions on May 26 Thursday called, "Breaking Through Congress," whether it's corporate crime, local economies, improving the civil service, the restoration of the rule of law, renewable energy and many other changes. The citizen summons is your tool to put muscle behind We the People, the Preamble to our Constitution. So go to [breakingthroughpower.org](http://breakingthroughpower.org). See how you can get tickets. There will be scholarships. Bring the family. It's a great learning experience and very easily accessible if you're living in the greater Baltimore, Washington D.C. area.

Steve Skrovan: Once again today, we're going to bring you three more people who will be at Constitution Hall for the Breaking Through Power Conference. Later in the show, we're going to be hearing from Karen Friedman of the Pension Rights Center. We've also got Mark Green. He's a former Nader's Raider.

David Feldman: But first up, the expertise of this guest spans at least two of the topics and probably more. He knows a lot about the media and a lot about war and peace. Chris Hedges was a Pulitzer Prize winning war correspondent for the New York Times, covering war zones in Central America, the Middle East and the Balkans. He's the author of 11 books including, War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning. American Fascists, and Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt. He writes a weekly column for Truthdig. And we are thrilled to have him back for his second tour of duty on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. Welcome back, Chris Hedges.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, Chris Hedges.

Chris Hedges: Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Chris and I have had a lot of conversations. He writes this great article every week for the Truthdig. He's the author of many books, one of my favorites is the, *The Death of the Liberal Class*. He's a very severe and proper critic of liberals who sold out to corporate power, who become warmongers in themselves. One thing a lot of people don't know about Chris is he's been in a lot of wars, covering it for the New York Times. It's amazing he's even survived. He's dodged bullets. He's dodged explosions in Central America, the Middle East, the Balkans. And so he speaks from experience when he shows you how important waging peace is, muscular peace, diplomatic alerts, conflict prevention, rather than plunging into war like all these neocons want the US to do, but they don't want to have their children go off and fight of course. You're going to be on May 24th, Wednesday on the day called, "Breaking Through War." Chris, give me your appraisal of what kind of resurgence, we're going to have Veterans For Peace there. We're going to have people like Danielle Brian, the Project on Government Oversight. We're going to have the Friends Committee on national legislation, Coleman McCarthy who has installed peace studies in many high schools and colleges. We're going to have the former high level CIA analyst turned critic Paul Pillar. We're going to have Lawrence Wilkerson, the former Chief of Staff to Colin Powell. What a powerful argument he's making, critiquing our rush to war. And we're going to have Phil Donahue is going to be down. He's going to show part of the film, "Body of War" about Tomas Young, the severely wounded US soldier in Iraq and what happened to him when he came back, as well as the number of whistle blowers and people who are challenging the growth and waste of the military budget like William Hartung, Center for International Policy. We know that this country is an empire. It's pushing other areas around the world just blowing apart here or there, drone attacks, Special Forces. What do you think the blowback is going to be in the next few years, and how are we going to counter attack with peace, Chris Hedges?

Chris Hedges: Well, what we've done from Libya to Iraq to Syria and you could argue parts of Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan is create a series of failed states and in that vacuum has risen these very frightening groups like ISIS. And that is the consequence of this - I think we could argue the worst strategic decision in American history - to prosecute these pre-emptive wars, which of course now if we exclude the genocidal campaigns against Native Americans are the longest wars in US history, fifteen years now Afghanistan and what is it twelve, thirteen years in Iraq. It is one that benefits neither anyone in the Middle East nor anyone in the United States. We are not more secure or safer than we were before we went in to Iraq and Afghanistan. Once you open that Pandora's Box of wholesale violence, you lose control. That's why all of the original goals, which the Bush-Cheney administration used to justify the war, have been completely upended. We go into Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda, not the Taliban, which was negotiating and willing to negotiate with us with over the presence of Osama Bin Laden. And now we're engaged in this war against the Taliban, which we've lost. We wanted to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad; we now function as his Air Force. And he has integrated into his military units Hezbollah, so it means we function as Hezbollah's Air Force. Iraq as a unified country is destroyed and is never coming back. And that's the consequence of endless war. The deeply misguided intervention in Libya, which not only created a failed state in Libya, giving fertile ground for ISIS and cities like Sirte but Gaddafi's massive arsenal has just bled out

beyond the borders, including into the hands of militant groups and neighboring Tunisia. It has been a deeply misguided policy. And I think that there is no vision other than the fact that Obama doesn't want to walk out of Afghanistan and be tagged with losing the war. The government is now inserting more and more troops into Iraq. I think the official count is 3,000 or 5,000. But I did an event last night at the New York Public Library with Seymour Hersh and he said that his sources are telling him that it's far closer to 20,000. So yeah, this is much like the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. We are bleeding the country dry of resources, the investments into armaments like Tomahawk Cruise Missiles, for instance, which cost \$1.1 million. Well in the few days in Libya we dropped \$1.5 billion worth of Cruise Missiles alone in Libya. And look what we have to show for it. We're playing a very dangerous game at the end of empire. And we're going down the way empires traditionally go down, which is expanding themselves militarily beyond their capacity to sustain. And this would also include the expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe up to the borders of Russia and the Ukraine and the Crimea. And Gorbachev had been promised by Reagan with the fall of the Berlin Wall that the US would not expand NATO beyond the borders of Germany. Well, why did they expand? Because Raytheon and all of these defense contractors want new markets. It has created instability, antagonism and an understandable antagonism with Russia and created a kind of witch's cauldron of Jihadist rage within the Middle East. And there doesn't seem to be anybody with any vision or understanding of what the consequences.

Ralph Nader: On that point, what you described also is unconstitutional, illegal, violation of Geneva Convention. That's the nature of empire. The White House under Bush and Obama said we can go anywhere, destroy anybody, draw on anybody, blow up anybody, go through national sovereignties, overturn anybody. And that's going to produce what the CIA has called "blowback." And you're going to see more blowback. And what's happened is our adversaries have become more numerous. No matter how many leaders they cross, they become more skilled. They're spreading into Europe. They can't stop the suicide bombers and how long will it before it comes here?

Chris Hedges: It'll get here eventually. The difference between Al Qaeda - and I covered Al Qaeda out of Paris for the New York Times after 9/11 - and ISIS - and there are some very important differences - one is that Al Qaeda was just this kind of nihilistic acts of martyrdom, whereas that's not ISIS. ISIS is attempting to create in a controlled scenario the size of Texas a new caliphate from the 7th Century which was the kind of heyday of Islam. The other thing about ISIS is that it has 20,000 foreign fighters. And 4 to 5,000 of them hold EU passports. It's estimated that there are about a 150 to 200 ISIS fighters with American passports. So, the Europeans - if you listen closely, intelligence agencies will tell you and this is that part of the reasons the attacks in Paris took place is they don't have the resources to follow that number of people. And because the numbers are smaller in the United States, they are more easily monitored. But certainly the saturation bombing of Raqqa and places that ISIS controls and the fact that they don't have an Air Force - their version of an Air Force are suicide bombers - means that they are working overtime to pull something off within the United States. And I think it's not a question of "if," it's just a question of "when." And as you have said

correctly, the moment that happens the erosion of civil liberties, the massive state surveillance and monitoring, the militarized police, the removal of Constitutional protection is largely by judicial fiat means that with a flick of a switch, we're going to be living in a very frightening police state. And the press, which is already phenomenally anemic, is through fear - as we saw in 9/11 - going to urge the state on to remove what little liberty we have left.

Ralph Nader: Almost everything we're concerned about in this country gets crowded out. Public budgets are drained. You can't repair America, the schools, the proverbial bridges, highways, public transit, et cetera. Anybody who has any grievance, they can't get on the press. It's all about anti-terror, interviewing all these warmongers. So, let's put this before you, Chris. What would you tell the American people to do? Mobilize? What will you tell them to do? Because they still have the sovereign power. Congress is only 535 men and women. There are millions of people out there who share your concerns. What would you have them do in this election year? Because it doesn't look we're going to get much of a change from Trump or - if Hillary's the nominee - from Hillary the hawk. A major article in New York Times magazine two days ago, a newspaper that endorsed her - a leading article on how incredibly hawkish she is in addition to being a Wall street sympathizer. So, what would you urge people to do? Give them a program.

Chris Hedges: Well, I had spoken to Bernie Sanders along with Kshama Sawant at an event we did together the night before the Climate March.

Ralph Nader: And she is...?

Chris Hedges: She is the Socialist city councilwoman in Seattle. And we have urged Sanders not to run as a Democrat for precisely the reasons that are now evident. The Democratic Party establishment had fixed the system against him. He has done surprisingly well given. But they locked out independents. They have super delegates. She has Super PACs. And I think in a fair election i.e. an election where corporate money did not dominate, he would have beat her. But this was not a fair election and Sanders unfortunately has decided - or announced - that he will endorse the nominee, which is very clearly going to be Clinton. In that moment he becomes an impediment to progress. And I would say to Sanders supporters that Kshama Sawant a socialist alternative has put up a petition calling on Sanders to run as an independent in the Green Party. But if Sanders isn't going to step out and help us build a system free of corporate dominance - and the Republican and the Democratic Parties are of course completely beholden to corporate money and corporate power - then we have to do without him. And I think we have to stop getting caught up in these election cycles. Obviously, an independent isn't going to win. We have to think about what's going to happen five, ten years from now. We have to begin a movement. If five, ten million people will vote for an independent, that's ten million votes for a single payer healthcare. That's ten million votes for stopping endless war. That's ten million votes for the regulation of Wall Street. And the system will only respond when we stand up to defend ourselves. And unfortunately, the system has been quite astute, using that mantra of the least worst and the fear of the other, which is why people, most people see through Clinton.

They will just attempt to demonize Trump in a way that makes people grit their teeth and go into the ballot booth and vote for the Democratic anointed candidate. We have to stop playing that game.

Ralph Nader: You know what, Chris, nothing can stop Bernie Sanders from leading a civic movement for all these things. He could fill them all in the fall with hundreds of thousands of people and then regionalize the demonstrations and create a civic movement. In other words, he doesn't have to be a toady to Hillary. Now, with all the people supporting him and all the contributions and the donations, he could be a major civic force as a US Senator.

Chris Hedges: Yeah. He could be, but I'll tell you why he won't be, because he told me. When we pushed him to run as an independent his response is, "I don't want to end up like Ralph Nader." And what does that mean? It means the Democrats who have worked out a quid pro quo with him, whereby he blocks third party movements in Vermont, they do not run a serious candidate against him for his Senate Seat. They allow him to sit with the Democratic caucus. They give him a committee chairmanship. All of that he knows will be taken from him if he defies the party.

Ralph Nader: Chris, what's ironic is in the coming days they're going to be demands by the corporate Democrats representing Hillary Clinton for Bernie to drop out, "Drop out Bernie, drop out." You're already hearing the signs, so he's about to get the same treatment. They're basically saying to Bernie Sanders, "Drop out. Otherwise, you'll be like Ralph Nader." He's going to get to say quit.

Chris Hedges: Without question. But the problem is that he has already, unless he goes back on what he has said repeatedly has said that he will support the nominee. And at that point, he attempts to funnel the energy and the enthusiasm. But I don't think it's going to work with large numbers, especially the kids, the younger voters. But he will function the way Van Jones functioned in the last election, which is - remember he was running around saying, "Occupy the Vote." I think we're at a different moment in American history. I think people have seen through the system both on the left and the right. That's how you seen the Republican Party enclose but unless Sanders is willing to defy the Democratic establishment and up to this point he shown no interest in doing that. We're going to have to do it without Bernie Sanders.

Ralph Nader: You'll hear more from Chris Hedges at Constitution Hall. We're going to videotape all the presentations for further uses, education uses. Come one and all. Go to the website [breakingthroughpower.org](http://breakingthroughpower.org). See how you can attend these events on May 23, 24, 25, 26. And Chris Hedges will be one of the speakers on May 24th. Thank you very much, Chris.

Chris Hedges: Thank you Ralph.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking to Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author Chris Hedges who will be speaking at where else Breaking Through Power conference at Constitution

hall in Washington DC later this month. Please go to [breakingthroughpower.org](http://breakingthroughpower.org) for details. And of course, read Chris's weekly column in Truthdig. Right now, we're going to take exactly one minute and check in with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mohkiber, the Tony Baretta of the corporate crime beat. Russell?

Russell Mohkiber: From the National Press Building in Washington DC, this is your corporate crime reporter morning minute for Friday May 6th 2016. I'm Russell Mohkiber. Johnson and Johnson was ordered by a United States jury to pay 55 million dollars to a woman who said that using the company's top powder products for feminine hygiene caused her to develop ovarian cancer. The verdict, which the company plans to appeal, was the second straight trial loss for the company, which is facing about twelve hundred lawsuits accusing it of not adequately warning consumers about its talc-based product's cancer risks. Following a three week trial in Missouri State Court, a jury deliberated for about a day before returning the verdict for Gloria Ristesund. She was awarded five million dollars in compensatory damages and fifty million dollars in punitive damages. Ristesund said she used the baby powder and a "Shower to Shower" powder for decades. According to her lawyers, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and had to undergo a hysterectomy and related surgery. Her cancer is now in remission. For the corporate crime reporter, I'm Russell Mohkiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Our next guest is also returning for a second time. Mark Green and Ralph go back a long way. Mark ran Public Citizen's Congress Watch for ten years. After that, he went on to found the public interest organization, The Democracy Project. He was elected New York City's first Public Advocate. He is also an author, and a radio and TV commentator. His latest book is just out this week. It is entitled: Bright, Infinite Future: A Generational Memoir on the Progressive Rise. Welcome back to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, Mark Green.

Mark Green: Thank you. I'm happy to have made the cut a second time.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much Mark. In the time we have available, I'd like you to give the public a hint of what you're going to present on May 26th 2016 at Constitution Hall Washington DC. You're going to be the featured speaker on Electoral Reform - a pretty hot topic these days - along with many other leaders. Give us an idea of what you're going to tell the assemblage in Constitution Hall about our electoral system.

Mark Green: Well, whether anyone there or around the country is interested in the environment, anti-trust, pension rights, you name it, it all depends on a democracy where popular will is reflected by a Democratic Congress. That's not true now. I saw that people who didn't register to vote, voted in 2012. Of that cohort, Obama would have won three to one. So, there are two plus things that must happen for our democracy to consider the kind of reforms, Ralph, that you've been pushing for fifty years and your Constitution Hall event promises for the next fifty. It means less money and more voters. And I'm pleased to see that both Hillary Clinton, the likely nominee, and Bernie Sanders early in their candidacies, said that that they would - by



appointing one, two or three progressive jurists to replace vacancies on the courts like Scalia - would overturn Citizens United. And would probably then overturn the Shelby County Voting Rights case, which weakened the Voting Rights Amendment. And overturn the case that allowed voter ID. All of that would mean that more people would vote and fewer billionaires would be able to sway elections. Now finally, also on the political reform agenda are things like gerrymandering, the filibuster. These are not in the Constitution. And California has a system where congressional districts are allocated - not picked by the legislators who pick their voters but by voters who pick their legislators - can be done. If all this is done, then the progressive era - the emerging progressive era - we are in will be long-standing, deeper and broader.

Ralph Nader: Mark, you're not only a leading scholar - having written one of the best books on campaign finance reform - but you've experienced it. You've come up against candidates in races both for Congress and for the Mayoralty of New York City and for other posts, Attorney General, who have amassed huge amounts of money against you. And so you talk from experience. Why don't you give us the capsule in this fashion? I guess about a month before the election of who's going to be the Mayor of New York City. In 2001, you were ahead of Michael Bloomberg by seventeen points in the poll. Tell the listeners what happened in the succeeding months?

Mark Green: Well, let me put you in my shoes and not to alibi but simply to be a reporter. When I won the Democratic nomination for mayor I was ahead of Bloomberg by about twenty points. My pollster of Mark Mellman Polls, said, "I have good news and bad news. Good news is: I've never had a client ahead by twenty with three weeks to go who lost. The bad news is Bloomberg, who is a multi-billionaire, is spending a million dollars not a month, not a week, but a day, and gaining a point a day. Mathematically, I did the math and I realized "uh oh." On my own strategical terms I figured that was to steal his money. I was told that was illegal. And so, I organized Democrats. I worked like hell. But I was done-in. And God - she has sense of humor Ralph. When I worked with you producing the best seller Who Runs Congress, we concluded that money runs Congress. I then become a Public Advocate of New York City and draft and get enacted a law - the best campaign finance system in the country - where now any small donation is matched six to one by public funds, which helps to level the playing field. However, because of two Supreme Court decisions both through Citizens United, a wealthy individual is regarded as simply engaging in free speech by spending - by the Koch brothers and the Bloomborgs - spending hundreds of millions of dollars. And that trick has allowed conservatives to often - who have the money - to dominate. And so I lost to Michael Bloomberg by two points after 9/11. And then after his \$74 million campaign. But like you, Ralph, I learned that I'm more interested in the "dreams of the future," wrote Jefferson, "than the history of the past." And so I'm looking forward to the 45th President to enacting the kind of campaign finance reform that you've been pushing for your whole life.

Ralph Nader: Well, I hope they take you as one of their prime advisers. You're just out with this wonderful book Bright Infinite Future. I'm sort of conflicted when I say "wonderful" because you say a lot of nice things about me and our work together but ...

Mark Green: Truth is a defense.

Ralph Nader: ... but this book is almost like a history of over forty-five years. What would you like people to come away having read this book and where did the title come from Bright Infinite Future, just out this week?

Mark Green: Two things. I hope they take away what Jeannette Rankin said to us half a year before her death in 1973. She was the very first woman ever elected to the Congress in 1914 - to those who are doing the addition go "What? How could she?" She was still alive in her early 90s when we met with her. And when I asked her, "My God, you lost twice for the Congress, You served two terms. How did you endure over these fifty years to push your suffragette democracy idea?" She said to me "Son, you can't lose if you never give up. You can't lose if you never give up."

Ralph Nader: What a wonderful statement. She's from Montana.

Mark Green: That's correct. And it's a statement that embodies your public life and I hope mine. The title Bright Infinite Future came because I read that in 1953 Leonard Bernstein, the great conductor, of course, and the great liberal said, "A liberal is someone who believes in a bright, infinite future." And then I read, of course, the famous mission statement of Bill Buckley in his National Review in 1955, "A conservative is someone who stands athwart history yelling: Stop!" How better to contrast why progressives are on the side of history than showing that progressives, liberals, populists - however lurchingly, however much government makes mistakes - is trying to fix things, the economy and society, while conservatives want to go back to the 1950s maybe the 1850s. Which is why this November is going to be a reckoning, if not a rolling realignment when it looks likely that Hillary Clinton will beat Donald Trump by double digits and frankly advance the progressive prospects so long as citizens keep her honest by attending the Constitutional Hall convocation of "Breaking Through Power." Because the politician will respond to the pressure on him or her.

Ralph Nader: Another way of saying without a strong civic society, politics goes into the dumps. Politics is a mirror image of how much time we spend or how little time we spend as active citizens at the local, state, and national level. I've figured out a way to say this, Mark, and here's the way: Dictatorship cannot happen without people letting it happen. Democracy cannot happen without people making it happen. And just a point on your great book, which is really funny in a way - Mark Green is the wordsmith. He has an appendix. It's called "The Book of GOP Twistifications." He wrote the book Reagan's Reign of Error, which is hilarious, quoting Reagan like, "92% of pollution comes from trees." And like Nuclear warheads, they can always be recalled once unleashed." And then on page 339, Mark, you have a heading called "Climate: because there's no planet B." Great book. Read it folks, Bright Infinite Future out by St. Martin's Press. We'll see you on day four, Mark, May 26th 2016. Let's hope the hall is full of people ready to mobilize and recover the country under the name of We The People, which by

the way is the Preamble to the US Constitution. It is not We the Congress. It is not We the Corporation. It is We The People. Thank you very, March Green.

David Feldman: We've been speaking with Mark Green who's latest book is entitled Bright Infinite Future: A Generational Memoir on the Progressive Rise. He will also be speaking at "Breaking Through Power" later this month. Please go to [breakingthroughpower.org](http://breakingthroughpower.org).

Our next is guest is the Executive Vice President and Policy Director of the Pension Rights Center. Her name is Karen Friedman. And Ms. Friedman has been protecting and promoting the rights of consumers for over twenty years both of the media and in front of congressional committees. She coordinates Retirement USA and the Conversation on Coverage and is also responsible for the Pension Center's day-to-day operations. Welcome to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, Karen Friedman.

Karen Friedman: Yeah. Hi. Great to be here today.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, Karen, for coming on the show. The theme of the show is [Breakingthroughpower.org](http://Breakingthroughpower.org), our Super bowl of civic mobilization at the Constitution Hall May 23, 24, 25 and 26 in 2016 ...

Karen Friedman: Yes, and I'm looking forward to that.

Ralph Nader: ... and you're going to be right on the stage with seventeen other leaders of accomplished citizen advocacy groups, who have worked 10, 20, 30, 40, 45 years to improve their country and have overcome tremendous odds. They've had their losses, and they have not been discouraged. They have had their victories, and they have not been satisfied. And so, we want to talk a bit about a modest trove of trillions of dollars of public and private pensions owned by the workers. Together they own about the third of New York Stock Exchange companies at least. And the Pension Rights Center has been at it since the early 1970's, when the major ERISA law, E-R-I-S-A was passed. And that is the framework. So, let's get started and just talk a little bit about what is this ERISA law that you've been grappling with and trying to get enforced and changed, Karen Friedman? And then we'll get down to the various pension plans and companies like General Electric and IBM tried to do the workers in.

Karen Friedman: Yeah. Well, ERISA the Employer Retiree Income Security Act was passed the 1974 essentially to protect the reasonable expectations of workers and retirees to ensure that they could get the benefits that they earned. And so, when ERISA was passed in 1974, it setup a bunch of rules to ensure that the money has to be invested in the interest of workers and retirees; that people had to be able to earn a pension after working for a certain number of years; that there was a private pension insurance program that was setup, which people look at as the crown jewel of the system to ensure that if you worked for a company that later went bankrupt that you wouldn't lose all of your benefits. And so that private pension insurance program called the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation still exists. And it's made sure that millions and millions of people have not lost their pensions when a plan has gone bankrupt or

exhausted its assets, which was really an amazing thing. The Pension Rights Center, you might say, grew up alongside ERISA, because we were created in 1976 - thanks to you Ralph - because you were the one who handed Karen Ferguson a check and told her to make pensions into an issue. And so, she and I have been at it almost since. And there's been lots of challenges to the system. As you can imagine, a lot has changed over the last forty years, forty-two years. And just as you're trying to get laws enforced, other things come into play and corporations are continually trying to game the system. You have companies that are constantly trying to drop their good plans. They've cut them back. They've merged them. They've done all kinds of manipulative types of things to get out of plans. And also there's been a trend away from good old-fashioned what they call Defined Benefit Plans. Those are plans that are employer-paid and are pooled and professionally invested so people have money for the rest of their lives. And there's been a real trend away from those good old-fashioned Defined Benefit Plans in favor of 401K Plans, which are really nothing more than retirement savings plans where individuals have to save for themselves. The Pension Rights Center has been fighting all this trends. We've tried to keep promises to people that in the system and also we have tried to create a new universal secured and adequate pension system on top of social security.

Ralph Nader: Before we get to that, Karen, give us some examples of how these companies have cheated and shredded and diluted people's pension plans, who have been working for these companies loyally for years. I mean, if it's the workers money, how do these companies tap into it, loot it, use it for their own purposes? There's a Wall Street Journal reporter who wrote a book called Pension Heist. And Karen Ferguson with Kate Blackwell wrote a book on pensions. There've been some exposes. But I mean - workers have asked me "Hey, it's our money and it's vested. How can they it away from us?" And give some examples of the heart-rending rip-offs.

Karen Friedman: Yeah. Well, I'll give you one example that's happened most recently, actually something that's happening actually as we speak, Ralph. Which is that certain kind of - they're called Multi-Employer Plans - and these are plans into which unions negotiate with lots and lots of employers. They're union negotiated plans, but typically in the trucking industry or the food service industry or the construction trades industry. And these Multi-Employer Plans have always operated so that employees essentially give up wages so that their money is put into these plans. And then they expect to get pensions based on all those years of work. And as I said earlier, these plans are also insured by the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation. What we're seeing right now, because of the law that was passed at the end of 2014 - Congress passed a law pretty much at the behest of a lot of these both union and employer trustees that would allow for the first time for trustees to cut back the already earned benefits of both workers and retirees in order to balance the books of these plans. So, you something happening right now where there's about 270,000 workers and retirees, who are part of the Central States Teamster Pension Fund. And they are about to find out this week whether or not their pensions could be cut as much as 40-70%, because the law called the Multi-Employer Pension Reform Act that was passed at the end of 2014 - without debate, without hearings, and that would allow

for the first time for trustees for plans to cut back the already earned benefit of these benefits. And the way that it used to work is that in these Multi-Employer Plans - without getting into too much detail right now - but the only way the benefits could be cut back at all would be if these plans exhausted their assets. But because lobbying money - mostly by these both union and employer trustees - they passed this law that now will allow these trustees to cut back the benefits of people years and years after they've earned benefits; and they've already been retired. We have been working for the last few months - this is what we're calling the latest and one of the biggest crises we've seen where suddenly retirees, they give up their vacation pay, they gave up their wages so that they could get these pensions. Now they're in 60's or 70's and then they are being told, "Oh, sorry, your benefits maybe cut back as much as 40 to 70%." This is both affecting workers retirees and widows and spouses. This is a situation, if this is allowed to go forward, and the Treasury Department - which has the authority to implement this law and makes its decision on whether to accept this particular application that was put in by the Central States Teamster Pension Fund - if they say "yes" to this, then seriously hundreds of thousands of people could see their benefits cut as early as July. And it could lead to benefits cuts over a million people. That's been one of the ...

Ralph Nader: Yeah. Just to interject here, Karen. Over the years, millions of people have seen their pensions their private pensions shredded, looted and it isn't even a part of the presidential dialogue in the presidential elections. You hardly hear any senators or representatives talking about it. What do you think is going on?

Karen Friedman: Yeah. You're right.

Ralph Nader: Why aren't the unions trying to make a big deal here? Why aren't they putting ads on TV? Why aren't they forcing at least the Democratic Party to address it? As you say, this terrible bill passed without debate in 2014?

Karen Friedman: Well, one of the problems in the situation I'm talking about, Ralph - and you're right, there's a lot of scenarios like this that we could talk about - but in this situation you had some of the unions actually supporting this bill. You had the Construction Trades Unions and a few other unions that were supporting these benefit cut backs, because what they were saying is, "If we can't cut back on benefits of the workers or retirees, then these plans are going to go under." And the Pension Rights Center's position on this - along with AARP and the Machinists Union and others - has been to say, "That's ridiculous. What we basically need to do is we need to bail out these plans to make sure this doesn't happen." You are absolutely right. I would say that the whole issue of pensions is part of the American Dream. If you look at national opinion polls right now, Ralph, they basically show that pensions are one of the top economic concerns for people, even rising above paying their mortgage and healthcare benefits. And yet it is really true we haven't heard very much at all in the presidential campaign about the fact that pensions are being weakened. Companies are slashing benefits for workers; and not to mention the fact that - while all this is happening - that there are these huge gargantuan pensions going to top executives. This is a huge issue. And yeah, we're going to be making that into a big issue.

And when I do speak at the big citizen participation conference that you're putting together, I am going to lay out in more detail all the ways the companies have absconded with people's money, have broken promises, have slashed benefits for workers, while doing everything they can to continue these huge outsized pensions for their top executives.

Ralph Nader: We've been talking with Karen Friedman of the Pension Rights Center. Karen before we go, tell people how they can contact the Pension Rights Center. You're going to be speaking on May 23rd at the great Constitution Hall in Washington DC about these issues. But how can they contact you? What if they have a complaint, they have a question, how do they reach the Pension Rights Center?

Karen Friedman: Well, there's two ways. You can write to us right on our website which is [www.pensionrights.org](http://www.pensionrights.org), and we will respond to your questions. We also have a story bank right on our website, where if you have a story of ways in which you've lost a pension, or your pension has been reduced, or you think something else unfair has happened to you, or you don't even have a pension, and you don't know how you're going to make it, please put something on our website. You also could call us at 202-296-3776. And we're right here in Washington DC. And we're right there trying to represent your rights to make sure that you're going able to have a pension when you retire. Also, I want to point out that we have two sides to the office. One side works on policy and the other side we actually have a legal program as well. And we provide technical assistance to six pension counseling projects around the country that help people with their individual questions. If you have a question and you live in one of the thirty states where we have a pension-counseling project, and you need help with your pension, then one of our pension counselors can help you. And if you get in touch with us and you have a pension problem, we could give you the names of those pension-counseling projects.

Ralph Nader: Karen Friedman, let's go down an issue in Vermont when IBM tried to maneuver the pension plans of the workers there. Can you describe that and what Bernie Sanders did?

Karen Friedman: Yeah. Sure. This was back in 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002. And the Pension Rights Center was working very strongly on this issue where IBM - and there's lots of examples of this, Ralph, where you see companies - and really they're often counseled by these big consulting firms to find ways of breaking kind of promises to workers but doing it through legal loopholes. In this situation, IBM and lots of other companies - including Verizon - change their good old-fashioned pension plans into something they called the Cash Balance Plan. And without getting into all of it, it was a way - this very surreptitious way - for the company to change the benefit formula in a way that was so complicated that they thought nobody would notice. But because IBM was filled with engineers, these guys were - the workers were able to figure this stuff out. And they were actually able to come to us and tell us what they thought was happening. And in fact, the formula, in essence, ended up hurting especially older workers and cutting their benefits by as much as 50 or 60%. But it was this sort of legal maneuver that they were doing. We started to realize that a lot of consulting firms were telling big corporations, who at the time had really - Big Blue had a really good reputation - and they're workers really

talked to us about it. It was non-union companies and their workers had said to us "We looked at IBM as being our family." So they couldn't believe that after working for this company for so long that the company would really try to betray them. So, they were shocked by this initially. This was again at the early part of the 2000's. But the workers worked with us, and they came up with Yahoo Clubs. And they were able to work with us to, you know, Bernie Sanders worked with us on legislation. And we were able to ultimately get rid of the worst abuses in these situations. Now, of course one abuse disappears and another one comes up. That's what we're always doing, Ralph. And I know that you're doing this in lots of other areas, but it's kind of like a whack-a-mole, right? You whack one mole and then another one pops up. Corporations are moving faster than we can, coming up with all kinds of ways of trying to cut benefits or change plan formulas. But we try to often - by talking to workers or retirees actually - we're often able to see new trends. And then we try to fight those trends. So, when I was talking earlier about now all of these workers and retirees facing this huge benefits cuts - we're working really hard organizing a lot of these retirees to work with us to try to change the law to stop this happening. That's often what we do. Workers bring issues to our attention as much as we bring it to their attention. And then we work with the grassroots - both union and non-union employees. And IBM, as I said before, it was largely hurting management employees. But if you see a trend that's going to hurt management, eventually it's going to hurt the union employees as well.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. Well, listeners you've just take a taste of what you're going to hear and see and be motivated at the great Breaking Through Power Convention at Constitution Hall Washington DC. Go to [breakingthroughpower.org](http://breakingthroughpower.org). You'll listen to Karen Friedman of the Pension Rights Center. You'll listen to people who revolutionized wheelchair technology and broke the wheelchair monopoly that was gouging people with disabilities. You'll see Michael Jacobson on food, safety, nutrition. He has revolutionized the area. You can see Jamie Love, who broke the price of AIDS medicines from \$10,000 per African per year to \$300. And now it's even lower than that. Michael McPherson the head of Veterans for Peace on how veterans are all over demonstrating, protesting often non violence civil disobedience, waging peace over waging war. You'll see the Foresters of the US government, who organized the group called Public Employees for Environment Responsibility talk about professional responsibility of environmental staff in the US government. Barry Schenk of the Innocence Project that's freed death row people who were falsely convicted from being executed. The hundreds of drugs unsafe, ineffective taken off the market by Dr. Sydney Wolfe, Public Citizen Health Research Group. It just keeps going and on. Robert Fellmeth, the most effective citizen advocacy group for children in the country out of Southern California is going to be there. The head of the Center For Auto Safety, Clarence Ditlow. The great defender of indigenous peoples Robert Coulter of the Indian Law Resource Center. They're going to be so many people together. It's a great civic jamboree. You know what our ambition is David and Steve? Our ambition's to have almost as many people fill those seats of 3500 in Constitution Hall as the number of people who got up early in the morning to go to the zoo in Washington and see the eight months old panda. How about that for ambition?

Steve Skrovan: That's pretty good. But no panda is as cute as you are, Ralph. You know that.

Ralph Nader: Listen. If I could only bring the panda next to Karen on the stage, we'd fill the seats.

Karen Friedman: It's true.

Ralph Nader: Seriously.

Steve Skrovan: That's an idea.

Ralph Nader: We've got to be serious. If we're not serious, we're not going to have fun. The history documents that. And we've got to be more engaged to citizens and grab hold of that sovereign power that the Constitution gives us. Nothing can stop the citizens once they mobilize. By the way, a lot these issues and subject matter are supported left/right, conservative/liberal support all of this. Last I heard conservatives are not immune from unsafe food and hazardous drugs. Last I heard liberals are not immune from waste in government. And so we've got a great left/right coalition here with fantastic leaders. If there was a civic academy awards Karen - which there should be in a sane society - not just the Hollywood Academy Awards. If there was a Civic Academy Awards agenda on national TV, you and others would be the nominees. So come to --

Karen Friedman: Wow. That would be great. And I'm hoping, Ralph, that I can actually bring some of my entertainment to this. I'm hoping I'm going to write a song, which will be better - I promise you - than what Carly did. But I think it is key. I think that right now what we're seeing in this election is a lot of - both disaffection - but also a lot people who are participating in the process. They want to see change. And I think that now people are beginning to say we can make change. I think that the conference that you're putting together is going to be really fabulous, because people - particularly a lot of younger people - are going to see that a lot of us have been at this for really long time. But things change for the better. You're often trying to stop bad things from happening, but we are changing things. And it could be a fun as well. I'm looking forward to being there on the 23rd, 24th, 25th and 26th. And I look forward to seeing all of you.

Ralph Nader: Very good. Bring your staff and friends, folks. Wherever you are, call your friends and relatives who are in the greater DC area and tell 'em to show up and be part of it. You'll see how much change occurs from tiny budgets. In fact, Karen, what I'm going to do: I'm going to total up the budgets of all these groups on day one, eighteen of them. They've transformed so many things to the better all over the country, food, auto, safety, you name it. And I don't think their total budget amounts to what one CEO makes from some giant corporation. So, we're going turn this around.

Karen Friedman: I think you're probably right.



Ralph Nader: We're going to turn around. Thank you very much, Karen Friedman of the Pension Rights Center, we'll see you in May ...

Karen Friedman: Okay. Looking forward to see you soon.

Ralph Nader: ... May 23rd at Constitutional Hall Washington DC. Thank you.

Karen Friedman: Okay. Thanks Ralph. Bye, bye everybody.

David Feldman: I'd like to thank all the guests on our show, Mark Green of course, Chris Hedges and Karen Friedman from the Pension Rights Center.

Steve Skrovan: That's our show. a transcript to this episode we post on the [Ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://Ralphnaderradiohour.com) or Ralph's weekly blog go to [Nader.org](http://Nader.org) for more from Russell Mohkiber go to [corporatecrimereport.com](http://corporatecrimereport.com).

David Feldman: Remember to visit the country's only Law museum, the American museum of Tort Law in Winsted, Connecticut. Go to [tortmuseum.org](http://tortmuseum.org). Join us next week on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. Talk to you then Steve, Ralph

Ralph Nader: Thank you Steve. Thank you David, thank you listeners.