

## RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 391 TRANSCRIPT

**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. Good morning.

**Steve Skrovan:** Welcome. And we also welcome the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Hello, everybody.

**Steve Skrovan:** First, on today's show, we're going to return to the topic of Afghanistan. The United States spent 20 years trying to remake Afghanistan's government and military in our own image. Billions of dollars and thousands of deaths later, the US has finally withdrawn its troops. We've left the people of Afghanistan to fend for themselves in the nation we "built" and it's not going well. The resulting chaos has left pundits and politicians blaming Afghan leaders for failing of their country. President [Joe] Biden for withdrawing, President [Donald] Trump for promising to withdraw, President [Barack] Obama for not withdrawing earlier, and President George W. Bush for invading in the first place.

But all of this performative outrage distracts from a truly outrageous fact. Our elected officials and military leadership have known for years that our war in Afghanistan was a failure. And they knew that the Afghan government that we have been propping up was ill-prepared to stand on its own. Now that we're facing the fallout from their choices, what do we do? Can these same people who brought war in Afghanistan, who lacked the courage to admit their mistakes, reverse course? We'll ask our first guest, Colonel Lawrence [Larry] Wilkerson how we got here and what our leaders should do next.

Then we'll turn to a progressive beacon on Capitol Hill. Jacob Wilson is a congressional staffer who came out of the peace movement. Weapons manufacturers have successfully lobbied for a bloated military budget and corporate lobbyists have cultivated direct access to our elected representatives while advocates for peace and other progressive causes have been left out in the cold. So Jacob set out to create the kind of progressive network he wanted to see.

One year later, at the Congressional Progressive Staff Association [CPSA] has over 550 congressional staff members. Mr. Wilson will be our second guest. We'll ask him about the association's goals, how it has been received on the Hill and how progressives can use grassroots organizing strategies in the halls of power. Then Ralph will answer more your listener questions. And as always, somewhere in the middle we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's continue our conversation about our 20 years in Afghanistan and what it says about what America is today, David?

**David Feldman:** Lawrence Wilkerson is a retired US Army Colonel and former chief of staff to [US] Secretary of State Colin Powell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Thank you, David. Good to be back with you.

**Ralph Nader:** And he's been teaching for years at [College of] William & Mary in Virginia. Welcome, Larry. When this whole Afghan effort, George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, toppled the Taliban after 9/11, the invasion started in October 2001, you were in the [US] State Department. What can you tell us about the origins of this invasion that has had 20 years of frustration, slaughter of innocence, huge amount of money that could have rebuilt part of America. What can you tell us about those early days? And was there much dissent? Was there a consensus they had to topple the whole government of Afghanistan and take over?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Well, let me say first, I can tell you a great deal and will try to do so in the time allotted, but let me say one thing that I'm really angry over this morning, because I'm a veteran of Vietnam. We never learn anything. I have already heard the "stabbed in the back" phraseology from the military. It's being couched now as – it was not a military defeat, it was a political defeat. This is an abandonment of everything the military was responsible for in Afghanistan, and a lot of the failure should be laid right at the feet of the Pentagon.

After 9/11, there was a rage in the government. There was also a fear, a very palpable fear, because George W. Bush had no political mandate. He had the mandate of the US Supreme Court – period. We thought we were going to be thrown out of office on our heads because we just allowed the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor. That quickly abated when we realized after he was on the debris pile in New York and said, "The people who did this will hear from us soon," and his poll ratings went to 90% plus. And then it became a rage. The President even expressed that rage in an interview when he had some evangelical leaders in the Oval Office and he said, "Please help me. I want to rip, roar, and thunder. I'm in a rage." And he asked them to help him calm down in accordance with his Christian values.

So, that's how we went at it in the first place. We at the State Department, Richard Haass in particular, and my boss, Colin Powell, were very much alarmed that such a rage persisted, because we knew the world was coming together in a way it had not come together before. We called it "a moment of global solidarity" that could be used in a very positive sense to advance a lot of our better wishes and objectives. We quickly saw that going to hell in a handbag with this rage for war, but we did what we could to attenuate it. We pointed out, for example, that we had used law enforcement before as the principal instrument against terrorists, with the exception of Ronald Reagan's raid in April of 1986 on Libya, which was the exception that proved the rule. We went right back to law enforcement. And we pointed out that if you go to war with these criminals, you will elevate them to warrior status, which is precisely what we did. You'll have to deal with Geneva and the other laws of land warfare and so forth. You will have a real problem. [Donald] Rumsfeld was - typical Rumsfeld, [US] Secretary of Defense - saying, essentially, "Well, we'll cross those bridges when we come to them."

Well, we've been crossing those bridges ever since Rumsfeld got fired in November of 2006. But it was a response out of rage. And as [Carl von] Clausewitz or any other theorists of war will tell you in no uncertain terms, when you go to war based on rage, it's probably not going to turn out too well. And indeed, it deviated into Iraq in 2003. The war planning started for Iraq as early as November. We went into Afghanistan in October. November 2001, General [Tommy] Franks at the time, the man in charge, said, "This is crazy. How can I do Afghanistan?" He was right. We turned Afghanistan into an economy of force theater, which Colin Powell had told the president

would happen. And Dick Cheney had put his finger in Colin's chest and said essentially, "You're not a military man anymore. Quit operating in the military realm." Well, he was telling him we don't have enough troops to do two major regional contingencies simultaneously. And of course we let Afghanistan go to pot. Not that it would have turned out any differently had we had half a million troops for Afghanistan, but at least it would have been better in terms of all the Afghans who had to die for our invasion and incompetent occupation thereafter.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, you know, just to etch the history a bit, it's often said that Afghanistan is a place where empires go to get buried and the British Empire got buried in the 19th century there. And then Russia, Soviet Union came in and then they had to leave after ten years, defeated. And we didn't seem to think that that area of the world in terms of resistance applied to US Armed Forces. Tell our listeners who drew the lines of Afghanistan's boundaries to begin with. These were tribal regions. There was no Afghanistan. Who drew the lines, Larry?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** It's not a state. It never has been a state. And I dare say, given present conditions and conditions estimated for the future, I don't think it will be a state. The British and others in the Great Game drew the current lines. And what you have is Uzbeks living in Uzbekistan and Pakistan. You have Uzbeks living in Afghanistan. You have Tajiks living in Tajikistan and in Afghanistan and Pakistan. You have Pashtuns and others, Azeris, living in other places. You have them living in Northern and Eastern Iran and you have them living in, of course, Baluchistan, which is not really - talk to the tribes - a part of Pakistan. And you have him living in Pakistan proper. You have them everywhere. And when you go out in the hinterland, as Sarah Chayes has pointed out in her book *Thieves of State[: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security]* and recently in an article called "The Ides of August" A brilliant article, which I ask everyone to read. She has pointed out that you go into the hinterland of Afghanistan, which is almost everywhere outside Kabul, and you ask Afghans and they don't even know the term Afghanistan, let alone understand what it should imply in terms of a national entity. They know their tribe. They know their tribal shura. They know other things related to that kind of culture. They don't know nationalism, statehood and so forth.

So in that regard it was insanity for us to start an occupation aimed at state building in Afghanistan, but of course it wasn't aimed at that. What it was aimed at ultimately was becoming a cash cow for the military industrial complex, which it has been for these past 20 years. Lockheed [Martin Corporation], [The] Raytheon [Company], all those big guys have made a fortune off Afghanistan. Just look at their CEO salary increases and their share price increases. Iraq and Afghanistan together have saved and sustained and put them into ultimate prosperity over the past 20 years. Not to mention Syria, Libya, Somalia, and a host of other places. It's a disaster. And it's all about this sucking at the tit, as it were [Abraham] Lincoln's terminology, "too many pigs for the tit," he said, of the US war complex.

**Ralph Nader:** Kind of, again, the prescience of [Dwight] Eisenhower's warning in military industrial complex. And his warning indicated that he thought it was going to be a lot worse than it was in the 1950s when he made those statements. I wanted to get your view on the Afghan government and Ashraf Ghani. Ashraf Ghani was an anthropologist teaching at Johns Hopkins [University] and he renounced his US citizenship in order to run for election in Afghanistan. He is a Pashtun. He comes from the Pashtu tribe. He had traveled all over Afghanistan before he ran for the presidency and knows the culture very well. He was the [Afghan] finance minister before he ran for the presidency of Afghanistan. And then he got elected [and] he had to share power

with another powerful person, Abdullah Abdullah. And then what happened? It seems like the US didn't utilize his knowledge. He was known to be incorruptible personally. They sidestepped him. They started negotiating with the Taliban even before Trump without the Afghan government on board. And now the whole Afghan government is getting the recriminations by the hour of its collapse. Could you give us your take on all of this?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Ashraf Ghani showed that what you said was absolutely true. You said something to the effect of he knew Afghanistan very well. I think that's the case. He knew Afghanistan very well, so he fled immediately. He didn't stick around. He knew what was going to happen. Unlike some of the people around him from Washington and elsewhere, he knew exactly what was going to happen. You can't have a government in a place that is a non-state any more than you could have a government in a place like Saigon that has no legitimacy with the bulk of the people. In the case of Afghanistan, probably over 90%, no legitimacy, whatsoever. Only has a relationship with a superpower that sustains it and expect when that superpower leaves, as in Vietnam and now Afghanistan, that things will hold together. They simply won't. The fact that some in the Pentagon and some in the State Department and elsewhere in our government thought it would shows us the depths to which our competence has sunk as we have increasingly become an empire rather than a republic. If you will consult history, you'll see that that's an effect of empire in many respects, whether it's Rome chasing Hannibal for years and years after Cannae in order to get him, or whether it's the British Empire holding on and holding on until Suez in 1956, when Eisenhower essentially put the stake in their heart. That's the way empires act.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, we never really get the story of what Ashraf Ghani was trying to tell the US government over these years, whether they heard him, whether they saw he was powerless. What's the story there? Of course he has never spoken out. He has never presented his case. He is now getting criticized for fleeing Kabul and his response briefly, about a week and a half ago was that he wanted to avoid a real bloodbath and then he and his circle would have been hung in Kabul if they didn't flee and just have the Taliban deal with the US. You see some sense in that approach?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** I do, personal sense in respect to him and his entourage, but I'll say this. If you've read *Thieves of State* by Sarah Chayes and that article I referred to, *The Ides of August*, you understand that the United States was not interested in Afghan leaders from [Hamid] Karzai on. It was only interested in figureheads, whom it could hold up to the world as examples of its ability to pick true Democrats to be in charge of Kabul and Afghanistan. And I say Kabul because that's really the only thing they were ever in charge of. And Sarah points that out vividly.

There was one example in Sarah's book that I'll briefly summarize. It tells everything. She kept pointing out, she was there 12 years, fluent Urdu and Pashtu speaker. She was there 12 years--Kandahar, Kabul--all over the country. She was very close finally to Karzai and [David] Petraeus and she was absolutely intent on doing something about the massive corruption she saw that was essentially corrupting everything that we were trying to do, or at least the better things we were trying to do.

So, they finally managed, she and Petraeus managed to get a person who was one of the biggest and most corrupt drug dealers in Afghanistan into the courts, the Afghan courts, the national

government's courts. And just as they were about to go to trial, and she describes the scene almost as if she and David Petraeus were walking this man in handcuffs up to the courtroom, Afghan courtroom, and in steps to the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and says, "You can't take this man. You can't." And they win. The argument goes to the highest levels, and they win, because their relationship with the Inter-Services Intelligence group in Pakistan, ultimately the godfather of the Taliban, is so tight, and they are so prominent in the scheme of things in Afghanistan. We have to go back to the beginning. The CIA won Afghanistan, not the military. That gave them a lot of clout in Afghanistan afterwards. The fact that they could win that kind of argument, the fact that they were in cheek and jowl with the ISI in Pakistan, the fact that the CIA was running things in Afghanistan to that extent tells you the whole story.

**Ralph Nader:** This word "corruption" is always bandied about as if it's only people in these countries who are corrupt. Ashraf Ghani was actually an academic expert on corruption. And the US would send entire cargo planes full of \$100 bills that would land in Kabul airport [and] be transshipped to Kandahar. What is this corruption all about and what is the US role in this corruption? And when police are paid just a few dollars a month and they have to live, naturally they're going to take stuff under the table; that's petty corruption. Give our listeners some idea of the nature of this corruption and how it is used by the US government to put down people in other countries as if the US government doesn't have a role in this right down to handing out a \$100 bills and even paying the Taliban to let them through certain mountain passes. Can you elaborate on that, Larry?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Well, as Sarah points out, the United States is the fulcrum of the corruption, whether it is, as I just pointed out, with this individual who was one of the biggest drug dealers probably in the world, not just in Central Asia, or whether it's the packets of money that you're talking about. So many of those disappeared going to Iraq. Vividly do I remember our budget guy coming into the office, my office, and saying, "We're all going to jail. We're all going to jail." I said, "Joe, Joe, sit down. Tell me what you're talking about." And he said, "We just sent \$18 billion and there's 9 billion in the residual fund for Oil-for-Food Programme in the UN [United Nations] and it's gone. It's gone!"

Well, there was never any accountability for that because we are the most corrupt institution in all these wars. We are the leader in corruption and it ranges the gamut from mainstream American banks laundering drug dealers' money to the fact that some of the money going to Afghanistan in these pallets of \$100 bills, as you said, is going to American contractors who pass it right back to their cronies in the United States--some of their cronies being the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and so forth. [This is] all legal through PACs [political action committees] and so forth. But nonetheless it's corrupt. It's major and filthy corruption. It's a product of what I call predatory crony capitalism of which the United States, despite China's attempts to unseat us, is still the leading country in the world. Predatory capitalism. Incidentally, predatory capitalism is destroying the planet right now.

We are the leaders in corruption, but it's made to look legal, if not cursorily actually legal, because of our laws in our system and our banks' participation in it. But you put your finger on one of the principal things that Sarah is trying to reveal. When she started out *Thieves of State*, the title of her book, she's not just talking about thieves in Kabul. She's talking about thieves in Washington and London and Riyadh and elsewhere where this thievery goes on.

**Ralph Nader:** But the banks laundering drug money and knowing it is criminal behavior of course, and they're very rarely prosecuted. The money to the chairs of the House Armed Services and Senate, you're talking about campaign contributions, right?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Absolutely.

**Ralph Nader:** David Brinkley of NBC once called legalized bribery. So there is a bright light in terms of investigating some of this corruption. It's the IG [Inspector General] for the US expenditures in Afghanistan. Tell us about this remarkable man ~~in~~ and the reports he keeps putting out, including one that just came out a few days ago.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Well, in my view, for one man [David E. Horwitz] and his staff, which I know is limited, to have put out the volume that he has in terms of what I call indictments of the system and of people in that system, is remarkable. He is one of the few IGs that I note, in my time in government, roughly half a century, who actually is doing his job. What's happened to the IG complex over the last few years is it has become so embedded in its institutional fabric, whether it's DOD [US Department of Defense], DHS [US Department of Homeland Security], DOJ [US Department of Justice], or whatever, it has become a sing song for its own institution's interests and not a defender of whistleblowers or a looker for crimes and corruption. But this guy has defied that tendency and that development. And he won't be listened to, though. We'll go after a few low-hanging fruit like we did in Iraq and Afghanistan. We'll punish a few staff sergeants or their equivalent in the civilian world, but we won't get the big guys. We won't go after the big guys because the big guys are many of the same people that are involved, for example, in the [Jeffrey] Epstein scandal.

**Ralph Nader:** Right.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** There are many of the guys who were really some of the guys and gals who were involved in what Bradley Birkenhead, a whistleblower who got \$75 million plus as a fee and a few years in prison for his revelations about tax avoidance and so forth. Did they go after any of the big kahunas? Well, they went after a Russian in California. They went after a few others, but DOJ had Bradley's actual revelations. Those revelations featured some names that every American would know if they heard them, but they didn't prosecute.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, we're talking with retired Colonel Larry Wilkerson, who was chief of staff for Colin Powell, who has been a voice for truth and justice, clarity, candor, and historical context for years. And I think we should identify this Inspector General and ask Larry if a commercial publisher wanted to put these books into his reports into paperback, because they are really detailed and forthright, is this possible from the point of view of who owns the copyright? What is this man's name to begin with?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Well, you know, you've got a problem there with all the agreements that you have to agree to and you have to sign or whatever, even as the Inspector General. And you have a problem with the entire apparatus of what I would call and Thomas Mueller's book, *Crisis of Conscience: Whistleblowing in an Age of Fraud*, sums all this up in terms that you'll cry just about every chapter. We've put such a labyrinth in place to restrict them, even though they are charged with the mission they're charged with, and ultimately, they were charged by Congress, that it's difficult to get anything done.

[The] Boeing [Company] is maybe the most visible case in point right now but look at what happened with the Torture Report [*The Senate Intelligence Committee report on torture: committee study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program*], Ralph. We have been laboring the North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture, particularly, to get that 6,000-page report, which I am absolutely convinced would call on some accountability for at least some CIA people, if not, Dick Cheney and George W. Bush, ultimately.

We've been trying to get that released. We can't get it released. We can't even get the Democrat, Mark Warner, Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, to release this report. We've been trying to get a meeting with Senator Warner for a month, the North Carolina Commission of Inquiry on Torture. We can't because no one wants to do the kind of accountability. No one even wants to do the kind of truth commission work that's necessary to clean up some of these terrible messes.

**Ralph Nader:** This is a Senate report, too, to make it worse.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Yes! Yes!

**Ralph Nader:** This is supposed to be an independent branch of government and it's a report on what went on in the executive branch and Senator [Dianne] Feinstein wouldn't release it. Now, Senator Warner wouldn't release it. What's the prospect of this ever getting out?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Let's get the culprit there really right. Richard Burr of North Carolina, whom I've been trying to get unelected for about ten years was the real culprit here. He is the guy who determined that President Obama could have a copy and put it in his papers in his museum or whatever the hell they're going to call it, and it couldn't come out for 25 years. And he told everyone who got a single copy of the report that they had to guard it for their life until they died. I mean, Burr is the culprit here. Feinstein is no shining example nor Warner now, but Burr is the real culprit. And what he did was unconscionable. The American people will never know that from the highest levels of their government, we've tortured before, Ralph. You know that in the Philippines and Vietnam, but we have never had a president of the United States, as a policy matter, authorize torture. This is a first in the history of our country. And we're not going to know anything about it for 25 years.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, speaking about George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, you know, there's a lot of media coverage now on how the Afghan War got started and they almost never mentioned George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. There was a long article on this in the *New York Times* recently. And the main war criminals, the initiators, the people who got the US in the mess, all the deaths of US soldiers and many, many more hundreds of thousands of Afghans, and they're just sitting there living the life of Riley--Bush and Cheney. So what's your view on holding them accountable? They can still be criminally prosecuted since there is no statute of limitations.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Unfortunately, Donald Trump resurrected George W. Bush and Dick Cheney to a certain extent. People were comparing them and saying, "Oh, I'll have George W. Bush back anytime." I don't know what that means about us. That's quite a statement on us. But I will tell you this, and I said this publicly; I think I said it on the Chris Hayes show on MSNBC or someplace like that. I would gladly go to jail if they will put Dick Cheney and George Bush in

jail for torture. To me, that was the low point of our history, the low point of our existence as a national entity--that a president of the United States would formally authorize other people to be tortured.

Abu Ghraib was the end result of that in one respect for the military. And the very idea that the President and Vice President involved the military just sickens my heart because the military has enough problems not doing that sort of thing on its own as the Philippines and Vietnam readily attest. And to have the President bless it for them and the Secretary of Defense add to that blessing by his famous memo that went from A to double D listing the things they could do to these so-called terrorists. And for me, to know that 750 odd people at Guantanamo had 700 people amongst them who weren't guilty of anything but being picked up and captured and sent there, and to know that some of them were being tortured was torture to my own heart and my own system and my own patriotism. And so that is why I say, I'll go to jail alongside of them if the courts decide to as long as Dick and George go prominently. Right behind them, where he not dead, would be Rumsfeld.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, just a few days ago, when Biden struck the vehicle that was laden with explosives near Kabul Airport, another errant drone, described as such in the *New York Times*, blew up a home and killed ten people, seven children, and the Ahmadi family. One of the men killed was an engineer working for an American aid program, a nutrition food program in Afghanistan. And the other one was a contractor with the US military and Biden gave this statement and he didn't have one sentence of regret for what's left of this family.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** I watched this morning the webinar from the "Costs of War Project" at Brown University. One of the panelists talked about this and talked about the arrogance of power and the arrogance in particular of Washington, D.C., whether it be the president, the Congress, the courts, or whatever. She was absolutely right. We do not – I'm paraphrasing her now. We do not care about the almost million deaths which this project has documented--929,000 people precisely that we have caused. We only care about, for example, the 13 who died in Kabul. Watch how that titillated the American people and the American mainstream media. Watch how that captured their attention so quickly. Do you know how many Afghans died never capturing anyone's attention in America to speak of? Do you know how many Iraqis died, Syrians, Libyans, Somalians, Malians, and so forth as we're killing them on the globe?

**Ralph Nader:** Yemenis.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Yemenis, yes. Our support for that war is unconscionable and we can't get out of it. We've got two pieces of legislation passed by previously cowardly Congress that said stop the support for the war in Yemen and Trump vetoed it. And we didn't have enough votes to go back and override his veto.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, let's look forward here on US Afghanistan relations with the Taliban. What do you see coming? And what do you think we should do? Let's assume you were in charge of American foreign policy after the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Two very different things. What I see coming is arrogance continued, and therefore, a disaster. What I wish were coming would be a Secretary of State Tony [Antony] Blinken, maybe Jake Sullivan calling Sergey Lavrov, one of the most accomplished diplomats in



the world, working for [Vladimir] Putin, but he really works for Russia. And calling Wang Yi, State Councilor and Foreign Minister for China and their equivalents in Iran and Turkey and elsewhere., Pakistan comes to mind, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and saying, "Let's meet. I don't care where. I'll meet in your home territory. Or we go to neutral territory like Geneva. And let's talk about how we're going to make sure that whatever government evolves in Afghanistan has a reasonable chance at feeding, clothing, caring for, and essentially, turning into a peaceful, and as far as possible, relatively successful economic situation in this tortured area called Afghanistan." That's what I wish would happen, but I don't think it will.

**Ralph Nader:** And you think Congress is going to rise to the occasion at all? Anybody in Congress give you hope?

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** What I'm hearing from the Congress is anger and arrogance and punishment. It certainly is not coming from the [Congressional] Progressive Caucus or from those you and I know well. It's coming from the people like [Jim] Inhofe and [Robert] Menendez and others who are beholden to the complex and beholden to their grip on national security as a political issue that they can sell to their people and their constituents. It's coming from them but they're the ones who run that place. And I fear that we will do something really noxious and harmful, like increase sanctions on the Taliban and their leadership. I'm guardedly optimistic that the Taliban may have learned a few lessons. This is not the people that we invaded in 2001. Their rank and file still act rough from time to time, but no rougher than, for example, General [Abdul Rashid] Dostum, our ally who fired machine guns into a railroad car with people in it. But I'm hopeful that they might understand they're not going to survive and Afghanistan is not going to survive in any form, tribal or otherwise, if they don't calm down and try to be a reasonably good government and a tolerable government and a tolerant government.

I know that's a lot to ask, but I'm hoping that pressure from those outside powers, that I just enumerated, can help that along and pressure from the United States could help that along. But I fear we will be the arrogant beast we usually are and seek revenge rather than accommodation, rapprochement [or] whatever you want to call it. The only deal I can point out, and it took a while to affect, that defies that stereotype, of course, is Vietnam. But as much as I had to argue with John McCain towards the end of his life, and it was much, that was mostly his effort to get the United States to face up to the crimes that it conducted and was actually the perpetrator of. In Vietnam and the ripple trauma that came about, though it took some time, was a result of that, I think. My heart hurts when I think about what we might do in the next months or years to Afghanistan in retribution for what they "did" to us.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, thank you again. We've been talking with retired Colonel Larry Wilkerson, a voice of history, a voice of wisdom, a voice of truth and candor. And we hope that you'll reach many, many more millions of people, Larry. Thank you very much for coming on.

**Lawrence Wilkerson:** Thank you, Ralph, for having me. And I hope for you the same thing.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson. We will link to his work at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Let's take a quick break. When we come back, we will speak to Jacob Wilson, a young congressional staffer who wants to do more than just polish his resume. But 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, September 3, 2021; I'm Russell Mokhiber. For years, Starbucks [Corporation] workers have complained about the company's labor practices, saying that chronic understaffing has led to a chaotic work environment, erratic hours and difficulty taking sick days. Despite periodic commitments by Starbucks to revise its policies, the complaints lingered and appeared to intensify during the pandemic, when overstretched workers also had to contend with new health concerns and safety protocols. Now the long-standing frustrations are fueling one of the most serious union campaigns ever to confront the company, whose more than 8,000 corporate-owned locations in the United States are not unionized. That's according to a report in the *New York Times*. For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

**Steve Skrovan:** Thank you, Russel. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. Last week, and our conversation with Professor Paul Sabin about the history of the public interest movement, Ralph mentioned a young congressional staffer from Pomona College who formed an organization devoted to drawing congressional staff from the ranks of civic activists, organizers, faith leaders, and people from the labor movement in order to bring fresh, bold, progressive ideas directly into Congress members' offices, David?

**David Feldman:** Jacob Wilson is co-founder of the Congressional Progressive Staff Association. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Jacob Wilson.

**Jacob Wilson:** It's so wonderful to be here. Thank you for having me.

**Ralph Nader:** Welcome, indeed, Jacob. And as you know, from our prior conversations, I think what you and others have started on Capitol Hill is extremely significant for citizen groups who are so frustrated and unable to get in personal contact with congressional offices and congressional committees. But you didn't just start spontaneously. You worked with Peace Action and you used to go up on Capitol Hill, arguing the need for waging peace for arms control treaties, using a diplomacy instead of armed force. And you'd sit in one office after another and the staff would politely listen and nothing much would happen. So I guess you decided maybe I better become a staffer and you joined Congressman Andy Levin's staff, Democrat from Michigan. And you're now Director of Communications for Congressman Jamie Raskin. Give us an idea of those early days over a year ago that led you to do what no one has done before in congressional history, which is organize an association of progressive staff across the House and increasingly in the Senate. And then we'll get to what you'd like to see happen.

**Jacob Wilson:** Well, I think you've outlined it very nicely. Just a few years ago, I was in the peace movement. I was up in Maryland, actually, in Silver Spring, Maryland, organizing with the peace movement. And I would go down to Congress and sit down with the legislative staffers and sometimes the members of Congress themselves and make the case. At the time, I was primarily working on US involvement in the war in Yemen. And yeah, when I sat down, I often found an audience that was not particularly receptive or not particularly aware of the issue that I was there to advocate for and the people I was there to advocate for.

And that really fed into an understanding that I had at the time, being primarily, at that point, the grassroots organizer of Congress and our political system more generally. And that was one in

which the advocate, the grassroots organizer, was someone who was really trying to work for working people and people around the world and the importance of human rights. But sometimes those messages had to be forced into Congress. They had to be forced into politics at sometimes quite a considerable cost.

And what I found when I came to Congress was a more complex story. And I started sitting down, started hearing word of mouth, who I should talk to. Because of course, once you're in the institution, once you're in Congress, it's very different. People tell you, "Oh, this person would be good for you to talk to about human rights. This person is really, really supportive of getting the US out of Yemen," for example. And so I began sitting down with these staffers, who I now had the information and the connections to meet and immediately found there was quite a bit of progressive thought and really commitment and motivation to achieve so many of the big ticket s and immensely popular items that grassroots organizers, labor organizers, faith leaders around the country are all advocating for.

And as soon as I realized that, that there were these staffers who were taking control of their members of Congress's portfolios, they had the members of Congress's ear, and they were absolutely supportive of these big and wonderful ideas it became clear to me that there was some sort of disconnect between what was happening on the ground and what was happening in Congress. And I suppose that's very obvious. In retrospect, we talk all the time about how Congress can be insular and separated, but I was learning that lesson in real time. And so I took it upon myself just to continue having those conversations, but at the end of them--and by the way, at the time, I was just an intern--I was sitting down with these directors of policy, these chiefs of staff, listening to what they had to say. And at the end, I would pipe up with my pitch and say, "Hey, what if we brought all of these folks on the Hill together who really do care about these issues, try to create some community between them and try to get them working together a little more efficiently and effectively." And what I found was just a wonderful positive response to that time and time again. And so it was the people here who really motivated me to keep doing this and eventually start this Congressional Progressive Staff Association. And I heard in the introduction you said very kindly that I was one of the founders, maybe the lead founder. Yet I would not have been able to do this without the help and support of my two other co-founders who have done just as much, if not more, work than I have.

When I joined Congressman Andy Levin's office, I met Courtney Laudick, the senior legislative assistant for Congressman Andy Levin. He is a wonderful Congressman who represents Southeastern Michigan and Courtney handles his education portfolio, his environment portfolio, and his library portfolio, and so much more for him. And she's committed to organizing legislative staffers on the Hill to make sure that they're forwarding a progressive agenda and her work has been simply invaluable.

**Ralph Nader:** And who is the other one?

**Jacob Wilson:** Yes, and if I may, she introduced me to Philip Bennett, who is the scheduler for Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. And once the three of us met, really, that's when the project took off, because now we had three hats, three pairs of hands on deck, and all of their friends, all of their networks. And we were able to combine everything that we had there. And then we really got to work. We didn't launch this thing right away. We wanted to lay a solid foundation. So we spent about a year continuing to have those conversations, soliciting feedback from the people

we had met with. What do you want? What are you looking for as a congressional staffer? How could we be serving the American people better in these jobs that we have? And after about a year, we had spoken with the over 200 staffers and knew there was interest [so] we've finally formally launched the association just three months ago in June. And there's been a wonderful outpouring of support and enthusiasm.

**Ralph Nader:** How many staff have joined and how many senior staff?

**Jacob Wilson:** Yes. So today, in fact, I'm happy to announce that we've got our 600th member just this morning and we have over 100 senior members of staff. These are the folks who either run the whole office for the member of Congress or the Senator or run their entire legislative portfolio, decide or really advise them on policy positions and really set the legislative agenda. So very important folks who are now joining this organization.

**Ralph Nader:** We have had one listener want to find out more information about you. I think there is going to be much more coming about the new association, especially with Congress in recess. Maybe the reporters on Capitol Hill will write about it. I wrote a column called "*A Beacon Rises from Capitol Hill*". And listeners, you can get it by going to [nader.org](http://nader.org). Now this is not just going to be a discussion society. You've laid out three preliminary goals of this association. Tell us about it.

**Jacob Wilson:** That's right. The Congressional Progressive Staff Association or CPSA for short, we're really focused on three main things that we're working on to bring to Congress. And the first is to bring more progressives to the Hill. And what does it mean to bring more progressive people to the Hill? It means bringing more working-class people to the Hill. As you outlined at the top, it means bringing more people from the labor movement to the Hill. It means bringing more activists to Congress. It means tapping into our faith communities back at home in the districts that these members of Congress represent and finding ways to bring those folks who have very different knowledge, very different understandings of the communities that they live in and represent in their own way, and bring them to Congress, to have their voice heard.

**Ralph Nader:** There are a lot of staff that are, I call, on loan from the K Street lobbyists [that] actually put their people in key congressional committee staffs and key congressional office staff. And a lot of other staff comes from the Ivy League. You hail from Pomona College in California and you gave me an interesting phrase You said you want class diversity to be more reflective in the kind of congressional staff on Capitol Hill. And let's face it, the influence of congressional staff is enormous. And tell us about what you mean by class diversity.

**Jacob Wilson:** That's absolutely right, Ralph. And what we have in Congress right now is a system with a very harmful positive feedback loop, where Congress, each year, and especially in the House, is more or less giving itself less money to pay its staff. And so salaries are getting lower and lower. And as you can imagine, that's not necessarily the people at the top whose salaries are getting lower and lower. That's your people who are just getting their start, just getting out of college, who might and probably do have a lot of student loan debt; those salaries are getting tighter and tighter. Some of them actually are under \$30,000 a year for folks; that's less than \$15 an hour, we're paying some of these public servants as they work.

**Ralph Nader:** In a high-priced city.

**Jacob Wilson:** In the fifth most expensive city to live in in the country with suburbs that are in the top 15. What happens when you do that? You create two effects. One, the only people who can take those jobs are more likely to come from wealthier backgrounds and more privileged backgrounds. The second is that you incentivize what we were talking about earlier, that revolving door. Okay, fine. Maybe I'll go and work in Congress for a few years. But the only thing that I can do after is to go take that cushy lobbying gig and actually pay off my student loan debts. And that's really how you perpetuate a culture that can prioritize some of the corporatism that we so often see in Congress. And what we're trying to do is break that. What we're trying to do is connect the working class to Congress, so we have people who are not only coming from, say, the labor movement to work as an aggression staffer. But we also want people who were staffers heading back out into the labor movement. Because the reason lobbyists are so successful is they understand how this system works. It's a complex system; it's an insular system. It's extremely driven by relationships. And so as soon as you bring in someone who has that knowledge and understanding that can only be gained by coming and spending a few years and put them back on the ground; put them back in working-class communities, representing the people of America, I think that is one of the most important things that we can do here in the United States.

**Ralph Nader:** Fair enough. The second one, you've been concerned about the weakened position of Congress helped by the [Newt] Gingrich reforms, but also by the abdication of leaders in Congress over the years to the power of the executive branch and the presidency, like abandoning the declare war clause, letting the government spend money without congressional appropriations, defying subpoenas under Trump and getting away with it. Basically Congress, the most powerfully empowered branch of government under our Constitution, has really abdicated. So you want to have, as one of your goals, the education of the staff. They've got to learn the history of congressional assertiveness in the past, the contemporary problems. How are you going to go about doing that? Because I know that's your second goal.

**Jacob Wilson:** That's absolutely right. Once folks are here, we need to start broadening the dialogue. We need to bring in more progressive and working-class voices, representing a broader spectrum of ideas that really match the ideas of the American people, who oftentimes back many of these policies that we call it progressive. How do we do that? It's about first of all, using our unique position in Congress to create a space for these voices. It's extremely hard. I'm sure anybody listening who has tried to call their member of Congress, get a meeting with their member of Congress, knows how difficult it is to just get in the room and get somebody's ear. And getting a member of Congress or staffers here is so important to moving the chains when it comes to success in electoral politics. So we can host these events. We can bring in these activists. One event I'm so proud of we did was just a few weeks ago was on the Line 3 Pipeline. And what we're trying to do as well is break up how these events have happened in the past during which so many of these briefings on Capitol Hill, you'll walk in, you can tell exactly where you are. It's some wonks who live in the Beltway; this is what they do. So, a few think-tank people, a few executive branch people from the relative agency and that's that. They're extremely smart. They often have very important things to say, but it's very similar information.

What did we for this Line 3 group is brought Winona LaDuke, a leading academic and activist on indigenous issues and the climate, Frank Bibeau, an attorney at Honor the Earth, and we brought a Representative member from Minnesota's state legislature, whose district would be

affected by Line 3. We brought the Sierra Club. We brought a representative from Congresswoman Ilhan Omar's office AND a staffer from Congresswoman Cori Bush's office.

So what we're trying to do there is say, who is the progressive movements? We know who it is. We're always talking about it. We're always talking about the strength and the beauty of progressive politics, how it is a big tent, how it matches the American people, and they come from all these different places. But how often do we actually bring all those people into the same room, let them say their piece, and make a coherent argument together that is coming from the judicial, the state level, the federal level, the nonprofit level and the congressional level?

**Ralph Nader:** Yeah. And also, basically, on a broader scale, you're giving recognition of the First Amendment right to petition our government to redress grievances. That's right in the First Amendment. And if you can't get to your member of Congress, you can't reach in the executive branch agency or department, it's all automated voicemail and they don't get back [to callers], people are losing that part of the First Amendment right under their Constitution. What have been the reactions of the senators and representatives to all this? I mean, this is not like a guild movement to get better salaries and working conditions. Although that's important to roll back some of the Gingrich deforms that weakened congressional committees' budgets the GAO [US Government Accountability Office], abolished the Office of Technology Assessment, the OTA. And unfortunately, the Democrats did not reverse these deteriorating moves for a weakened Congress. What's been the reaction of some of the members--of the lawmakers themselves?

**Jacob Wilson:** I want to answer that question. I want to first go back to another point that you made about Congress abdicating a lot of its responsibility to the executive over the past few decades. And we can see that so clearly in just a few simple numbers. How much money does the US government give to Congress, to every member of Congress and senator each year to do their entire work, to represent entire states? In the case of senators, to represent almost 800,000 people each for members of Congress. We have all 535 of those members, voting members, just over a billion dollars. Okay, that's a huge price tag, but we need to compare it to something. How much do we give fossil fuel industries every single year in subsidies? \$20 billion. How could we possibly think that we are going to be developing a strong Congress, a strong Article I of the Constitution that is representing the American people effectively if that's where our spending priorities lie.

**Ralph Nader:** Not to mention having to watchdog the executive branch massive bureaucracy, which the committees have been unable to do and sometimes unwilling to do. So as you pointed out, it's not just a matter of staff, it's a matter of networking and organizing. So give us some idea what the reactions so far by the representatives and senators have been.

**Jacob Wilson:** Absolutely. I would say the reaction from the members who we've been working close to with has been very good. From the beginning, we made sure to partner closely with the Congressional Progressive Caucus and they have been so supportive of this effort, which has been very helpful. In fact, our member sponsor--to be a staff association, you have to have a member of Congress sponsor you--is Mark Pocan, the Wisconsin Congressman and former co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Basically, to have his name at the masthead is really, really wonderful for us. And indeed, we've even found support from some of the rank and file of the Progressive Caucus. We hosted just a few weeks ago an intern summit; these are part and parcel on the Hill and enormously important. It's where interns each summer get to know

what a member of Congress is like. And to consider whether they want to do this, i.e., do I want a career in public service? And as progressives we thought we needed one that showed what progressive members do; what their values are and how that's different. And we were able to bring quite a few, about six members of Congress altogether from the Progressive Caucus and they were all so supportive: Texas Congresswoman Representative Barbara Lee joined us. Rep. Jan Schakowsky from Illinois joined us, California Congressman Mike Levin, Jimmy Gomez from California and Jim McGovern from Massachusetts.

**Ralph Nader:** By the way, Jim McGovern was an early peace advocate from New York. He worked with Colman McCarthy. He wanted a Department of Peace. Listeners, lest you just think this is an organizational breakthrough and is going to open channels of communication from you to your members of Congress and to the staff, I think Jacob Wilson and his co-founders and members are all about advancing the progressive agenda and all that means in domestic and foreign issues. So I take that that's what you see down the line. I mean, that's what it's all about. So you have a Congress that functions for a progressive, productive, resourceful democracy in all manners that can be reflected in the awesome authority given Congress under the Constitution, Don't you think?

**Jacob Wilson:** Absolutely. And I think earlier you said so nicely that this association is really the first of its kind and it's wonderful to hear that. And I want to add to that, that there's no way that we would have been able to start this association and to channel some of this progressive energy in Congress, were not for literally decades of work from people on the ground. I know the reason why I'm able to be talking to you today about this work is because of what people were doing in their communities for a very long time and how it slowly, slowly made its way to the national level because that's how this stuff works. We start at home and we build out. And there have been talks for almost a decade to start an association like this in Congress, but the movement just wasn't there yet. The timing wasn't right. And so I think in many ways, Courtney, Phillip and I were here at the right time and we're doing our small part to move this movement forward so that we can advance this progressive agenda that is so popular with the American people.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, Jacob, our listeners are probably wondering how they can contact this new organization. So tell us how they can contact you, what website you have.

**Jacob Wilson:** Well, the best place to go and keep up with us is our Linktree. That's kind of like one of these websites for organizations getting off the ground. And so if you just type into Google Linktree, one word, CPSADC, that's us, you'll see our site and you'll be able to sign up for our newsletter, see some of the coverage that we've had, upcoming events and things like that.

**Ralph Nader:** We've been talking with Jacob Wilson, one of the co-founders of the new Congressional Progressive Staff Association. Remember that name. Thank you very much, Jacob, the pride of Pomona College.

**Jacob Wilson:** Well, thank you so much for having me and thanks for those very kind words.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Jacob Wilson. We will link to his work at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). I want to thank our guests again, Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson and

Jacob Wilson. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you, podcasts listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up." We're going to have some great stuff this week. A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

**David Feldman:** Ralph Nader wants you to join the Congress Club. Go to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website, and in the top right margin, click on the button labeled Congress Club to get more information. We've also added a button right below that with specific instructions about what to include in your letters to Congress. The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

**Steve Skrovan:** And our theme music "Stand Up, Rise Up" was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt.

**David Feldman:** Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you, everybody. And listeners, pay some attention to this Congressional Progressive Staff Association. Give them your ideas. This is a bright beacon rising on Capitol Hill.