

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 363 TRANSCRIPT

Jimmy Lee Wirt: Please note this program was recorded before the death of Rush Limbaugh.

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

David Feldman: Hello, everybody.

Steve Skrovan: And we also have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, Steve. Hello, everybody. This is a generic show. It's on talk radio.

Steve Skrovan: Yeah. Well, picture this: hundreds of AM/FM radio stations across the country fill their broadcasts with progressive talk radio. Shock jocks talking about why the Green New Deal doesn't go far enough to reverse the impact of climate change. Substantial debates over Medicare for All, and your commute; local stations interviewing police reform advocates and labor organizers; progressive discourse happening on the public airwaves free of charge tailored to local markets, addressing the topics their communities care about, inspiring them to take action and effect change. It sounds like some sort of fantasy world, doesn't it? Well, it kind of is. As it stands, the talk radio landscape is absolutely dominated by right-wing influence. So-called conservatives have built a robust network of local stations across the country, developed trusting long-term relationships with their listeners, and (they) use those relationships to shape hearts and minds. You could drive for hours without hitting a single progressive radio station unless you pay for satellite radio or live in a major city. It's no wonder the Democrats get painted as corporate elites and corporate Republicans can sell themselves as populists. If our political discourse is essentially determined by where we live and who can get in our ears, how can we change this? That's what we'll be asking our guest today, Thom Hartmann.

Thom Hartmann is a notable exception. He's probably the most prominent progressive radio host out there. And he's put together a comprehensive plan of action to turn that leftist radio fantasy into a reality. So we'll be talking to Thom. As usual, somewhere in between, we will take a break to check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, what would happen if progressive voices had the same reach as reactionary ones? David?

David Feldman: Thom Hartmann is one of America's most popular progressive talk radio hosts, a writing fellow at the Independent Media Institute and the author of more than 30 books, including *The Hidden History of American Oligarchy*. We previously had him on this program back in July of 2019, and he called then President Donald Trump a racist, a criminal, a thief, and a rapist. In retrospect, that appears to be an understatement. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour*, Thom Hartmann.

Thom Hartmann: David, Ralph, Matthew, Hannah, thank you. All of you, and Steve, thank you.

Ralph Nader: Welcome back, Thom. I think it's gonna be pretty engrossing for our listeners because one point you make is that progressive listeners of talk radio very rarely tune in to Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, [Michael] Savage, [Mark] Levin, and they dominate the top 15 rated radio shows in the country. And you started one of your articles by quoting a headline from *the New York Times* shortly after the November election and (the) headline asked, "Why Did So Many Americans Vote for Donald Trump?" Your response?

Thom Hartmann: Well, in large part, because actually, I would add two things or add something to that. But, you know, to the point that we're discussing, because every day on a little over a thousand radio stations coast to coast, we have right-wing hosts who are promoting and who were promoting Donald Trump. They saw him the way that I saw Bernie, as somebody who was a little outside of the mainstream, but, you know, very much the voice that represented their worldview and just went all in for him. I mean, talk radio across this country went all in for Donald Trump in the primary and then in the general election. And they have no constraints on what they can say and how accurate it has to be. So you've got that. And the other thing I would point out, though, and I think it needs to be said repeatedly, is that when Trump was running for president, he stole Bernie Sanders's platform. You know, I was living in D.C. at the time and I lived down at the marina and a number of the people I knew were ex-military or current enlisted military, and at least seven people that I knew out of that marina that I lived in, which was maybe 120 families, at least seven of them had never voted for a Democrat in their lives. And they were gung-ho for Bernie in the primary. And then they voted for Donald Trump in the general.

Trump had come out and said he was going to raise taxes on rich people. He was going to do it so much that his friends are going to hate him, and he was "going to get killed", I think was the phrase he used tax wise. He said that he was going to give everybody in the country high-quality, low-cost healthcare much, much better than Obamacare. You know, he said that he was going to reverse the treaties that Ronald Reagan and [George H.W.] Bush the elder had negotiated. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT] and [North American Free Trade Agreement] NAFTA that [Bill] Clinton had put into place. And he was going to bring back those 65,000 factories to the United States. I mean, he was lying through his teeth in every point, but a lot of people who voted for him, and I know some of those people, thought that he was actually going to be more progressive than Hillary Clinton.

Ralph Nader: Well, you know, you described *the New York Times* article, which asked why did so many Americans vote for Donald Trump by saying, and I'm quoting you, "Weirdly, that article and hundreds like [it] are purporting to explain the previous 2016 election, lacked even a single mention of the roughly 1,500 right-wing talk radio stations that saturate every corner, no matter how remote or rural, of America. As a 2008 Pew Research [Center] poll found "16%, (that's one six percent) of Americans get their general election year information about presidential candidates from talk radio, a percentage that has held constant for eight years at that point despite the explosive growth of the internet over the same period."

It doesn't make sense to a distant observer, Thom Hartmann. At least half the country disagrees with these talk radio show hosts. And why aren't there more progressive radio stations? Is it because on the conservative radio stations, they go after government, which doesn't advertise, and they appeal and toady up to corporations that do advertise? Is that a good part of the reason

why they don't have countervailing progressive radio stations on the public airwaves which belong to the public?

Thom Hartmann: I don't think so. I know that that's the main pitch that Limbaugh has been making for years and, you know, and that, for some reason, the [FCC] fairness doctrine would have kept him off the air, which is another lie. But what I've found over the years is that if you can generate ad revenue, if you can make sales for radio stations, they will put you on the air. I think really what's going on here, Ralph, for example, by the way, to the point of progressive talk radio, most people don't remember, aren't old enough to remember, or just never knew that talk radio in the 1970s and '80s was dominated by progressives. You know, obviously you had, you know, a healthy Pacifica Network back then, but also commercial talk radio. In fact, the most famous talk radio host in the United States was a guy named Alan Berg out of Denver. And he was on in 29 states on a blowtorch station out of Denver an unrepentant progressive. And I forget the year that he was assassinated by two skinheads in the parking lot of the radio station, but I think it was just two or three years before Limbaugh started his show in '88; I'd have to go back and look. But, you know, they made a movie out of it called *Talk Radio* and advertisers had no problem with that. I think the big problem is that prior to 1996, when there were actually a fair number of progressive hosts, local progressive hosts on stations all over the United States, prior to '96, radio stations had to be locally owned. I started in radio when I was 16 years old. I was a weekend DJ on WITL[FM], the country music station in Lansing, Michigan. And I did that for a couple of years and ended up bouncing around other stations and then came back (to WITL) and did news there for seven years until 1978. And back then, every single radio station in Lansing, and I think there was seven of them, was locally owned by, like, local families or groups put together by local people. And these were by and large middle-class people too. In fact, I knew the guys who owned WITL. There was no radio guy, an old engineer, a sales guy, and they scraped together enough money to put a radio station on the air all by themselves. And I'd been to some of their homes; these were not rich people. But when Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of '96, these limits that had been since the 1920s on how many radio and television stations and newspapers a single entity, a family or a corporation could own; those limits got blown all to hell. And the local ownership rules, which specified the radio and television stations had to be owned by entities at least within the state, got blown all the hell. And the result of that was very quickly, I mean, that was '96 and within a year and a half, I believe, I'm not sure if I referenced this in the article or not, because I originally wrote that article about twice as long as what ended up getting published. I had to cut a lot out to get down to the word count they wanted. But prior to that, Clear Channel had been this small regional company that owned about a hundred radio stations and—or not even a hundred. And as soon as those ownership caps were blown up, you know, within a year and a half, they owned over a thousand radio stations nationwide and just came to dominate the American media landscape.

Ralph Nader: And replaced a lot of local talk radio shows; it was cheaper just to use the syndicated show.

Thom Hartmann: That's correct. And syndicated shows that reflected that worldview of the management and ownership of that giant network. Their biggest competitor, another radio station I worked at, over 800 radio stations got acquired by a couple of billionaires and a United States senator, invited one of those two billionaires to his office along with me to sit down and discuss this, you know, the fact that they had just bought this network and all these radio stations. And they'd also bought at the time, the network Westwood One, that syndicated my program and the

entire progressive lineup, the one good solid 24/7 progressive lineup in America. They had just bought this. And the senator said, you know, are you going to put—you got 800 plus radio stations now, and you've got right-wing talk radio on an awful lot of them. Are you going to put any progressive talk radio on? And this guy looked us in the eye and said, “No, I'd never put anybody on here who wants to raise my taxes. It ain't gonna happen.” And, you know, it's like, so how do you deal with that? You know, I also... I don't recall, again, if it made it into the article, but you know, I wrote about it in my book on oligarchy, that one of these talkers conventions-- Talkers Magazine is kind of the Bible of the talk radio industry and every year they do a convention in New York, and all these talk show hosts and radio station owners and managers from all over the country get together. And this was a little more than a decade ago. I was sitting—they have a big luncheon where the speaker, you know, so I was sitting at one of these big round circular tables. And just by coincidence sitting next to me was one of the senior executives at Salem [Radio Network], which is the radio network that, you know, syndicates Dennis Prager and Hugh Hewitt and those guys. And I said, hey, you know, what would you think about putting my show on your network, offering some balance? And he's like, oh, well, you know, we're owned by a Bible publishing company, and we only put people on who want to promote Christian values. And I'm like, you know, I'm a Christian, I'm a “Matthew 25 Christian”. I think that's the core of my political philosophy. And he's like, no, no, you can't be a liberal and be a Christian.

Ralph Nader: But that's part of it. They're very overt about it. They're very blatant about it. And let's see what your comments are on the following three shows. The nationally syndicated late night radio show by Larry King, between 1987 and 1992, where he opened it up to a lot of liberal voices, conservative voices. He was a very fair-minded person; he never over-talked. Then there was *The Diane Rehm Show* that was widely syndicated out of Washington for years, and then there was the Terry Gross show [NPR Fresh Air], which still is syndicated. Now, some people would say they're center, a little bit to the liberal. How do you compare them with Levin, Savage, Hannity, (and) Limbaugh when somebody says they got big audiences?

Thom Hartmann: Well, there are different genres. And that's something that people who are not kind of immersed in the radio business don't get. I knew Larry King. He's a great guy or was a great guy. He passed away recently. But there's a difference between talk radio and interview radio. And there's very few people who can do interview radio in a way that they are essentially invisible. You listen to them for weeks, months, years, and you still don't know what they really think. And Larry King, Diane Rehm and Terry Gross are all brilliant at that. And that's a skill, frankly, that I don't have. It's a skill that when we were doing Air America, Al Franken didn't have, which is why when he tried to do an interview show, it never really caught on the way that talk radio does.

Talk radio is a completely different animal. Talk radio, which is what I do now on my program; it's what Rush Limbaugh does; it's what most of right-wing talk radio does. And sadly, a lot of left-wing talk radio, these people are still trying to do interview shows. But what I do is when I'm talking, I'm talking to one person on the other end and it's like a phone call. It's a conversation. It's one on one. And I talk directly to the listeners. I take calls that the listeners talk back to me. If I've got a rant, I'm telling, you know, in my mind, I'm telling the one person who is on the other side of the microphone. And I imagine somebody that I know and like, and I talk right to them. And I very rarely have guests on my program unless they either are experts in something that I don't know anything about and they can teach me, or they are politicians who will take

calls from our listeners so that we can kind of do a forum, or if they are conservatives who want to disagree with me because people love debates. People slow down for fist fights and car wrecks. So that's it. I almost never have people that I agree with on my show. There's nothing more boring than two people sitting around and talking about something [saying] Oh, I agree with you; no, I agree with you even more, you know. And I realize that with podcasts, the rules are quite different. But I think on radio, trying to compare what Larry King did, which is interview radio with what Rush Limbaugh does, which is talk radio, is very much comparing apples to oranges.

Ralph Nader: With the leading conservative or corporatist radio talk shows that we've just mentioned, how many of them take calls and do they screen the calls pretty rigorously? Anybody who disputes them never gets through.

Thom Hartmann: They all take calls. It's not the major part of the show, but they all take calls. And I'm assuming that they screen their calls much like we do. You know, we basically filter out people who are abusive, obscene or drunk or mentally ill. And beyond that, you know, if somebody wants to agree with me or disagree with me, you know, I'll put them on the air and take them on. And I think broadly that's true of right-wing hosts as well. And the reason why is because when somebody disagrees with the host, that perks--you know, like I said, people slow down for fist fights and car wrecks--that perks the audience up, actually.

Ralph Nader: You make a distinction with the Democrats spending billions of dollars on paid advertising. Republicans use more of this radio model of long-term trusting relationships to get out to vote for GOP. And then you say something most people don't know. And you say in 2016, right-wing talk radio gave Donald Trump the boost he needed to put him in the White House. The hosts loved him and promoted him relentlessly. The same goes for George W. Bush and why? Every weekday, all across America, people get into their cars and drive to and from work, listening to the radio, as the nation's largest statistics organization, Statistica, notes saying, "During an average week in September 2020, radio reached 90.9% of all American men aged between 35 and 64 years of age." How do you justify that? Most people think Trump got a lot of free network TV time, got an enormous amount of Fox [Broadcasting Company] TV time. And that's what really got him to people's notice, not talk radio.

Thom Hartmann: I think, again, probably most people not in the radio business don't get the importance of relationship and trust. The main thing that a talk radio host offers their audience is trust, a one-on-one relationship. Television is like voyeuristic. You know, it's like watching, you know, through somebody's living room window; you're watching other people have a life. Interview shows very often are somewhat similar. I've never felt, just from listening to Terry Gross, I get a sense of who she is. But I've never felt like if she were to tell me her opinion, that would be real meaningful to me, because there's not this relationship of trust over the years that I've built up with her. I trust her to ask reasonable questions of people. But, [as for] trusting her opinions, I don't know what they are. But for a right-wing or a left-wing talk show host, who is talking one on one to their audience three hours a day, five days a week, for years... You know, I've been doing this 18 years; you build a relationship that **is** a relationship of trust. And what comes out of that is that when you endorse a particular point of view or a particular candidate, it's enormously powerful. I used to work in the advertising business. I owned an ad agency in Atlanta, and we sold it in '97. That was the last time I retired. And I can tell you the number one goal of any kind of advertising campaign is to emulate as closely as possible word-of-mouth

advertising. It's why you have people on TV who look like the people that they want to sell the product to saying, "yeah, I take Prevagen because it makes my mind sharp" and ~~you know, right?~~ "I'm using this this particular drug because it makes my plaque psoriasis go." It's the extent that you can get a friend or a peer to endorse something is—that's where your real power is in advertising and marketing. It's not the concept; it's not the idea; it's not even the pitch; it's the relationship. And those relationships that listeners build with talk radio hosts are incredibly strong on the left and the right. And that's why I feel it's so important and why I wrote this piece that was originally published in *The Nation*--why I wrote this piece that, you know, basically saying to left-wing billionaires, the GOP is getting about \$5 billion a year worth of free promotion through this 1,500 right-wing radio stations running 24/7. And what the Democrats do [is] every two years, they drop \$1 billion dollars; every four years, they drop \$2 billion or \$3 billion in paid advertising when they could have had, you know, every single day of the year, they could have had somebody on the air, ideally locally but nationally as well, you know, pounding on Republicans and promoting Democratic candidates. It's pretty straightforward stuff. And so, I'm calling on *our* billionaires, and there's a few out there. In fact, one of the radio stations I'm on is actually owned by one of them. But, you know, he's not like an uber billionaire, [he is a] very wealthy guy. I'm calling on the really wealthy progressives out there to seriously think about, you know, about buying a radio network. In fact, a year and a half ago, two years ago, when Clear Channel was up for sale; you know, it had been sucked dry by Mitt Romney's Bain Capital, and the husk had been thrown away and it was in bankruptcy. And it was for sale for \$1.1 billion or \$1.2 billion, which is chump change for some people. And I wrote an op-ed at the time to Tom Steyer saying, "Tom, if you want to put your money in something, instead of running for president, buy Clear Channel." I think it was probably beyond his means, but it's not beyond the means of other people.

Ralph Nader: How many stations did Clear Channel have?

Thom Hartmann: Clear Channel at that time, I think, had just a little short of, or a little over 900 stations.

Ralph Nader: I thought one of the most telling points you made is Eric Cantor was a [US] Congressman from Virginia and he rose to be the number two most powerful person in the [US] House of Representatives under the Republican Speaker [of the House], John Boehner. And he was upset in 2014, by someone whose name nobody knew. Describe how David Brat pulled it off.

Thom Hartmann: Yeah. Dave Brat was an obscure junior college professor who had hung around the fringes of right-wing politics for years. And Eric Cantor had been, you know, basically taking the entire political system for granted, because he was able to raise almost unlimited amounts of money, because he was the number two Republican in a Republican-controlled House. And he had John Boehner and between the two of them, they had these huge PACs [Political Action Committees] and all this money. And, you know, he spent \$5 million in the primary, which is mind boggling for one district in Virginia. And Dave Brat spent \$200,000. Cantor had, you know, professional media people, professional campaign consultants, the very best in the business. Dave Brat hired a kid in his 20s who had never run a campaign before. And like I said, he raised \$200,000. That was it. But what happened was, the right-wing hosts around the country, were at that point in time, just getting over it with Boehner and Cantor being kind of their version of what, you know, the way that you and I would view, you know, Clinton and

Gore as kind of, you know, get along and go along kind of guys, and they wanted somebody who was a real conservative and Dave Brat was that guy.

And so one of the things that the Brat campaign was shocked to discover was that they were getting these, like, \$10,000 and \$20,000 wads of money; they were actually, you know, bundles of small, you know, lots and lots of small contributions that were coming in at, like, you know, 11:00 o'clock at night, 1:00 o'clock in the morning. And it's like, what the hell, you know, where's all this money coming from? And it turned out it was right-wing, nationally syndicated right-wing hosts broadcasting mostly out of East Coast, but they were being time delayed into the West Coast to push them into drive time or just after drive time. And they had picked up the cause of Dave Brat. So, you know, without the consultants, without the money, without the advertising, even in the district, Dave Brat was able to take down the second most powerful Republican in the House of Representatives. It was pretty mind-boggling, and it was entirely talk radio.

Ralph Nader: Well, on another point, I remember I used to go on these major local radio shows like Michael [Robin] Jackson show in Los Angeles and Jerry Williams in Boston. They had large local audiences. We could talk about consumer protection, corporate abuses [and] even offer our materials to the listening audience. It would let us put the address on. And I remember once I did a whole circuit of these with our book, *Winning the Insurance Game*, how to learn enough about insurance to buy better, cheaper, more reliable auto insurance and health insurance, life insurance, homeowner insurance, and in about a year, thousands of these books were called for by the audience all over the country. We distributed them. All of that is completely gone now.

Thom Hartmann: Yeah. And you'll recall Michael Jackson, I used to, you know, whenever I visited Los Angeles, I'd pop Michael Jackson show on if he was on when I was there, because he was a progressive, you know, and he was doing talk radio. He would have guests on from time to time, but he did a lot of rants all by himself. And he interacted with his callers a lot, and Michael Jackson, with that very elegant British accent, you know,

Ralph Nader: Yeah. And you know, they're all replaced by these syndicated radio talk show hosts, like we just talked, Limbaugh and Sean Hannity and Levin and Savage and others. Jerry Williams was at WBBM in Chicago when *Unsafe at Any Speed* came out. I couldn't get on "mutual radio broadcast system" [Mutual Broadcast System]. I couldn't get on CBS Radio. I couldn't get on ABC Radio. I went to Chicago, and he put me on! He was the first person to put me on. And he said, they got a lot of flak from upstairs and the advertising office, because the auto companies were advertising on this big Chicago station. That doesn't happen anymore. I mean, the younger people who try to breakthrough with prominent investigative material in books, they just don't know what they're missing anymore. And I think the fairness doctrine did have an effect. When they abolished the Fairness Doctrine, they abolished the Federal Communication rule. That was abolished under George Herbert Walker Bush in 1987. And when they abolished it, at the [Federal Communications Commission] FCC, I was there at a PAC hearing. And the FCC in a split vote got rid of it. The fairness doctrine said that if you put on a point of view, let's say you're pro-nuclear power, you put on a lot of people on pro-nuclear power, you have an obligation to inform the audience about opposing viewpoints. There was no real enforcement of it, but I'll tell you a lot of the radio stations took it seriously enough to be more balanced in who they put on the air. And some people say when that was abolished, that gave an opportunity, not just for talk show radio hosts being conservative, it didn't affect that, but

for being way out in effect for being in cahoots, Thom, with prominent candidates. I mean, there are legal experts now, [like] former general counsel of the FCC Bruce Fein, who think that people like Sean Hannity, who continually talked with Trump, strategized with Trump about electoral issues, about his reelection; that that was basically a campaign finance violation, because it amounted to a donation by Sean Hannity. He didn't report it and he didn't disclose it as such for Federal Election Commission [FEC]. What do you think of all that?

Thom Hartmann: Broadly, I agree. I worked in radio when the fairness doctrine was in place. And I can tell you that the legal why—and the reason why you say it wasn't generally enforced; I think a lot of people don't get the nuance of it. The fairness doctrine said that radio and television stations when their licenses would be considered for renewal, which is more or less every two years, would have to demonstrate that they had programmed in the public interest. Number one. And that was generally considered to mean you had to carry news at the top of the hour on radio, and you had to carry an hour of news block in primetime on television. And then secondly, if the ownership or management of a radio or television station expressed an opinion on the air, that radio or television station was required to find a person in the local community to express a countervailing opinion. And that was part of my job when I started with WITL as a teenager. Chuck Mefford was one of the owners of the station. He had a talk show in the afternoon, but he was an owner of the station and he would do an opinion piece. I also worked at WJIM-TV in Lansing, Michigan. Same deal; it was a local family. In fact, they named the station after their new baby boy; it was Jim. And the owner of the station would come on and do a two-or-three-minute rant about, you know, the new millage increase to pay for Potter Park [Zoo]. And my job was to go out and find somebody to record a two-or-three-minute piece to balance that. And they took that very seriously because that was an actual requirement of the fairness doctrine--that if it was the station ownership or management, it had to be balanced.

But if it was just some host or some show, there was no legal requirement for balance. But as you point out, Ralph, they tried to get that balance anyway, because that kind of defined the zeitgeist; that defined the water that we all swam in. And so even when Chuck on his radio show on WITL [his] 3:00 to 4:00 PM everyday radio show that I helped produce; when he would go off in a really strong way on a particular topic, he would toss it later on after we got off the air, he'd say, you know, "Why don't you see if you can find somebody who disagrees with me on that [and] we'll get them on." You know, I just—I would like to try to keep it, you know, a semblance of balance here, even though it wasn't required.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Thom Hartmann, syndicated radio show host, three hours every day on weekday. Is that right, Thom?

Thom Hartmann: Yeah, three hours a day, five days a week.

Ralph Nader: I mean, I don't know how you do it. And he also at the same time is a scholarly author of all kinds of books, including the recent series of *The Hidden History of [American] Oligarchy*, *The Hidden History of Monopolies*, et cetera. And he just pours them out and they're really thorough and clearly written. But just to show our listeners, who may not know this about the decay since the 1934 Communications Act was passed under Franklin Delano Roosevelt; and even before that, when Herbert Hoover was [US] Secretary of Commerce, and radio was just coming on board in the 1920s, he called radio so much a sacred trust that he opposed any advertising. Any advertising.

Thom Hartmann: Hmm, I wasn't aware of that.

Ralph Nader: Anyway, the 1934 Act then made that famous clause, the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" standard for all radio and later, TV stations, because they used the public airwaves. We own it; we're the landlords. The radio and TV stations are the tenants [but] they pay us no rent. They get the use free 24/7 compliments of Congress and the Federal Communications Commission. And they decide who says what and who doesn't on our public airwaves. I accused Rush once that he was the king of corporate welfare. He didn't know what I was talking about. And I said, "Well, you're using the public airwaves free on all these stations all over the country and making tremendous money." He makes almost \$1 million a week. And you ought to pay tribute to the taxpayer, to the people who give you this free use of the public airwaves. Well, anyway, going forward from 1934, it was nothing more than a whole series of decay until it reached the point now where the liberal progressive establishment in this country is basically giving up on having their viewpoints on talk radio. It's just amazing to see even very young people who are all into the internet now; they don't even know what's been taken away from them. After World War II, there was a national radio program called *Voice of Labor*. In your research, I'm sure you came across; it was supported by the labor unions; it was all over the country. There isn't even a voice of labor. The AFL-CIO has shown very little interest in radio or talk radio, and it just keeps getting worse and worse. What do you see as a turnaround here?

Thom Hartmann: Well, to add a historical punctuation point to what you're saying, when I started my show in 2003, we started it on a local station in Vermont, as a way of showing as proof of concept. I just wanted to... I had written an op-ed that was published in *Common Dreams* called "Talking Back to Talk Radio" that became the first business plan for Air America Radio. They had brought me in as a consultant to help set it up. But a year before they got their act together, I wanted to prove it was possible. And so I found this local radio station in Vermont and said, you know, can I do a couple hours on a Saturday morning? And they were, like, sure, you know, let's see what happens. And within about six months, I got picked up by the only progressive radio network in America. I was on 27 stations across the country and Sirius [XM Holdings Inc.] satellite radio. And that was called the I.E. America Radio Network. And it was owned by the United Auto Workers [UAW]. The UAW was based out of Detroit. And even though I was living in Vermont, I was on this network out of Detroit, and we were on stations all over the country. And then I forget the names of the UAW CEOs at that time. But the guy who had started that thing died. And the new guy who came in said, "Oh, we don't need this radio stuff and it's losing money for us." And so he killed that network, so I just went back being independent for a couple of years and then, you know, went back on Air America.

Ralph Nader: More default, that's in your article, described, people wonder how did Trump in the last election in November pick up so many Hispanic votes and, you know, all the political pundits trying to figure it out...well, you gave a very important reason why.

Thom Hartmann: Oh, yeah. Conservatives are buying Spanish language stations like there's no tomorrow and/or they're leasing them and putting Spanish language right-wing talk onto them. It's a huge thing in Southern Florida and across Texas right now. But it's spreading all over the country. And people think of right-wing talk radio as just being, you know, Limbaugh, Hannity and those guys. But there is Hispanic or Spanish language right-wing talk radio and then there's Christian right-wing talk radio. There's a lot of these stations, a lot of these broadcasters of, you know, I think probably Pat Robertson blaze the trail for this and made himself \$1 billion in the

practice in the process, who are using their tax-exempt status to good advantage to broadcast with a good dose of religion thrown in. But their message is overtly political every single day. So it's not just the 1,500 explicitly right-wing radio, mostly programming to white right-wingers across America. It's not just them. It's all these Spanish language stations that are increasingly going right wing. And it's all these religious stations that are everywhere that are going aggressively more-right wing.

Ralph Nader: And by the way, every morning a lot of these talk show hosts get a memo from any one of the right-wing corporate think tanks in Washington about talking points for the day for the news. So they get that research backing. Well, why did the last attempt to have progressive radio syndicated all over the country [like] Air America, [which] you were associated with in some way. Why did that fail? It raised quite a few millions of dollars, had Al Franken on and others. Why did it fail?

Thom Hartmann: Principally, I would say 90% of the failure of Air America was a lack of appropriate funding. When Air America declared bankruptcy, they were \$17 million in the hole. When Rupert Murdoch started Fox News, he lost \$100 million a year for the first five years before he made a penny. But Shelly [Sheldon Drobny] and Anita Drobny were the people who read my article in *Talking Back to Talk Radio* back in early 2003 and called me up and said, will you come out to Chicago and talk to us? We're venture capitalists, and we want to do a radio network based on what you're saying. And I was, like, sure. I went out there [and] we got it into reasonable shape in terms of a business plan. They brought in Jon Sinton, the FM radio guy and a friend who was really good. And then they brought in this guy, Evan Cohen, I think, was his name as I recall, who claimed that he had access to tens of millions of dollars, maybe even hundreds of millions of dollars, and he brought a big wad of cash with him. Turned out he had stolen that money from the Boys & Girls Clubs of America. He thought he was going to use the radio network to leverage more money out of people. He's a professional conman. He left the network broke. He fled the country and eventually got caught. But Air America was, you know, five, six months into being on the air in 56 radio stations, in 56 markets all across the country at that point. And so they just limped along desperately begging at places like the Democracy Alliance conference, definitely begging for money, getting 1 million here, \$300,000 there and \$2 million here. And it's just, you can't run a radio network that way. But, you know, sadly, a lot of wealthy progressives will tell you, Oh, well that was a disaster; it was an experiment; we should never do that again. When in fact, you know, yes, there were some basically incompetent people in management at Air America Radio at various times, but they were not the ones who killed it. What killed it was the lack of appropriate funding. They should have started that network with at least \$40/50 million in the bank, and instead, they started it with about one.

Ralph Nader: In terms of forward looking, you have a real platform here basically saying, this is what we have to do. Why don't you go through it one by one?

Thom Hartmann: Sure. You know, I laid it out in this article that we're talking about. And I said, first of all, the Democratic party should put together a taskforce to create a national progressive talk-radio strategy. And I'm not talking about bringing back the fairness doctrine or the "personal attack rule" or any of that kind of stuff, but how do we help make progressive talk radio work? Number two, there are progressive talk radio stations around the country. I'm on most of them. And you know, they're getting by, but radio is a business with very razor thin margins. And so if they could put together a sponsorship network and get companies that like

their affiliation with the Democratic party, companies that are unionized, for example, get them to say yes, we will commit to progressive talk radio, they need to start a lot of local shows. You know, this is the farm team. There are literally... when I go to these conferences, these talkers conferences, there'll be 200 local talk show hosts from all over the country. And every single one of them is a conservative, because, you know, they're doing the morning show on the station that has Rush Limbaugh on in the afternoon. And so, you know, we need to build up that. We need to build up our farm team, because radio is just like writing or anything else. And Ralph, I know, you know this well; you know, the more you do it, the better you get at it. And it's not something that just, you know, it's not a matter of some brilliant talent suddenly appears here. Rush Limbaugh started in radio at the same time I did. We're the exact same age. You know, we both started as teenagers in local music radio. So you've got to do that. We got to bring back legislation to break up these giant monopolies and return radio and television station ownership back at least to local ownership at the state level. And another thing we need to do is expand low power FM. Here in Portland, Oregon, where I live, about a group of local people got together who were led by Jefferson Smith, a local activist who started the Bus Project and had been in the state legislature for a while. And they put up a low-power FM station. Low-power FM stations, you know, putting a big AM stick on the air can cost you a couple of million dollars. Putting a low-power FM station on the air, you can do for a couple of hundred thousand.

Ralph Nader: How many of those are operating? There were a lot of opportunities, more licenses from the FCC last I heard about it than were taken by people in local communities. What's the story now on that?

Thom Hartmann: Well, the Republicans, whenever the Republicans run the FCC, they make it almost impossible to get low-power FM signals. So during the Bush and Trump administrations, the FCC just was not passing these things out. But there is the potential for as many as 20,000 low-power FM signals around the country.

Ralph Nader: And what's their range?

Thom Hartmann: Well, typically, depending on the terrain, you know, there are physical things, but typically you can throw a signal about in a 10-mile radius. You know, the station here in Portland, I believe there's signal is in downtown Portland; I can hear it. I live in the north end of Portland, and you sometimes you can double and triple them up. I mean, the one here in Portland, now they've got another station, another low-power FM across the Columbia river and in Vancouver, Washington, which is, you know, a fairly good sized town, that is simulcasting. And so now they're on, you know, they're in two places and they helped flip Clark County, you know, Vancouver, Washington blue. So, I'm on low-power FM stations in Columbus, Ohio, Grand Rapids, Michigan and other places. And so, you know, we need a lot of these things and they can be done by local community groups. And like I said, it doesn't take a lot of money.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Thom Hartmann - just to reintroduce you - author of many great books on the history of corporate power and abuse and attempts to try to do something about it, as well as a daily syndicated radio talk show, three hours a day. I don't know how you do it, but you do it. But Thom, let me ask you a question that some of our listeners might've caught, who are more likely to go with the [U.S.] Green Party other progressive civic groups. You tied this reform package a little tightly with the Democratic Party. Do you have any problems with that?

Thom Hartmann: Well, my argument and I say this on the air a lot when people call up and complain about their local Democratic Party. And I'll say, have you shown up at a local Democratic Party meeting? I mean, you know, you can become a precinct committee person; in most places, they're begging for them. And the precinct committee people are the ones who decide who gets to run in the primaries and what the platform is going to be. I've had local Democratic Parties all over the country that have been taken over by listeners to my show now since I've been on this hobby for—

Ralph Nader: No, I understand that. My point is a little different. You run into problems with the Federal Election Commission, whether these are donations.

Thom Hartmann: Oh, a the contribution in kind; I get it.

Ralph Nader: Are you worried that even the Republican Party, you know, doesn't overtly try to build radio stations?

Thom Hartmann: Yeah, well, that's why I'm not asking the party to fund anything. I did suggest that the party should put together a taskforce to look at this. And I know that a couple of members of Congress in the [Congressional] Progressive Caucus read this article and said, you know, we really ought to do this. But they would not be looking at, you know, getting themselves on radio or buying radio stations or doing anything that could be interpreted as contribution in kind. Instead, they would be looking for ways that legislation could be passed that would open back up the radio airwaves, things like bringing back local ownership rules or bringing back the fairness doctrine.

Ralph Nader: I'm curious about the reaction by *The Nation* magazine readers. And it was also reprinted in the *Progressive Populist*, one of my favorite publications. We've had Art Cullen, the editor, on the show a couple of times. But the title is *Talk Radio: Democrats Can't Win if They Don't Play*. What kind of response, really functional, any functional response? A lot of pretty well-off New York people Democrats read [*The*] *Nation* magazine and also around the world. Do you get much of a response or were you sort of disappointed? It's not like every day somebody writes an article like this.

Thom Hartmann: Yeah, yeah. There is one fellow. Well, I got a lot of “ataboys,” you know, “Great article, let's hope something happens” that kind of stuff. But, you know, talk is cheap. There was one guy who is an investment advisor to progressive billionaires. He's got a couple of clients whose names you might recognize. And he helps them decide where their money should go. He read this piece; he reached out to me and said, you know, let me help you. Let's try to pitch this to a few people. And he helped get this article in front of and read by at least three billionaires that I know of and that I know he did. But so far, we haven't found anybody who's going to nibble on it.

Ralph Nader: Is one of them Nick Hanauer from Seattle?

Thom Hartmann: No, Nick has been on my show a number of times, and weirdly enough, somebody tweeted it at Nick, and Nick tweeted back saying, oh, you know, liberals don't want to listen to talk radio. Talk radio traffics in fear and hate, and that's not the way liberals think. And so I tweeted back at Nick saying, “Hey, I'm a liberal; I'm on the radio; you've been on my show;

I don't traffic any hate and fear. And you got it wrong, Nick.” And to the best of my knowledge, he never responded to me, and I'm not sure he even realized that I had said that.

Ralph Nader: But that's a very widespread attitude. That's a very—it's a total defeatist attitude.

Thom Hartmann: I agree.

Ralph Nader: And almost a bit removed from the reality of what people listen to in their car when they're going back and forth from work and going about shopping. I mean, it's as if these super wealthy people don't experience this. Therefore, they think everybody doesn't experience this and that radio is passé.

Thom Hartmann: Yeah, it's unfortunate. And, you know, if you have a chauffeur driving you around, I don't know if that's the case with Nick or not. He seems a little more down to earth and he's also—he's not a billionaire; he's just a multi, multi, multi-millionaire. He's a very wealthy guy, but he was one of the founders of Patriotic Millionaires, you know, which is a great group. Him and Black and a few of these other guys who have also been on my program. But, you know, I don't want to and have no real reason to criticize Nick. He's a good guy. And I think he just doesn't understand radio. And I think you're right, Ralph, I think these guys live in a rarified world by and large, the billionaires, anyway.

Ralph Nader: Well, it's enough evidence. All the evidence you need to know is, at least in my opinion, that right-wing talk radio did more than any other factor in changing blue collar workers from Democratic voters, New Deal-type voters to [Ronald] Reagan Democrats. Would you agree?

Thom Hartmann: You're absolutely right. And it went on steroids during the [Bill] Clinton administration. And frankly, I believe that that if right-wing talk radio, let's say right-wing talk radio is not a big, huge, powerful force, but just, you know, a force, right? Let's say they only add 2% or 3% to the electorate. In one side, you know, if they can only swing 2% or 3% of the vote, that's more than enough to put George Bush and Donald Trump in office!

Ralph Nader: I think it was much more than that. I think they swung 7 to 10 million blue collar workers into the Republican camp for the duration.

Thom Hartmann: I would agree. I was saying, you know, even the most skeptical perspective would indicate that right-wing talk radio has put Republicans in the White House at least since Ronald Reagan. And had there been an equal presence in left-wing talk radio, I don't think Bush or Trump ever would have made it to the White House.

Ralph Nader: I agree. We shouldn't conclude this program without mentioning National Public Radio [NPR], which has some of the largest audiences in the country. Is that correct?

Thom Hartmann: That's correct. Yeah, they do. And, you know, a lot of people will say, well, you don't need progressive talk radio, you got NPR. However, NPR is scrupulously apolitical. You know, it's a completely different thing from having somebody—

David Feldman: And it's corporate sponsored.

Thom Hartmann: Yes. Although, you know, I'm not quite so historical about that because my show is corporate sponsored also, and I've never had a corporation try to tell me how to change my politics. They can take it or leave it. But I think the big thing with NPR is that they're not telling people how to vote the way that I do and Mark Levin...

Ralph Nader: Right, but my point was, there's still a lot of people listening to radio per se.

Thom Hartmann: Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Ralph Nader: I mean, David Brancaccio told me his audience for *Marketplace [Morning Report]* is 11 million. I mean, this and, you know, *All Things Considered*, which I think should be named "*Somethings Considered*", has a huge audience. *Morning Edition* has a huge audience. So, the radio habit is not going the way of the Australian dodo [bird].

Thom Hartmann: No.

Ralph Nader: A lot of people still listen to radio. David, do you have a comment or question?

David Feldman: Yeah. When you were talking about Clear Channel, they racked up so much debt that I think at one point, they were taken over by Bain Capital. Private equity owns these radio stations. Is it profitable? Have we proven that creating these radio conglomerates are not profitable? And isn't there something the [US] Justice Department can do, the [Federal Trade Commission] FTC could do, the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] could do to block these mergers and break up these radio chains?

Thom Hartmann: Yes. And that's at the core of, and there's an entire chapter about that, as it applies to radio in my last book, *The Hidden History of Monopolies*, which Ralph wrote the foreword for. God bless you, Ralph; thank you. And by the way, we got your cookbook a while ago and it's great, Ralph. I just wanted to say. But to the point of the bankruptcy, Clear Channel was actually making money. I was--about the third or fourth year of my show--I think it must have been around 2006 or 2007, or thereabouts, the local Clear Channel station here in Portland, Oregon picked up Air America, KPOJ; They had picked up the Air America lineup and the local manager reached out to me and said, hey, if you come out to Portland, you can still do your national show; you can do it out of our studio. We'll give you a free studio and backstop you on the engineering end. And we'll also pay a salary to do a morning show for us if you'd like to do six hours of radio every day. And I thought, you know, hey, let's try it. Let's see what happens. And so, you know, we came out here and did that. The station was doing good. All across the country, Clear Channel was quite profitable. And then Mitt Romney's company, Bain Capital, came in and bought them. And this is, you know, and I know you guys know probably a lot more about this than I do. And Ralph has been all over this for years. But the business model of these so-called private equity companies is basically to suck a company dry. I was working at Clear Channel at this station, and the first thing that happened was they came in and decertified the union, the SAG-AFTRA [Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists]. The second thing that happened was that, I mean, literally within months of the Bain Capital taking over Clear Channel, was the 10 or 12 or 15 people, I don't recall how many total, but there was a bunch of people that worked in the newsroom and they had a lot of local music shows. I mean, we must have had 30 or 40 employees, and there was five stations in that pod--a couple of music stations, a right-wing station that had Limbaugh on it and a left-wing station that

had me on it, and they fired pretty much everybody. All the radio stations went to voice track, you know, to basically automated music coming out of New York. The sports station went to national syndicated sports. They shut down the progressive station, KPOJ. And, you know, that was the end of that. And as Romney's company took over Clear Channel, that was when they started dropping the Air America shows like crazy. And that was also one of the things that helped kill Air America because most of the stations that Air America was on were Clear Channel stations.

Ralph Nader: That's the business model. That's the same model that these companies taking over newspapers all over the country [use]. First thing they do is they fire local reporters. They don't want to pay the salaries and they use a lot of syndicated puff material. But from what you described, Thom, this is a violation of the 1934 Communications Act. You can't strip mine radio and TV using the public airwaves to that level and still meet the standard of public interest, convenience, and necessity. Why aren't there more lawsuits by, you know, companies in these areas that have been displaced?

Thom Hartmann: That's a good question. I don't know the answer, Ralph. That would be something for people that you know who are good litigators in that area. By the way, this didn't just happen to Clear Channel, Cumulus [Media, Inc.], which was the second largest radio network in the country with about 800 stations, same thing. They got taken over by venture capitalists. They got sucked to dry. It took less than a year as I recall. And they just came out, you know, went into bankruptcy earlier last year, early last year, as I recall.

David Feldman: I'm confused, Thom, because I understood that venture capital bought up all these radio conglomerates because the radio conglomerates were in trouble, that they had incurred so much debt buying up too many stations [and] that the business model "big" doesn't work in radio. That was my understanding.

Thom Hartmann: I'm not sure that's true, David. I can't speak authoritatively. You know, I've never carefully examined all the details of the takeover of Clear Channel even though I was working there at the time, but—

David Feldman: It was my understanding of the Clear Channel that their eyes were bigger than their stomach, [and] that they ended up buying way too many stations.

Thom Hartmann: Maybe. But they had economies of scale. I mean, they had a substantial economies of scale that would argue for profitability. Whether they were able to pull that off or not, frankly, I don't know.

David Feldman: I think they had way too much debt, Clear Channel.

Thom Hartmann: It may be. Although, again, you know, would Mitt Romney take over a company that had debt? Well, maybe, I don't know. That's not my area of expertise.

Ralph Nader: Well, something clearly happened, whether they underinvested as they strip mined their programs, but, for example, they owned a radio station in North Dakota, and it was completely automated. So when there was terrible natural disaster approaching, usually the local station would be right on informing people about this and that. And it was basically irrelevant

because it was being programmed by some office a thousand miles away, and there was nobody there except the machinery. That's the failure of the Federal Communications Commission and more generically, the utter failure of a media-indentured Congress to do anything about it.

Thom Hartmann: Yeah. And in that case, there was a train that derailed, and they were leaking poisonous chlorine gas and there were five radio stations in that town. I thought it was an Idaho, but there were a couple of radio stations in that town, and the authorities were desperately calling these radio stations saying, please put out the alert, you know, people are going to die. And every single radio station was being programmed out of state. They didn't even have engineers on duty at the time, which used to be a requirement when I was in radio, back in the '60s and early '70s. And as a result, people did die.

Ralph Nader: Well, our listeners should put pen to paper, as we used to say in the old days, and ask their [US] senators and representative [if they] are they aware of all this. Do they know that there should be oversight hearings of the moribund Federal Communications Commission, which reached an all-time low under Donald Trump, as you might imagine?

David Feldman: I remember Byron Dorgan, the senator in the well of the Senate—he's from North Dakota—complained specifically what Ralph was talking about. So, even he couldn't do anything about it.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. Well, here it is. We own it. The public airwaves, we own it. The corporations control it, decide who says what and who doesn't say what on our property 24 hours a day. And we're all asleep at the switch. We have to close now. We've been talking with Thom Hartmann. Thom, give our listeners your best contact numbers so they can get the stream of information you pour out every day during the week.

Thom Hartmann: Well, thomhartmann.com is my website. And however you spell it will get you there. We have all forms of spellings. And, you know, I write every day over at medium.com and at thomhartmann.medium.com and T-H-O-M-Hartmann with two n's. And you can find my books anywhere you find books. Thank you for asking, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Well, you're very welcome. Thank you, Thom. To be continued. You're opening up this whole talk radio issue from the inside and from the outside based on your historical knowledge of corporate power and media. And we thank you for that. And I hope you're going to generate a lot more follow up on this important article that appeared in *The Nation* magazine and [was] republished in *Progressive Populist*, February 1, 2021 called "Talk Radio: Democrats Can't Win if They Don't Play". I might add, the American people can't win if we don't have a more diverse talk radio. Thank you.

Thom Hartmann: Thank you.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Thom Hartmann. We will link his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Let's take a short break to check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. Russell?

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington D.C., this is your Corporate Crime Reporter, "Morning Minute" for Friday, February 19, 2021; I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Columbia Law [School] Professor John Coffee says that [The] Boeing [Company's] deferred prosecution agreement is one of the worst he has seen. The agreement included an unusual provision finding that a compliance monitor was not necessary because the misconduct was neither pervasive across the organization nor undertaken by a large number of employees nor facilitated by senior management. This is without precedent. Coffee told *Corporate Crime Reporter* in an interview last week, "I have not seen that anywhere else, and I've looked at a number of deferred prosecution agreements. Not only was there no independent study by a reputable law firm, but when you look where the money went, only 500 million [\$] out of the 2.65 billion [\$] went to victims. 1.77 billion [\$] went to airline companies. It was important to inflate the amount of the settlement." For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. And hello, we must be going because that's our show. I want to thank our guest again, Thom Hartmann. For those of you listening on the radio, we're going to cut out now. For you, podcasts listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up". A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, it's free; go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: To support the The American Museum of Tort Law, check out their online shop at store.tortmuseum.org. They have autographed books, "Flaming Pinto" coffee mugs, and other unique gifts for all of you lawyers, law students, paralegals and tort fans out there.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: 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.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Rader Hour* when we'll talk to the former head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Richard Cordray. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. This show with Thom Hartmann is a good background for