

# RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 422 TRANSCRIPT

**Tom Morello:** I'm Tom Morello and you're listening to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour.

[Music] Stand up, stand up, you've been sitting way too long.

**Steve Skrovan:** Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan. David Feldman is off today — well, David Feldman is off every day, but that's not the point. David is on assignment, and he'll be back next week. But we do have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph?

**Ralph Nader:** Hello. And we have little news. We've created the first pilot edition of the *Capitol Hill Citizen* to show how Congress should really be covered. It's a 42-page newspaper. Just send a donation of \$5 to cover shipping and handling, and you'll get a print copy of the first edition of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, 42 pages. Just go to [capitolhillcitizen.com](http://capitolhillcitizen.com), that's C-A-P-I-T-O-L, [hillcitizen.com](http://hillcitizen.com).

**Steve Skrovan:** We'll repeat that website at the end of the show. Stay tuned. We have a very full show today. First, as we enter the third year of the COVID pandemic, it's easy to see how it has changed our lives. But this is not the first time a disease has shaped the way we live. I'm not talking about the Spanish flu of a 100 years ago, this one goes back even further. Tuberculosis, nearly one third of the global population has latent TB. And 10.4 million new TB cases are reported every year. But TB is an ancient disease. Scientists have found traces in Egyptian mummies dating to 2400 BCE, and its influence is all around us. It brought us vampire stories, Gillette razors, shorter skirts, shorter beards, and some of our most exploitative copyright laws.

Our first guest today will be health journalist Vidya Krishnan. She's spent the last decade reporting on the rise of drug-resistant tuberculosis in Mumbai. And in her new book, *Phantom Plague*, she tells the story of tuberculosis, the interplay of science and industry, and the crucial role that class, race and caste play in medicine. In the second half of today's show, we'll welcome back friend of the show and journalist John Nichols. Most of us think that coronavirus has been kind of a bad thing. But the COVID pandemic hasn't been bad for everyone. Some people have been able to use the pandemic to get rich or richer. The elites of our political, economic, and social classes could have used their power and money to reduce harm. Maybe by not fighting for vaccine patents while millions fought for their lives. Maybe by giving away PPE and ventilators. Maybe by-passing universal healthcare legislation. Maybe by just telling the truth. But what would they get out of that? In his new book, *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers*, Mr. Nichols considers some of the United States' most egregious pandemic profiteers and he makes the case for naming names and demanding accountability, all for the health of our republic.

As always, somewhere in the middle we'll check in with our *Corporate Crime Reporter* Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's find out how tuberculosis shaped history. Vidya Krishnan is an award-winning journalist who has been reporting on medical science for the last 20 years. She has written for the *Atlantic*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Caravan*. Her new book is entitled *Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History*.

Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Vidya Krishnan.

**Vidya Krishnan:** Thank you for having me.

**Ralph Nader:** Welcome, indeed. This is, listeners, an extraordinarily important book and I'm going to frame it by taking an excerpt from Chapter 12. "About 2.8 million people every year, and that may be a low estimate, die from tuberculosis", 2.8 million. And Vidya starts the chapter this way. "The World Health Organization estimates that one-fourth of the world's population has latent TB. The HIV epidemic was a rude awakening. Suddenly there was a realization that TB was a grave crisis. HIV, because it compromised immunity, liberated the latent TB. The logic was inescapable. Any widespread epidemic that adversely affected immunity had the capacity to make latent TB into an active and deadly killer." Of course, some of that observation may start being applied to the COVID virus, which compromises immunity. We've been very complacent as a society and we've ignored the ravages of this disease in third-world countries, and you have ample pages on how the center of tuberculosis now is in the giant city of Mumbai in India, your native country. So let me start this way. You have a lot of good history about how the germ theory of disease was finally discovered by the work of Pasteur, and Lister, Koch, and the martyred doctors who were abused and ridiculed because they fought what you described as the miasmatic theory that's rooted in the Dracula fiction. And we won't have time to go into that, but I do want to tell our listeners that this book, *Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History*, is not an understatement. Throughout history it was the dominant fear and nobody understood how it happened until the germ theory was established. But I want you to start by describing the case of a young woman, Shreya Tripathi, who you dedicate your book to in part, and how she experienced this increasing patent monopoly on drugs like the ones that can treat tuberculosis. Tell us the story.

**Vidya Krishnan:** Yeah, thank you for that question and for being a generous reader. Shreya was 15 when I came across the family. Her father was a government servant who moved court in Delhi to access this new drug which is patented by Johnson & Johnson. And it's manufactured for Johnson & Johnson in an Indian factory here, which then ships it to the rest of the world, but patients like Shreya do not have access to it. And this teenager failed five rounds of TB. She was diagnosed with extremely — extensively drug-resistant TB, which is XDR TB. It's one of those deadly superbugs against which most of modern medicine, most antibiotics don't work, except for bedaquiline, which was this newer therapy.

And she could not access it in India, despite it being manufactured in India. And the family moved court and they won, but eventually this teenager died in that process. Because the process is the punishment in the Indian court system. And India is the "pharmacy of the world" or, at least, I've been reporting for 20 years in India and we keep — very proudly talking about how we supply to WHO [World Health Organization] and we supply to African nations. And what has happened since 2005, in particular, when India became TRIPS-compliant, and I will get into it in more detail, is that Indian patients do not have access to newer therapies because India's generic drug makers now are acting as contracted manufacturers of Big Pharma. And all of this is a decades-long journey because India's booming pharmaceutical industry made very affordable generic drugs after the HIV epidemic. What happened after the HIV epidemic is that no other large scale infectious disease has been — I guess I want to say that especially in black and brown nations as a reporter, my bread and butter is infectious disease. Especially in India, increasingly I

find it impossible to talk about infectious disease and treatment without talking about patent monopoly because drugs, diagnostics, vaccines--everything, is locked in a patent. And that's what happened with this teenager. It was very shocking for me that India, while calling itself the "pharmacy of the world," systematically denied this teenager and her family access to this newer therapy, which is available, for a disease which is curable. And I guess it got me started writing this book and that's actually why I dedicated the book, not just to Shreya but also to the millions of people who are now dying of a preventable disease.

I guess that's the short answer.

**Ralph Nader:** And what was the extent of Johnson & Johnson's monopoly here? On page 153 of your book, it's pretty astounding how they filed multiple patents in at least 52 countries. And a patent is another name for monopoly, listeners, legal monopoly. They filed multiple patents in each country, divided into five types. The patent is on the compound. The second is on the method of use of the compound to treat the TB. The third is the method of use patent to treat latent TB. The fourth one is the patent on the process to make bedaquiline. And the fifth is a patent on the end-use product that will come to market. So, this idea of our founding fathers, or the framers of the Constitution, to entice innovation by giving the lone inventors at that time a monopoly for a few years so they could market it and get a reward, has turned into a global monster that is really hard to exaggerate. They can turn these patents into evergreen patents and roll them over after the patent expires, say around 20 years, and roll it over so they could have it for over half a century. And these big drug companies have this *modus vivendi* that they get their patents and they let the other companies get their patents. And it's basically a pay or die monster. It basically says to people who can't afford the monstrous price for these drugs, "Too bad, you pay or die." And in the area of HIV, there was an Indian drug company; you talk about, Cipla, who for a variety of reasons decided to challenge Big Pharma in the United States and broke the \$10,000 per patient in Africa cost of anti-HIV drug "cocktails" as they're called, and the Indian company was charging \$300; from \$10,000 to \$300. So, what is the role of Bill Gates here?

**Vidya Krishnan:** I go into that quite a bit in my book. So, when you call it a global monster, that's exactly right. And one of the champions of knowledge monopoly is Mr. Gates. And I go into the history of how Bill Gates, not coincidentally, made a lot of money after 1995 when the TRIPS [Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights] agreement went into force. And at that point, I go into the book about how Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation brings a very technocratic approach to healthcare as against an approach that has human rights in it. And especially when dealing with infectious diseases. I also go into how Big Philanthropy in particular has in some twisted way raised charity to some high principle of justice.

And we now see again with COVID technologies, they are locked in patent. And it's exactly for the same reasons. In fact, I think the *New Republic* had a fantastic essay profiling Bill Gates, calling him the "vaccine monster." Because in my country right now, I've not had a booster dose. And all of this is happening because there is one single company called Serum Institute of India, which can make the drug which is actually funded by taxes and developed by scientists at Oxford University. And what we keep seeing again is there are immense taxpayer contributions when the molecules are at an initial stage of R&D. And bedaquiline, the drug this teenager needed to be treated for XDR TB, is a perfect case in point. It was a genuine case of public contribution. And MSF repeatedly argued that the public contributions weren't a common right. [MSF =

Marginal Standing Facility: a window for banks to borrow from the Reserve Bank of India in an emergency situation when inter-bank liquidity dries up completely]

And that is true again for COVID technologies. The German taxpayers have invested in COVID vaccines. American taxpayers, NIH has invested in one vaccine. Indian taxpayers have their own vaccine. But at this point - I'm not sure of the exact data right now but - the Global South does not have access to vaccines while the Global North is binning extra vaccines that are expiring. And none of this would be possible, very central to this is Bill Gates, who is not a politician, not an elected official, not a scientist, and not a doctor.

**Ralph Nader:** Extending what you're saying that basically this is a grotesque circle that's going on where you have the government using tax dollars to do the risky research and development for these pharmaceuticals because the drug companies don't want to risk their own money. And when the discoveries are made, the government gives it away to select drug companies as they did with AZT, for example, to a British drug company. And then the drug companies use the monopoly patent cover to secure totally monopoly prices, which have devastating effects killing millions of people all around the world, literally pay-or-die. Then obviously they cannot pay. Why aren't some countries just nationalizing these corporations' operations? For example, in India, other countries, why don't they just nationalize them as an emergency situation? I mean, companies have been nationalized for far lesser gravity throughout modern history.

**Vidya Krishnan:** I feel like we are at a point in time where in India we have a right-wing government right now, and India also has a highly privatized health sector. And what you keep saying about "pay-or-die" —I live between the US and India and it's such a weird twilight zone to be in to make these complete polar opposites, "east and west" comparison. But this architecture of unfairness is just so exacting. It falls very precisely on exactly the same minority communities in an extremely predictable way. I would actually take forward what you call "pay or die" because it's not just the patients who die. These are infectious diseases, which boomerang in a circle for a certain time. But if you keep the salve - literally medicines that are available - from the patients there are more variants. You're seeing this with COVID [even though] this book is about TB. Again, I've written the book in such a way that TB is just a case in point to show everything that is messed up with the extremely unjust law.

The fountainhead of why there is such disparity and lack of affordability for drugs is the TRIPS agreement. And why don't countries nationalize? I mean, I wish India [would] nationalize. We had public sector units that made our drugs when we were a newly independent country. We are now 75 years into our independence. And our health sector has become extremely privatized. It's a case of regulatory capture where the policy is being dictated by industry very much in parallel with what's happening in the US or even in the UK, frankly.

A pandemic is actually a perfect time to nationalize healthcare. I remember when the pandemic began, there were a few countries that were genuinely thinking about making healthcare universal, taxpayer funded and free for the duration of the pandemic. If I'm not wrong, Spain was one of the countries which was having this conversation because that's the only way to address a really dreaded infectious disease, which does not need to kill as many people as it's killing. And I kind of keep going back to the model core of why we just made up a system in the G77, which

is that all of the developing post-colonial nations were not at the table when the TRIPS laws were made.

And then the US government has made — India became TRIPS-compliant in 2005 under extreme pressure from the US. And unlike the 1990s when Cipla came and offered affordable — a dollar a day HIV cocktail, that option doesn't exist anymore because Cipla has changed as a company. Dr. Hamied, who headed it, has resigned, and the patent certifications are just so expensive that it's just easier to sign a voluntary license than to innovate the company. And eventually all of us get shortchanged because it's not just the patients. The patients die right now and immediately. But we are stuck in a forever pandemic, while there are parallel pandemics going on in my part of the world and a very different portion going on in your part of the world.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, you know, there are remedies. Countries can require compulsory licensing to have more competitors and in effect, break the grip of the patent. That's a political issue. That's an issue of Congress. Who runs Congress? We know: the corporations. But the people can run Congress as we've said many times in many contexts throughout the program, week after week. The second way I'd like you to talk about is that the WHO has authority to break a patent in an international health emergency. Isn't that true?

**Vidya Krishnan:** WHO again could have done this. But again, this is why Mr. Gates is such a looming presence in every conversation. He is the largest funder to WHO. And at this point, WHO's way of procuring medicines is they have this COVAX facility and the bulk of the supply for COVAX is made in Pune, India by Serum Institute. And six months ago, India had a devastating second wave after which we had to stop exporting COVID vaccines because India had only vaccinated 4% of its own people. And what's actually happening is that because the WHO wants to protect patents more than protecting patients at this point, the burden to vaccinate the world has been passed on to a single Indian company. And no company can manufacture for the world. And when India had that second wave and had to stop exporting vaccines to the rest of the world in June last year, 91 countries had to stop vaccinating their people. And the book goes into great detail about WHO's role in perpetuating many pandemics, not just COVID but also TB in this case. And it just goes back to the same set of four or five people who have their voices heard, and the clash of interests, and closed-door meetings. And the price of it is invariably borne by black and brown communities, not just in countries that are poor or post-colonial or in faraway places, but the courtesy of extending the same health services, is not even extended to black and brown communities in the US. So, you see the same health deficits in minority communities and immigrants and refugees. So, I will say that WHO has been sleeping at the wheel here a little bit because we know that in a pandemic every continent needs to have its own vaccine supplies. You cannot depend on it being shipped from somewhere. Especially what's happening in Canada that shipped its vaccines to many African nations. They were close to expiring. And all of it then creates a situation where we have to address the scientific racism where you're just not saving the lives that don't matter. That's essentially what WHO's policy is.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, you might be interested in the work of Jamie Love who was an economist at our Center [Center for the Study of Responsive Law] and started the resistance against these patent monopolies on HIV. And he's proposed a way to replace the present antiquated, much-exploited patent system. And he's an economist. He has his own group now in Washington, D.C. You might be interested in interviewing him. He has traveled all over the world many, many times.

**Vidya Krishnan:** I am aware of Jamie Love's work and what KEI does, and the Medicines Patent Pool. And again, there are so many ways to reconfigure the system of how we regulate medicines as against regulating it the same way as iPhones or refrigerators.

**Ralph Nader:** One thing I like about your book, Vidya . . . we're talking with Vidya Krishnan who is the author of *Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History*, and still is. One thing I like about your book is you get tougher as you go along. And you really close the book with blazing rhetoric backed by irresistible, irrefutable evidence. And I'd just like to read one paragraph where you say "Incrementally we've centralized power and concentrated a vast amount of wealth in a few hands in oligopolistic industries like Big Pharma, Big Tech, and Big Philanthropy. We can no longer tinker with language or repurpose discredited cost-effective policies to sound like a healthcare plan when none of it produces the experience of accessing healthcare safely and humanely." And one of the pointed conclusions you come to in the book is how Big Philanthropy like Bill Gates's foundation is very much involved in backing this dictatorial, monopolistic patent system. And it isn't just drugs. You point out in the middle of your book something that maybe a lot of people aren't aware of. I've described it as: corporations are trying to patent our dictionary. And you say that intellectual property, which is a euphemism for monopoly, monopoly, property of discoveries, you say this, "Since then, free market capitalism and intellectual property laws have only made ownership of words, symbols, smells, designs, creative content, and existing knowledge worse. Candy Crush trademarked the English word 'saga' because they had a few games with that word at the end. "Apple thinks it owns rounded edges on rectangular phones." And I had litigation with MasterCard because on one of my presidential campaigns I had an ad where I used the word "priceless." And they sued basically saying you can't use that word; we have trademarked that word. I said, I beg your pardon; that's in the dictionary. You're now starting to monopolize control of words in the dictionary? Of course, the trademark office in the US in Washington is full of those examples. So, you're raising a very, very serious issue of autocracy, corporate dictatorship, collusion with giant philanthropies, stifling the WHO, and controlling third-world country parliaments so that the obvious compulsory licensing or nationalization options are not initiated to save millions of lives every year. That's what we're talking about. Never mind the sickness and the agony and the impact on the families and the lack of income in order to survive. So where do you think you're going from here? You've written this book; most people who write exposé books just move on to the next story. Are you contacting any members of Congress who might be amenable, like Senator Pat Leahy, to hold congressional hearings here?

**Vidya Krishnan:** So far, the book has been out for six weeks now, and I'm also in the middle of reporting on the pandemic in India and the second wave, so I haven't thought that through but, yes, that is an organic step because I write in the book— this moral arc does not bend towards justice. It has to be *broken* towards it. I'm Brahmin, which is upper caste in India. It's a slightly longer way to answer your question. And Brahmins, according to India's system of caste apartheid, are the most expert people in knowledge monopolies. What we do as an upper caste is keep lower caste out of schools. And what the TRIPS law is essentially looking at knowledge as a monopoly and that's actually why I talk about Germ Theory at such length. And talk about how without Semmelweis there will be no Lister. And without Lister there would be no revolution. He's known as the father of asepsis. And knowledge is the most important input in future knowledge. And we are just having this conversation where we have turbocharged— again,

American innovation is worth protecting because it's also ahead of many other countries. But then the constitutional provisions that are there in the US is so foundational; the patent system is so foundational in the American way of life almost... the idea behind that is to make sure there is more innovation, but it has been decentered from that, from more innovation for more social good, and it has just singularly been serving profiteering. And this is price gouging, and it is endless price gouging that's just not in the US. It is global.

And during the pandemic we saw Pfizer, for example, in many nations Pfizer wanted the national sovereign assets mortgaged if they wanted vaccines, which included parliament buildings in some countries. And this is just humiliating a country for no reason, especially given the fact that they haven't opened their books about how much they spent on this vaccine. It's a completely unreasonable conversation, and for the life of me, I have not heard a single sensible idea. For years I've been working in India as a health supporter, and I keep hearing about how Mr. Gates wants to solve malaria. I mean, here's a disease he can-solve.

**Ralph Nader:** You're reporting on something that affects everybody because the larger story of your book is the global antibiotic resistance where major infections of all kinds are now developing mutant bacterium that overcome existing antibiotics. And without more public investment from the US government and other governments, the pharmaceutical industry just isn't willing to put the money into it. They spend far more in marketing and advertising, by the way, listeners, than they do on their highly touted research and development programs. And you point out that the drug resistance coming out of India in tuberculosis is very, very ominous. The last line in one of your chapters titled "Antibiotic Apocalypse On the Move", is "In that way, India's antibiotic apocalypse is on the move." So, this can affect everybody in every town, hamlet, city, country, all over the world when people have infections and the doctors and hospitals tell them "Sorry, we don't have the antibiotic that could overcome this latest mutating infection." Before we close, we've been talking with Vidya Krishnan, the author of the new book *Phantom Plague: How Tuberculosis Shaped History*. And she brings it right up to date, listeners. Is there any last comment you want to make to our serious listening audience?

**Vidya Krishnan:** Well, I will say that I kind of specifically write about Bombay knowing, hoping — the book is written — it cannot see just India's infectious disease on the move because I'm reporting from Mumbai and I'm reporting about what I'm finding there. But with climate change and the permafrost melting, there are old pathogens that reflect our unknown unknowns. We cannot predict them at this point. Why I talk about Mumbai in such granular detail is that this particular strain may not affect us, but we have more infectious diseases in our future. And I heard the other day in some seminar in Switzerland, they were talking about a pandemic-resistant future. The current pandemic is not over for most of the world. And I do not want this book to become a reason to further discriminate against black and brown people because they are locked out of medicines; they are fighting for those medicines which they don't have; Asians are already being attacked in many parts of the US and many parts of the world, in fact. But that is really not the point of why I say that. What I say is no one can escape this. It's an infectious disease. It does not respect geographical boundaries. And that's what we saw happening in Wuhan. And the problem is not where the disease is starting. The problem is where the medicines are locked up and kept. And that's where I'd like to leave you guys.

**Ralph Nader:** Well said. And listeners, remember, you know better than most listeners of other radio programs that everybody has been affected by so many of these tragedies, these

corruptions, these displays of corporate greed that we cannot be just private citizens anymore. We have to become public citizens, because if you just are a private citizen, and millions and millions of people just stick to their private knitting, the dangers are not going to stop at your threshold. The dangers are everywhere, and they're going to pervade everything. Thank you very much, Vidya, for your good work, and I hope you expand it with your allies so we can move it more to the congressional stage, which happens to be the main lever under our Constitution to change directions from tragedy and disaster into promise and performance. Thank you very much, Vidya.

**Vidya Krishnan:** Thank you for having me.

**Steve Skrovan:** We have been speaking with Vidya Krishnan. We will link to her new book *Phantom Plague* at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Up next, in the interest of our nation's founding principles, we'd like to publicly shame Jared Kushner, Mike Pence, Elaine Chao, Mitch McConnell, and of course, Donald Trump. 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, April 8, 2022; I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Amazon hired an influential consulting and polling firm with close ties to the Democratic Party to help the company thwart a critical unionization effort at a Staten Island, New York, warehouse. That's according to a report from CNBC. Global Strategy Group, which served as a polling partner for a pro-Biden super PAC ahead of the 2020 election, has been working for Amazon since at least late last year to produce anti-union materials. Amazon fought aggressively to beat back the union effort on Staten Island. Warehouse staffers across the company amped up their activism during the Covid pandemic, demanding safer working conditions and better pay. For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

**Steve Skrovan:** Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with Ralph. Why did COVID get so bad? Our next guest has written that our leaders "had been trained to stop caring by a country that claimed to be egalitarian but always let its elites off the hook," which brings us to our next guest.

John Nichols is a Columbia School of Journalism graduate, and he has put that degree to good use as an author and the national-affairs correspondent for the *Nation* magazine. A contributing writer for the *Progressive* and *In These Times*. And the associate editor of the *Capital Times*, a daily newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin. His latest book is entitled *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers: Accountability for Those Who Caused the Crisis*.

Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, John Nichols.

**John Nichols:** Honored to be with you.

**Ralph Nader:** Yes, John, we're going to break some new ground, listeners, here. Enough generalizations about what's going on badly in our country. What John Nichols has done in this book is named the villains who, by their defiance of common sense, defiance of humanity, defiance of the facts, enabled profiteering and government indifference during the Trump years to the coronavirus ravages. In tort law and criminal law, there is such a thing as criminal



negligence. And people are prosecuted if they drive drunkenly down the road and they kill somebody they can go to jail. But there seems to be impunity, or a more specific word, immunity, to high government officials and high corporate executives. So, we're going to go through chapter after chapter and ask John what he found out about these people in terms of their liability exposure to prosecution, civil actions and the rest. So let's start. You showed the horror of what happened by just telling the story of Mike Jackson very briefly, John.

**John Nichols:** Yeah, I tried in every chapter of this book to keep an eye on the human side of this, the reality that, as we look at close to a million people who died from COVID-19 and tens of millions who have been either infected or have had their lives profoundly impacted by this, and so I do tell human stories. And the first story that I tell the book is that of Mike Jackson. He was a factory worker in suburban Milwaukee, and he's a father of a large family. His job was very, very important to him. He knew he had to show up for work. He did it diligently. And as the pandemic hit, he was labeled an essential worker. It was a bit strange because the work that he did was making lawn care products for a corporation. But he was an essential worker and so he showed up. And very early on in the pandemic, Mike Jackson, and some of his coworkers said, "Look, this place isn't safe. The fact is, that we're working face to face with other workers. We don't have adequate protections," and they complained. And the company that he worked for, instead of responding to that, just kept on going and kept on trucking through in a relatively normal way, the way they had before. And Mike Jackson got sick and one day he had to leave the workplace and thought he got a little bit better, came back a day or so later, collapsed at his machine, and ultimately died. And the reason that I start with his story is because he was not one of the first to die. He was relatively into the crisis, but he was one of many people who I found again and again in researching the book, frontline workers who recognized the danger. They recognized the threat, and yet when they complained either to their employers or to government officials, they got a very limited and sometimes neglectful response. And there's simply no question that those limited and neglectful responses led to hundreds of thousands of deaths that were unnecessary.

**Ralph Nader:** And there are studies that show that if certain things were done early in February, January, March 2020, hundreds of thousands of people's lives would have been saved. Eugene Jarecki the filmmaker, actually created a death clock and he put it up at Times Square in New York City, a pretty highly visible place, marking the number of people who could have been saved if the necessary safeguards were taken. So let's go to your Chapter 1, "The Killing Presidency of Donald Trump". How did he handle it?

**John Nichols:** Terribly. Donald Trump did what our political class does too often. And that is look at a crisis and ask, how will this impact me politically? What will this mean to me as an elected official, as somebody seeking reelection? And there's simply no question that Donald Trump ran his entire response to the pandemic through the lens of his reelection campaign. He was very badly advised, and I write about a lot of his advisers in the book, but the bottom line is that he felt that the pandemic would, in fact, slow down the US economy, which it did, at least for a time, and that that slowdown in the economy would undermine his argument that he was a very successful president, that his actions on the economy had been to the good.

Now I might disagree with him on that, but his fear of this led him to deliberately downplay the pandemic. He acknowledged this to Bob Woodward that he told people it was less of a problem than he knew it was. And I want to really emphasize this, Ralph, that in January and February,

Peter Navarro, and other people in the White House, provided reports to the president and to others in which they absolutely detailed the trajectory of the corona virus pandemic. The fact that hundreds of thousands would die if there were not adequate interventions to do protections--like masks, social distancing, et cetera, and that millions would be impacted, both physically and economically. So Trump knew exactly how serious the disease was and yet he deliberately downplayed it. He lied about it on a regular basis. He told people they'd be back to normal by Easter of 2020. We're now around Easter of 2022 and we're not back to normal.

He also, and this is an important thing, put truly incompetent people in charge of key elements of dealing with the pandemic again and again, including his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. And then finally, he promoted absurd, false, and misleading science and so-called cures throughout the period of the last year of his presidency. There's no question he did tremendous damage. And I point to the *Lancet* report where they did an examination of the difference between what happened in the United States and what happened in other countries. And the conclusion they came to was that 40% of the deaths in the United States would not have occurred if the Trump administration, and others in positions of power, had simply followed the basic protocols that other countries followed.

**Ralph Nader:** And then, of course, he put Mike Pence in charge. Your next chapter "Mike Pence: Yes-Man of the Apocalypse"

**John Nichols:** Yup. Look, Mike Pence is a serial incompetent. This is a guy who screwed up almost everything he has ever touched. And Trump has a lot of these kinds of people around him because he doesn't trust people who are frankly smarter than him or who are frankly more competent than he is. So he likes people like Mike Pence. And he's a very, very bad judge of who to put in a position of power at a critical stage. When things started to get serious with the pandemic and Trump found himself facing tougher and tougher questions, he decided that he would put Pence in charge of the taskforce dealing with it. And for a brief period, to imagine that Pence would be sort of the chief spokesperson. Pence showed very little interest in this role. He did a lousy job. He didn't attend the meetings of the taskforce on a regular basis. And when he did step up, he lied to the American people. He downplayed resurgences of the pandemic on a regular basis. Beyond that, he echoed Trump's false premises and false statements. Now at the end of the day, this was serious because there was a general feeling, I think in a lot of the media and other places, that as bad as Pence was, he was sort of more of an adult in the room than Trump. The fact of the matter is he was every bit as bad as Trump. And this is perhaps the most critical element of it, when he did intervene, he did so from a perspective that was very punishing as regards people who got sick and people who needed care. And in the chapter on him I recount his long history of allowing his personal biases--his religion, his ideology--to get in the way of science. He was absolutely the worst person to have in charge of a taskforce in this regard. And in fact, as bad or worse than Trump.

**Ralph Nader:** As if that wasn't enough of a handoff by Trump, he also handed responsibility nepotistically to his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Your chapter "The Grounding of Jared Kushner".

**John Nichols:** Yes, Jared Kushner was brought in, as he frequently was during the Trump administration, to take on a mess that was way beyond Kushner's area of competence. And I recount in the chapter that during the course of the administration, Trump put Kushner in charge of Middle East peace, and the opioid crisis, and border challenges. Issue after issue after issue

Trump would put Kushner in charge of it thinking that this would suggest a seriousness. The fact of the matter is that none of what Kushner was in charge of ever came out well. And with the pandemic, the key thing that Trump wanted Kushner to do was to establish a supply chain that would allow the US to get the medical gear that was needed to protect people and to care for people. At the time that Trump made this announcement, we had just seen images of nurses in hospitals in New York using garbage bags to protect themselves as the pandemic raged through that city. And so Trump wanted to portray an image of seriousness by putting Kushner in charge. But what Kushner did was turn to a college roommate for advice and they set up something called Operation Airbridge, which was a classic, classic corporate-capitalist boondoggle.

What they did was provided transportation assistance so that US corporations could import goods and medical care from other countries and then sell it in the United States. And their theory was that somehow the free market would make this all work with the government, obviously, taking away the risk for the corporations. But what they didn't do is direct the gear that came into the United States to the places where it was most needed. And so the end result was that gear that came to the US, supported by the US government, with aid from the US government, was then bartered off to the highest bidder by multinational corporations. The end result is it was disastrous. The equipment didn't get to the people that needed it, and it cost the taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars. It was such a disaster that they finally grounded Operation Airbridge very early on. And it ended up in all sorts of congressional investigations. But one key thing I'll point out, Ralph, is that we have supply chain problems to this day that can be traced back to Jared Kushner's incompetent response to the issue with Project Airbridge.

**Ralph Nader:** And here's a political couple that's really gotten away with it. Elaine Chao is the wife of Mitch McConnell. Trump appointed her Secretary of Transportation. She's very, shall we say, business friendly. And she committed a number of acts, which should have been the subject of law enforcement, and she's still getting away with it, still not too late. You have two side by side chapters. The first on Elaine Chao "Let Them Die" and the second "Mitch McConnell's Fatal Bargain". Why don't you take those?

**John Nichols:** Sure. And Elaine Chao has been a, kind of, a lifer in Republican administrations. You could trace her back to the Reagan years. And she always holds positions of power. She always uses those positions to help corporate America and to undermine unions, working people, and environmental protections. That's her MO going way back. Why this became a real crisis was that when the pandemic hit, she was in charge of transportation. She had a lot of ability to intervene to provide national mandates for protecting workers who provide public transportation. And this is both in air flights but also trains, subways, buses, et cetera.

In the chapter, I write about transportation workers who very early on said, Look, it's very clear we're bringing people who are sick onto our buses, onto our subways. We need a lot of protection. We need a mask mandate on public transportation. Like one of the first people to raise the alarm was a bus driver up in the Seattle area, the first hot spot for the pandemic. And he said, "Look, our buses are like rolling cruise ships." And that was at a time when there were a lot of deaths on cruise ships. "We need help." But Elaine Chao, again and again and again, refused to do that national mask mandate. And she was begged by the union. She was begged by workers. She was begged by scientists. She was begged by public health experts. They pleaded with her to do this national mask mandate, and she refused to do so, and she lied about it. She

made up excuses. She always had schemes and scams to get around doing what was absolutely necessary.

**Ralph Nader:** She also is enriching herself and her family's business internationally, wasn't she?

**John Nichols:** There's a long history of that that goes into her family's involvement in shipping and things of that nature. But in this case, it was simply that on public transit in the US, thousands of people who worked in public transportation died. It's an absolute tragedy and they didn't need to die. And they were not the only ones. These public transportation workers were begging for protection that would've also protected riders on public transit, and people flying on planes. And so the end result is that Elaine Chao, by her deliberate refusal to intervene in this very simple way, was responsible for thousands of people dying. And she walked away with very little attention. And you mention also her husband, Mitch McConnell, who is over in the Senate. And Mitch McConnell obviously was similarly harmful throughout this whole process. And one of the areas which should be of special interest to you, Ralph, is that Mitch McConnell held up the second major package of COVID aid, which is desperately needed by local governments, schools, universities, to fund their interventions to protect people and also hospitals to do healthcare; he held that up for months. Why? He was very explicit about it. He wanted a liability shield for corporations, so that when they failed to protect people, if someone sued, they couldn't be held to account. And so Mitch McConnell literally held up federal aid and federal intervention in a time of a pandemic, in a terrible crisis, because he wanted to protect multinational corporations.

**Ralph Nader:** We've been talking with John Nichols, author of the book *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers: Accountability for Those Who Caused the Crisis*. Part of your book is pandemic profiteers, and you select Jeff Bezos of Amazon. Explain.

**John Nichols:** Well, Jeff Bezos of Amazon was an incredibly rich man before the pandemic hit. But in the first 15 months of the pandemic, his wealth increased by 87%. Just imagine that, somebody who got that exponentially richer. During the course of the pandemic, he became the first person to have over \$200 billion. He also became the subject of speculation along with Elon Musk about who would be the first trillionaire in America. So, the pandemic was very, very good for Jeff Bezos. It was a boom time for him. But during that same time, he and his company fired whistleblowers who tried to reveal that the warehouses for Amazon were not safe. They spent millions undermining union organizing drives that were based on making those warehouses safer. And again, and again and again, Jeff Bezos and Amazon put profiteering ahead of the safety of their workers, and frankly, of using their incredible position as this powerful retailing giant to promote public health in the best of ways. And Bezos, the weird part about this is that now we're hearing and seeing evidence of successful union organizing drives or a drive in Staten Island. In the chapter, I write about what happened when Chris Smalls, worker at that Staten Island plant, blew the whistle on the lack of public health and safety protections. He was fired and then the company set out to smear him, to attack him, and to undermine him. And so the bottom line here is that Jeff Bezos made an immense amount of money during the pandemic, but he did so at the cost of supporting his own workers and supporting public health.

**Ralph Nader:** There is no other time in American history where you had villains like this probably blasting forth their crimes, bragging the way Trump does, and totally getting away with

it. Where was the Justice Department? Where was Merrick Garland? Where are the state attorney generals? Because you say throughout your book, "We should not forgive or forget." And you quote one of your political heroes, Thomas Paine, often throughout your book. By the way, this book reads very, very well, listeners. Each chapter has a perfectly appropriate quote from a Shakespearean play or Thomas Paine. You begin to wonder when people are going to say enough is enough. So what's your prosecutorial program here?

**John Nichols:** They have to have accountability. That's the bottom line. There have been some elements of accountability. One of the people I write a chapter about, Andrew Cuomo, the former governor of New York, was forced to resign. But he wasn't forced to resign because of his horrible handling of the pandemic in his own state. He was forced to resign because of strong and powerful accusations of sexual misconduct. And I'm glad that Cuomo is out of office, but I would point out that he was never held to account for what he did as regards nursing homes in that state. And again and again, in chapter after chapter, we've got people who, instead of being held to account for what they did wrong, many of them are still in the exact positions that they were in. Many of them are preparing to run for president or are reaping new profits. So there needs to be an intervention. And here's the reality. Accountability can take many forms. There can be criminal action, and that's entirely appropriate, as you pointed out earlier this in conversation; there can be civil action. Thankfully, Mitch McConnell was not successful in getting his liability shield in the form that he wanted, but there are unfortunately liability shields in other places. And there can be congressional action. I think it was appropriate to impeach Donald Trump for his actions on January 6th and around January 6th, but I also think it would be appropriate to have impeached Donald Trump for his actions as regard to COVID, which had a profound impact on the whole country, and was clearly, clearly wrongheaded and destructive. So there's all sorts of interventions that I favor. And I do think that one of the key things that should happen is that Congress should get serious about doing investigations into this, so should attorneys general and others--to look at the clear evidence of negligence, criminal negligence, wrongdoing, deliberate wrongdoing. And then one final element here, Ralph, that I think is really important, taxation is a form of accountability as well. And we absolutely need to tax the billionaires and tax the billionaire class, which reaped such a fortune off this pandemic. At the start of the pandemic, America's billionaires controlled roughly \$3 trillion. Fifteen months into the pandemic, two years into the pandemic, their wealth had gone to over \$5 trillion. So they exponentially increased their wealth during a pandemic. Now in World War II and other times in the past, and I know wars are different than pandemics. But in World War II, when you had war profiteering, the Roosevelt administration looked at something akin to a 90% tax rate--92% tax rate on the very wealthy during World War II. I think that would be entirely appropriate. And I would favor as one of the many forms of criminal, civil, political accountability attacks on the billionaire class that would yield trillions of dollars. It could be used for healthcare and for other care of the American people who suffered so much. The bottom line is during the pandemic, we asked people to engage in shared sacrifice; nurses sacrificed, doctors sacrificed, bus drivers sacrificed, grocery store workers sacrificed. We had tremendous amount of sacrifice in this country so that many people got sick and died, and yet our billionaire class in this country, retired to their country homes or their waterfront villas; they turned on their computers, started moving money around, and they ended up richer than they had ever been before. That's absurd. It's time for them to share in the sacrifice. It's time for them to be taxed.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you very much. We've been talking with John Nichols, the author of *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers: Accountability for Those Who Caused the Crisis*. There are a lot of books on the corona virus, there's only one book on the accountability crisis. Thank you very much, John.

**John Nichols:** It's an honor to be with you, Ralph. Thanks so much for having me.

**Steve Skrovan:** We have been speaking with John Nichols. We will link to his new book *Coronavirus Criminals and Pandemic Profiteers* at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). And that's our show. I want to thank both of our guests, Vidya Krishnan and John Nichols. For those of you listening on the radio, we're going to cut out right now. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up" where we have an ongoing conversation with John Nichols. A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, it's free. Go to [nader.org](http://nader.org). For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to [corporatecrimereporter.com](http://corporatecrimereporter.com).

The American Museum of Tort Law has also gone virtual. Go to [tortmuseum.org](http://tortmuseum.org) to explore the exhibits, take a virtual tour and learn about iconic tort cases from history. And be sure to check out their latest program on how litigation on brain trauma is changing the future of football. All that and more at [tortmuseum.org](http://tortmuseum.org). And remember to subscribe to Ralph's new project, the *Capitol Hill Citizen*. We have a pilot issue printed and Ralph wants to offer to listeners and Congress Club members for \$5 to cover postage and handling. To get a print copy, just go to [capitolhillcitizen.com](http://capitolhillcitizen.com).

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

Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when we'll welcome journalist and national security expert, Andrew Cockburn, to discuss the *American War Machine*. Thank you, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you everybody.