

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EPISODE 149

Ralph Nader: Now listen to this. Steve, you and David do a great job, but I have one suggestion.

Steve Skrovan: Yeah.

David Feldman: When you introduce David, Steve, and you have a ten second repartee with David...

Steve Skrovan: Yes.

Ralph Nader: Let's up the quality. (Laughter) Because sometimes it falls flat, because it's too impromptu. Now, you got a real populist humorist coming on, and you've got one of nation's leading satirists coming on, so you should rise to the occasion with that ten second repartee.

Steve: Okay. We will... you know what? I'm going to put on my funny hat. That's probably what I wasn't doing before. I didn't have my funny hat on.

David: Well hang on, I think that would good for the show, if you said that, Ralph.

Ralph: That's going too far.

Steve: From the KPFK Studios in Southern California.

David: It's the Ralph Nader Radio Hour.

[Music]

Jim Hightower: We've got to build a new politics, a grassroots politics in this country from the ground up of the people, for all the people and by the people. And that's what the Our Revolution program that Bernie Sanders helped to create is all about. Let's go out there, and at

the very grassroots level, begin this spring running for school board and running for city council and races like that, local fights, taking initiatives where we can pass those in referendums. But also just going straight to the City Hall, going straight to the county commissioner's courts and into our state legislatures with a progressive program that puts us on the offensive.

[Music]

Steve: Welcome to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, my name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host David Feldman, who I'm happy to say has just been pardoned by President Obama. Not for anything in particular - just a blanket pardon for anything he's ever said.

David: I'm very grateful. And I'm not going to argue with Ralph. It's his show, but I just don't think Donald Trump should be president. But it's Ralph's show. If he's optimistic about Donald Trump, it's his show.

Steve: Well, speaking of that, here's the man of the hour, Ralph Nader, who I doubt is optimistic about the Trump administration.

Ralph: I just wrote him an open letter. It's on nader.org. And David, you'll see how optimistic I am. Basically, I outlined about five pitfalls that he's got to be very cautious about, otherwise he's going to implode and take a lot of the country with him, including the lack of impulse self-control when you have got that kind of power in the White House. Anyway, people can go and see it for themselves: nader.org.

Steve: Well on that note, we have what I'm sure is going to be a witty show today. We're going to be welcoming back old friend, Jim Hightower, who has been known to turn a clever phrase or two. And we are also going to visit for the first time with author and political satirist Lewis Lapham. I'm not sure the Trump Administration is going to be even possible to satirize. That's what David and I in the comedy business would call "a joke on a joke." But we're going to talk about all of that as well as pausing for a hot minute to hear from the corporate crime reporter Russell Mokhiber, the Frank Serpico of the corporate crime beat. And if we have time we will delve in to the electronic mailbag for some listener questions but first, let's get to Mr. Hightower, David?

David: Jim Hightower is a syndicated columnist, national radio commentator and America's number one populist. He's also a prolific author of such books as [There's Nothing in the Middle of Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos](#), [If the Gods Had Meant Us to Vote, They](#)

Would Have Given Us Candidates and Swim Against the Current: Even a Dead Fish Can Go With the Flow. Mr. Hightower is a board member of Public Citizen and also a founding board member of Our Revolution, an organization inspired by the issues brought up by the Bernie Sanders' campaign. And if that's not enough, he writes a monthly newsletter called *The Hightower Lowdown*, welcome to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour, Jim Hightower.

Jim Hightower: Hello, great to be with you. I'm exhausted by the introduction. It's more than anybody needs to know. But I appreciate it. And I always appreciate being on the air and even up in the air with Steve, David and Ralph.

Ralph: Jim, it wasn't even a complete introduction, because David left out that you were elected Secretary of Agriculture for the state of Texas on your way to being reelected, but dirty tricks by a Republican infiltrated FBI on your staff derailed you. And Mr. Perry won that election, went on to be governor instead of Governor Hightower. You've gone all over the state. You've been a great defender of the family farmer. And I want to start with this question, Jim, before you respond to my inquiry as to how people get your *Hightower Lowdown*, which I read every month and often ask you for surplus copies. Donald Trump is so easy to criticize for what he says, what he's done, who he's falsified, how he's run his business into the ground, what he's covered up, his tax returns. What do you do when someone is so easy to criticize with documented analysis but gets away with it? What's the next step? What's left for people like you?

Jim Hightower: Into the streets. That's what we've got to do, and not just dealing with Trump but with this Congress and also with my fellow Democrats in the Congress, some of whom are weaker than Canadian hot sauce when it comes to standing up for the people they're supposed to stand up for. We've got to build a new politics, a grassroots politics in this country from the ground up of the people, for all the people and by the people. And that's what the Our Revolution program that Bernie Sanders helped to create is all about. Let's go out there, and at the very grassroots level, begin this spring running for school board and running for city council and races like that, local fights, taking initiatives where we can pass those in referendums. But also just going straight to the City Hall, going straight to the county commissioner's courts and into our state legislatures with a progressive program that puts us on the offensive.

Ralph: And not just in the blue states, right?

Jim Hightower: Exactly. Here in Texas for example, not recognized as a blue state anywhere in America by any political party, yet is coming along very nicely not just to be blue but to be progressively blue. As I say, it's no longer enough just to *be* progressive. We've got to become aggressively progressive, because the right wing has turned so radically regressive. They're running roughshod over the work-a-day people, over our environment, over now immigrants and

people of people of Muslim beliefs and women and right on down the line. There's not a sheet big enough to write the categories of people, who have been assailed by Donald Trump himself. Our Tweeter-In-Chief is going to play that game. And we've got to go out there in places - for example here in Texas again - we've got a number of these right wing screwballs that are in our state legislature, passing just nonsense crap and not passing the things or even dealing with the things that ordinary people care about and actually need, like healthcare for all. But we can go at those people back in their districts, because numbers of them are winning their elections with eighty, a hundred, a hundred and thirty votes. It might be possible that they're winning by getting anywhere from 10 to 18% of the election. Texas is not a right-wing state. It's a non-voting state. And they're getting 18%. Maybe we could get 19% by going out there and talking about the things that people really care about and then organizing those folks into a political coalition that can run, win and then govern.

Ralph Nader: What you're saying is not only important per se, but redistricting is coming up in 2020. and in 2010 while the Democratic Party was asleep even though it had a majority in the house in Senate in Congress and had a president with high popularity ratings, behind the scenes and often in open view, three republican operatives with thirty-two million dollars of money from the big guys on the republican side flipped about a hundred and sixty-five state legislative seats flipping several state legislatures like Pennsylvania and resulting in redistricting that basically made it more and more difficult for Democrats to win in Congressional seats because of the gerrymandering that produced so many safe seats for Republicans. Are you aware of what happened in 2010? David Daley who we had on the show, former chief editor of *Salon*, now heads an electronic newspaper in Connecticut called *The Connecticut Mirror* wrote this book, a very detailed book - page one review in the *New York Times Book Review* some months ago - on exactly how a few of these Republican operatives took the Democrats to the cleaners in 2010 that set the stage for toppling the Democratic control of Congress. What's your take on the default of the Democratic Party even in the mechanics of electioneering, never mind how they refused to make minimum wage restoration for thirty million workers a major issue in 2010, '11, '12. Never mind how they ducked the full Medicare-for-all that a majority of the American people want with free choice of doctor et cetera. What's your observation on the Democratic Party default, which made it impossible for the Democratic Party to landslide the worst Republican Party in its two hundred and sixty year or so history?

Jim Hightower: What we've had - until the Bernie Sanders race last year that begun to alter the balance in the Democratic Party and the focus of the party - but prior to that our Party was captured by big money interests, corporate money and by the consultants, who draw hundreds of thousands of dollars, each of them every two years, every four years in the big races. And they focus almost exclusively on Presidential and Congressional, primarily Senatorial races, because those are the glamor shots. That's where they like to hang out. And meanwhile, as you just indicated, gerrymandering is not a function of Congress. It's a function of your own local state legislator. That's where it begins right there. That's why the Koch brothers have been pouring money into state after state to elect state legislators, who will follow their agenda, including

particularly the gerrymandering agenda that will be coming up in just a few short years. In fact it's really already underway. So that's why I say, we have got to as a Democratic party, as Working Family's Party, as Green Party as whatever alternative party you want to be a part of then to go out and win these state legislative races. Those count. And by the way, by electing county commissioners now and electing city council people now, then you're creating a talent pool at a local level that by 2018 and certainly 2020, they can be running for the legislative seats, both state and national legislative seats. That's where we build power, not by holding little séances in Washington DC with high-powered members of Congress and the administration's cabinet under Obama but rather getting out there in the nitty-gritty of just regular people. We had a meeting, Ralph, here at this last weekend. We've divided out state up into the nine regions for the Our Revolution Texas. Texas is going to be the first state chapter basically of Our Revolution. And we've got it well underway. We've had two of the regional meetings in the last couple of weeks. One here in Austin for Central Texas, seventeen counties with four hundred people turned out, not for a rally, not to hear speeches. We didn't do speeches. It was a work session, and it went for three and a half hours. And people hunkered down and began to plot: How do we actually take power? How do we pass some of these issues that we and the majority of people care about? How do we, once we're in office, hold people accountable, the office holders accountable? How do we win? And then how do we govern? Because that's what we're about. It's no longer enough just running to raise issues. Let's win office and then govern.

Ralph: Let's back up a bit. How do your people, who are showing up in such numbers going to deal with the real basic problem - which is how do you get compelling candidates to run local, state, national? The Green Party has never been able to get more than three hundred people to run for local offices around the country. And they are two and half million locally elected offices - board of education, city council - around the country. It seems to me that that is not discussed enough. How do you get people to run, who have a chance of winning, who are articulate, determined?

Jim Hightower: First of all, you seek them out. Bernie last fall issued a call to his supporter list and asked, "How many of you would be willing to run for office?" Got fifteen thousand people said, "Yes, we will do it." Now, whether they're the ones or not, then you've got to have these local committees, not just state committees but down to a local level, who can vet these potential candidates. And then as a state organization and also as a national organization, you decide which ones of those you're actually going to invest in, in terms not just to the paper endorsement but actually putting organizers out there, putting a little dabs of money into their campaign and putting some of the surrogate speakers into their campaigns. But first of all, you've got to go recruit those people. I'll give you an example. Here in Texas, our state Democratic Party chair has done a good job of trying to reach out into the red areas as well as the blue areas of our state to change the party, to bring in particularly Latinos. The saying is, "Texas will turn blue, because Texas is going to become a majority Mexican-American." That's not the way it changes, because they're not necessarily going to vote in a progressive manner, and they're not

going to vote at all unless they become the candidates. This party chair sent in organizer out to a meeting of a Democratic women's club in a county west of Austin here, and the lady in charge was complaining. She said, "We can't get those Latinos to come to our meeting." And the organizer said, "You're meeting in the country club. They're here. They're in the kitchen. You might hold your meeting in the kitchen next time." That's what's got to change. You have to actually go out and find these candidates. Amarillo, for example, a hot red spot in our state election after election has become 40% Latino. They're not voting, because we're not recruiting them. We're not making them in charge of the party. We're not running them as candidates. When we do that, then they'll begin to vote; and we'll begin to win.

Steve: Jim, I have question. Speaking of reforming and battles within the Democratic Party, last week Bernie Sanders introduced legislation that would allow people to get cheaper drugs from Canada versus the more expensive ones in the United States. Thirteen Republicans joined Sanders and a majority of Democrats in supporting this amendment while thirteen Democrats and the majority of the Republicans opposed it, including Cory Booker. What does it say when high-profile people like Cory Booker are voting against cheaper drugs and voting with Big Pharma?

Jim Hightower: It says that Cory Booker cannot be our candidate. It's absurd. We have to have a party that's willing to go against the corporate interests. And in New Jersey, drug companies are huge political powers, huge donors to the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. He chose to go with the money. Fine, but we as grassroots Democrats, if we get back to that grassroots organizing again, then we're going to be the ones who will just said who's going to be the nominees? That's what we have to do and reject the corporate candidates in favor of those who will stand for us. Bernie Sanders knows that works, that getting drugs from Canada, because his state has done it. There's a lot of these issues that we have real solutions to, because people at a local level and a state level all across the country are doing tremendous things. You don't ever hear about this in the establishment media. But they're in just about every place that has got a zip code, there's somebody who is taking on the big issues, coming up with creative solutions, and organizing people to implement them.

Ralph: Why don't you hear about it on NPR and PBS? They're supposed to be not controlled by advertisers. Why don't you hear about it on those programs, local NPR as well as national and PBS?

Jim Hightower: It's interesting, because of course those are non-commercial stations, except that they have commercials. They call them "enhanced support announcements." You've got David Koch sponsoring a science show on public television. You've got Merck and the Big Pharma corporations sponsoring news broadcasts on public radio and public television. You've got Exxon Mobil regularly sponsoring programs and including then putting the squeeze on NPR

executives to say, “Let’s not dwell on climate change issues and certainly not the fossil fuel cause of climate change.” They’re not only buying their way in, they’re buying content from our public airwaves.

Ralph: Is that a reason why you're not on NPR and PBS very often? Just to give you a comparison, Tom Friedman, the cheerleader for globalization columnist for the *New York Times* has been on Charlie Rose over eighty times. Bill Kristol, your opposite on *The Weekly Standard*, right winger, has been on Charlie Rose dozens of times. How many times have you been on Terry Gross, Diane Rheim and Charlie Rose?

Jim Hightower: Twice: once on Terry Gross and once on Charlie Rose. And in fact, I was on Charlie Rose’s show with you and Bill Greider. So we, three of us got an hour divided among us. And then the next week he had Bill Gates on for an hour to counter the damage that we had done to his corporate sponsorship on that show.

Ralph: Yeah. His producers sent an email after our show. For her, it was unfortunately routed to us by mistake, and she said, “We got a huge response favorable” to this program with Jim Hightower, Bill Greider and me on. They must have generated it. That’s the kind of mindset that you see there. And listeners, if you don’t know, Jim Hightower is one of the great progressive voices in our country. He has been all over the country many times, addressed huge audiences, has a newsletter, *Hightower Lowdown* with over a hundred thousand page subscribers, about which you will hear more in a few minutes. And he can’t get on the so-called non-commercial public radio and NPR and PBS. And he’s not the only one. It’s important for you to call your local NPR station and PBS stations and say, “What's going on here? Why does the right wing that wants to destroy the taxpayer support of public radio and public broadcasting get on so much more than leading progressive voices?” Now, in your regular commentary, Jim Hightower, you are taking on Donald Trump. And then one of your commentaries, “How Many Working Class Populists are in Trump’s New Government?” you start with typical humor and I’ll quote you. “Actor Jack Nicholson says, ‘He finally understood the meaning of the word ‘irony’ when his mother called him a son of bitch.’” How do you define irony in terms of the Donald Trump campaign and the nominees he chose?

Jim Hightower: The billionaire so-called populist is of course a billionaire plutocrat. And his true colors came out in neon bright glare, when he chose his cabinet. Far from choosing a cabinet that represents working people - whom he got good number of - which he got to vote for him on the basis he was going to be on their side, not a single labor official, not a single working class regular person, not a single school teacher, not a single steel worker, not a single anything having to do anything with the working class is represented in the cabinet or in his inner circle in the White House. Instead, Exxon got a seat. We've got the Energy Transfer Partners, the people who are building the pipeline that the Standing Rock Sioux up in North Dakota are fighting so

hard. They got a seat. Carl's Jr. the fast food restaurant got a seat in his cabinet, Amway got a seat. The Koch brothers even got a seat in the form of Mike Pompeo, who is the director of the CIA now. Pompeo worked for the Koch brothers. They were the ones who recruited him to run for Congress, and they're the ones who put up the money for him to get into Congress; and now he's in Trump's cabinet. The Koch brothers have their own personal representatives sitting on the cabinet. This is not only irony, it is fraud that Trump has pulled off on the American people. We're going to see more of this. The fraud is going to be very, very painful. There're so many good folks who voted - frankly out of anger at the elites and both the Democratic and Republican Party, the elites on Wall Street, the elites in the corporate suites. That's what they were reacting to. And it was not a vote for Trump. It was a vote against those elites. And he was the handiest big stick that they could get hold of to whack the establishment upside the head. But now that establishment is going to be whacking them.

Ralph: No, it's even worse. The Congress - and Tom Price is going to be the head of the Department of Health and Human Services. He wants to corporatize Medicare, Medicaid and he wants to subcontract out more of healthcare. He doesn't want to prosecute healthcare fraud, which just in the billing area alone cost over 300 billion dollars, according to Professor Malcolm Sparrow at Harvard University, the expert on the subject - imagine, three hundred billion dollars. And he's moving to get through Congress damage caps on horrendous medical malpractice injuries. And that's who Donald Trump wants as head of the Department of Health and Human Services. This is a gigantic double cross, a gigantic "in your face" to the working class voters, who supported Donald Trump. What do you think the consequences are going to be for him politically and his Republican cohorts - if any - by those voters?

Jim Hightower: That's up to us. Again, going back to the grassroots, carrying this message not just through media, not through just candidates but door to door, not during an election but right now, going door to door on issues like Social Security. So, as soon as Price and these others, who want to privatize Social Security - something, by the way, that Trump said he was against yet he put the people who are for it in the position to actually make it happen. And of course, Paul Ryan, Speaker of the House, it's been one of his wet dreams all these years is to turn our Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid over to the profiteers of Wall Street. They're pushing that, but they're going totally against the American people. Social Security is a program that works beautifully. And it can work beautifully forever, if we just finance it properly, which we're now not doing, because we let the super-rich not have to pay their fair share of Social Security. But we could do that and go to the people with that. People will support it. And when Trump comes out and supports the repeal of Social Security as a government program, then he's going to be in a heap o' hurt all over this country if we're doing our job by carrying that message door to door, town to town, state to state, letting people know this is what's going on "and that means you, this has an impact directly on you."

Ralph: Which means focus on 535 members of Congress from you back home. In a few days, Congress and John Conyers is going to introduce HR676, the most genuine single-payer or full Medicare for All - everybody in nobody out far more efficient, far more cost saving, far better results and it's important to say free choice of doctor and hospital. In the Senate, we found out that Bernie Sanders was reluctant at the beginning to even introduce a single-payer bill. And the one he has been supporting is not as good as HR676. Can you tell us what is going on here, and what he is going to do to collaborate with Congressman Conyers and the at least seventy members of the House, who right off are going to co-sign support for HR676? I just wrote a letter to Nancy Pelosi, the Minority Leader in the House, urging her to get that number up to over a hundred, so we can have a real alternative media focus to the Republican attack on Obamacare, with putting forward full Medicare for All, which is supported by the way by 80% of the Democrats in a recent poll, 30% of the Republicans and 60% of the Independents. It's supported by a healthy majority. What's the problem - if any - with Bernie Sanders here?

Jim Hightower: First of all, I think you're going to see Bernie will sign on to John Conyers' Medicare for All bill, in a large part because that's what he campaigned on as President again and again. And he had tremendous support from the National Nurses United, the nurses' union - fantastic group - that's all over this country and gaining more and more members, one of the strongest unions going today. And they're number one issue is Medicare for All. I think you're going to see Bernie doing it. Now, why he isn't at the moment? I'm guessing it has something to do with Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi saying, "Let's be a little cautious here." We've just got to be in the face of these Democrats, bucking them up. Since we're talking about healthcare, I've often favored allowing the drug companies to engage in direct collusion. Let 'em go into a backroom in secret and then come out with a new drug that will be a Viagra to strengthen the backbone of the Democrats in Congress. That will be a tremendous public service if we get that Viagra going - and by the way, a Viagra that will last more than four hours ...

(Laughter)

Ralph: Listen Jim, before we conclude let me ask you, is there anything good you expect coming out of the Trump Administration? He's been fairly good on trade. He opposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership. He wants to renegotiate NAFTA and the World Trade Organization. He's pounded away at the drug company's outrageous high prices for drugs. And he is pounding on the auto industry, saying "If you want to sell cars in the US, you better make them in the US." They seem to be shaken up by that. I think he's going to become a major jawboner on some corporations. Anything good is going to come out of it?

Jim: Yeah. We're going to get little things ... and not just little things. We're going to get some of those things you were just mentioning, but they will be diluted. For example, he's talking big about the infrastructure, "We're going to put people to work. We're going out there, we're going to build the bridges and the highways and the Internet and all this sort of stuff. It just is going to be tremendous." But what he's not telling yet is that those - instead of the government going out and hiring people to do this work, it's going to be turned over to corporations. And corporations

will be the ones doing the infrastructure work, hiring people under corporate terms not government terms, meaning low wages and very few benefits. And then, as a reward, the corporations will get to own the assets that they're building, that they've been contracted to build. It's a privatization scheme underneath it. We have to be wary of anything good that he is talking about. That doesn't mean we couldn't support him on anything; but it's got to be real, and we've got to be paying attention to what's real and what is just a faux gem coming out of Trump's brain.

Ralph: As you wrote, Jim Hightower, "As America's working stiffs know, if you're not at the table you're on the menu. Trump is no populist. He's a full time corporatist." And he's coming in to the highest office in the land with the lowest national polls in recent memory. He's under 40% approval. He's very sensitive - as we all know - to poll numbers. And do you think that the rumble from the people is going to affect him the way it affected Nixon, who signed into law a lot of good bills, because he was afraid of the rumble from the people coming out of the 1960s?

Jim Hightower: Yes. It's the only thing that will affect him. He operates on whim and on Twitter. He's going to be a Yee-haw president, "Yee-haw, here we go!" But he will respond when those rallies turn into boos. And as you put it in one of your recent columns, it's time to mobilize as citizens in the Paul Revere mode. That's exactly right. This is another of those when "In the course the human events moments" that Thomas Jefferson wrote about, whether we're going to be a plutocracy, autocracy or whether we're going to actually aspire to be the democracy that we set out to be.

Ralph: When I walk down the street and I see so many people walking alongside me on the sidewalk and across the street, and they're all looking down at their cell phone, I sometimes wonder why they're not looking down at the *Hightower Lowdown* newsletter, which is very easy to carry. Tell our listeners how they can get your newsletter and how they can listen to your podcast.

Jim: You just go to my website, quite simple. It's JimHightowerHightower.com and there will be obvious links. It's a pretty good website, pretty easy to navigate, find direct access to my daily commentaries, little "pops of populism" as we call them - little two-minute commentaries - and then to the newsletter as well, and my weekly column, and of course the *Hightower Lowdown*, that monthly newsletter that is really a joy to produce, because the hundred thousand plus folks who are subscribing to it call themselves "Lowdowners." They want to be activists. And in each issue of the *Lowdown*, whatever we're talking about - we bring you some of the horror stories - but we then also have a "do something" box. You have some access to doing something about the horror story that you've just read.

Ralph: And the podcast?

Jim Hightower: Same place, jimhightower.com. And you're connected. You can hear it each day, the podcast of that day. And you can download it as well.

Ralph: Do you think your circulation will double after you go after Trump, and he tweets an attack on you at 3:00 AM in the morning?

Jim Hightower: Yeah, sure. But we already have a piece in the mail offering my view of what Trump is going to be and going to do, and who he is in reality. The early indicators are - we're just beginning to get stuff in - that it's one of the best mail pieces we've ever had a reaction to.

Ralph: We've been talking with Jim Hightower, the great populist of modern American history, the author of many terrific books. They have a lot of factual substance in them, even though they have titles that want to just get your imagination and interest going. Thank you very much, Jim. Let me close on this note: and that is people, you should understand if you don't already - and I know a lot of our listeners are active to begin with - it's the rumble of the people that's going to send the message to Washington focused laser beam on community organizing and local, state and national election turn-out with good candidates. And all this starts with each one of you individually just like the Mississippi River, the great roaring river in the middle of our country starts with little rivulets in Minnesota that turn into brooks, that turn into streams, that turn into great tributaries like the Missouri River that turn into the Mississippi River. Let's hear from the rumble from the people. Thank you very much, Jim Hightower.

Jim Hightower: Thank you, Ralph, for everything.

Steve Skrovan: Steve: We've been speaking with America's number one populist Jim Hightower. We will link to Jim's vast body of work on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour website.

David Feldman: Would you find an ally in Newt Gingrich? I know he's ...

Ralph Nader: He's always on.

David Feldman: But I'm saying he hates the PBS and NPR.

Ralph Nader: No. He hates it in order to get on it. And he gets on it enormous number of times.

Steve Skrovan: Now, it's time to check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. Russell?

Russell: From the National Press Building in Washington DC, this is your corporate crime reporter morning minute for Friday January 20, 2016. I'm Russell Mokhiber. Fiat-Chrysler Automobiles is under a criminal investigation by the Justice Department over allegations that its cars cheated on diesel emissions. That's according to a report in Bloomberg News. The news of the Justice Department criminal probe came a day after the Environmental Protection Agency accused Fiat-Chrysler of using software on a 104,000 vehicles sold in the United States to bypass emissions tests. It isn't clear if the Justice Department plans to criminally charge Fiat-Chrysler or its employees or where the investigation stands, Bloomberg reported. But VW and Fiat have been accused of programming vehicles to emit less pollution during official test than they do on the road. Volkswagen has pled guilty of the cheating while Fiat-Chrysler has so far denied the allegations. For the corporate crime reporter, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Lewis Lapham: The camera sees but doesn't think. The camera doesn't care. The camera relies on a bottomless well of human ignorance wish, dream and fear. All it is interested in is what draws emotion. It's not interested in thought. You can't do thought on camera, as you know. I mean, if you're seen to think on camera, you're dead. The camera makes no moral distinction between a bubble bath in Vegas with a staff of pretty girls and a blood bath on the beach of Libya with a staff of headless corpses. It doesn't matter. The content is of no importance.

Steve: Welcome back to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. I am Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. If you are listening to this as a podcast take a minute and give us a good review on iTunes. I'm told that helps. And even if you're listening to us on the radio go to iTunes and give us a good review. I don't care, whatever - just give us a good review. We have a lot of loyal listeners. Now my friend and co-host, David Feldman here, has written for some of the best political satirists on TV in the last few years, Bill Maher, Dennis Miller, Jon Stewart and yes, even though we tease David for writing for a puppet I'm including Triumph, the Insult Comic Dog voiced by Robert Smigel, who despite whatever you think, has taken some very powerful figures down a peg or two and humanized them. Our next guest has been taking down the establishment a peg or two doing a similar thing for many years with the printed word. David?

David: Lewis Lapham was the editor of *Harper's* magazine from 1976 to 1981 and again from 1983 to 2006. His columns received the National Magazine Award in 1995 for exhibiting, "An exhilarating point of view in an age of conformity" and in 2002 the Thomas Paine Journalism Award. He was inducted into the American Society of Magazine Editor's Hall of Fame in February of 2007. His book 30 Satires is - as the name suggests - an assemblage of Mr. Lapham's satirical essays, chronicling two decades of political and cultural folly. *Vanity Fair* said about 30 Satires, "Lewis Lapham hits the bulls eye of our nation's ridiculousness." And the later Kurt Vonnegut, "Without doubt, our greatest satirist - elegant, honorable, learned and fair, I love reading him." We're all out of time, thank you for joining us. We'll see you next week.

(Laughter)

Ralph Nader: I want to add another elaboration for Lew Lapham. In his author's note to his book 30 Satires, is that how to pronounce Lew, satiries?

Lewis Lapham: No, satires just 30 Satires.

Ralph Nader: Okay. In his book, he has an author's note at the beginning and he quotes Mark Twain who says, "Well, humor is a great thing, the saving thing after all." A note of despair, it seems there. But then Lew Lapham goes on to make this to make this commentary, "Whether humor saves the reader or the country I have no way of knowing and cannot say, but for the writer of the pages in this book, it's the door left open in the wall of cant and the way out of the fog of lies. Laughter cannot help but breath the air of freedom, by its nature deaf to the voices of indoctrination or command. And I trust the joke to strike more nearly at the truth than the sermon, the sales pitch or the State of the Union address. Satire makes alliance with the spirit of decent and arms the writer with the hope of a possible escape from his own stupidity and fear." Following this note, there are all kinds of short satires with interesting names like "Capitalist Tool," "Balzac's Garret," "Tower of Babel," "Jefferson on Toast," "A Man and His Pig," "Eyebrow Pencils," "Fatted Calf," "Mixed Media," "Potomac Fever," "Hide and Go Seek," "Compass Bearings," and "When in Rome." Let me start with this question, Lew. Does satire have any effect on the Trump forces, Donald Trump to begin with, or is he impervious to it?

Lewis Lapham: I think he's pretty impervious to it. I think, give him time and let his administration play out as a kind of comic opera, opera boof, Gilbert and Sullivan. It will do itself in. It's hard to know how you would go about writing a satire about Trump, the Trump administration in the language of the tweet. I have no idea how to do it today. And that's one of the problems that our major, our news media has. The news media, as you know Ralph, is having a fit about Trump. How can this be? And sermons delivered every day on the op-ed page

of the *New York Times* and so on. But the thing is, they essentially hired him. The media hired Trump to do the satire for them.

Ralph Nader: To give them huge ratings and profits.

Lewis Lapham: Yeah, that's right. I'm reading one of your recent columns in December where you're talking about the incoming cabinet, right? You call it "a bizarre selection of men and women marinated either in corporatism or militarism with strains of racism, class cruelty and ideological rigidity." That's fine. But the thing is you can also say that about the Washington media. They are marinated in corporatism and militarism. Their adoration of money is truly a wonder to behold. There's no rich billionaire, a member of our fourth estate hasn't fallen worshipfully in front of. This is the same thing that happened at the end of the first Gilded Age, where you had the Robber Barons; you have Rockefeller; you had Vanderbilt; the whole group of them. The press adores them. Absolutely can't get enough. I mean, they go down to interview Rockefeller. They go down to interview Morgan and they sit politely with their hats on their knees waiting for the press release. The economy collapsed in the 1907 bank panic and the established media, the *New York Times* and so on went down to get a statement from Morgan. And they sat in the anteroom for an hour. And finally a secretary comes out with Morgan's statement. It was one sentence. "America is a great and growing country."

Ralph Nader: This is J.P. Morgan.

Lewis Lapham: Yeah. The media loved it. The *Times* was grateful.

Ralph Nader: Lew, Donald Trump is notoriously thin-skinned. He goes after criticism that's direct, like from Meryl Streep or John Lewis; but he's also thin-skinned to satire like on Saturday Night Live. How do you satire a satire? I mean he *is* satire. How do you satire a satire? What's the challenge here?

Lewis Lapham: There isn't any. It's easy. He used to make the work of the media, who would satirize him very, very simple indeed. All they've got to do is show up and watch the play.

Ralph Nader: Jon Stewart and Colbert - if they had their old shows back - would they be as flummoxed as I seem to imply I am on this issue of how do you satire a satire?

Lewis Lapham: I don't know. They are much cleverer than I am. I'm sure they would've figured an angle. But I don't know what it is. And when Trump tweets those of kinds of things to Meryl Streep or Baldwin, I think he's just playing with them. He's just keeping the ball in the air. I really do. His thin-skinnedness is, I think, a part of his act.

Ralph Nader: Do you think satire has any function other than an art form? Clifton Fadiman once called satire, "Cultured insolence." Does that have any function in mobilizing the people of this country to connect with reality and try to change directions of the political economy and the bosses who run it?

Lewis Lapham: Yes, I think so. Twain used to refer to satire as "A torture of words to burn down the hospitality tents of cant."

Ralph Nader: That's Mark Twain?

Lewis Lapham: That's Mark Twain. But you then have to direct it at the real enemy. I mean Trump is not the enemy. You can satire... what would have been effective satire is if it had been aimed at Obama. Let's say - when Kissinger gets the Nobel Peace Prize, that is truly absurd. But our media swallowed that one. They don't go after - satire has to be aimed at the right targets. Trump is not a very good target, because he's already there. You have to aim at it at Jamie Dimon, or aim it at the FACC. Aim at it at Hilary Clinton. Pick a target that matters.

Ralph Nader: Let's go back a little historically. By the way, Jamie Dimon is the outspoken CEO of J.P. Morgan Chase, the giant bank in New York. Let's go back awhile. I'm an amateur student of satire. And I was in the Soviet Union as a tourist. And I cut out of my tour and went to see the editors of *Krocodile* magazine, which was the only permissible criticism of this authoritarian regime in Moscow, because they did it with satire. And I found that the satire in *Krocodile* and the cartoons were far superior to anything in our country. From which I drew the conclusion, that the more authoritarian a society is the better the satire is as a fine art technically as well as subsequently. All right, we become more authoritarian and power is more concentrated in our country, but you excepted along with a few others - satire is not very clever in our country. It's often crude. It isn't subtle. Here's my question: do you see satire as powerful a force for a democracy today as it was in the United States a hundred twenty years ago?

Lewis Lapham: No, because satire is hard to do. In one way, it's easy to do and hard to do on television. The camera sees but doesn't think. The camera doesn't care. The camera relies on a bottomless well of human ignorance, wish, dream and fear. All it is interested in is what draws

emotion. It's not interested in thought. You can't do thought on camera, as you know. I mean if you're seen to think on camera, you're dead. The camera makes no moral distinction between a bubble bath in Vegas with a staff of pretty girls and a blood bath on the beach of Libya with a staff of headless corpses. It doesn't matter. The content is of no importance. See, Trump's made for the camera. He's a product of the camera. It doesn't matter what he says. Nobody ever remembers what anybody says on television. And it doesn't lend itself to - when it does satire it comes off as entertainment. It lets people off the hook. It says "Yes, America is a mess but so what? As long as we know it's a mess and we can laugh at the joke then that's our comfort."

Ralph Nader: It ends with a giggle rather than with a thought leading to any action.

Lewis Lapham: Yes.

Ralph Nader: Which is what young people experience with the *Colbert Show* and *The Daily Show*. They got their kicks. They got their laughs. But it didn't seem to lead to any mobilization or any individual assertiveness as a citizen. Is that what you're saying?

Lewis Lapham: Yes, that's what I'm saying. There was no blood in it. When you do the kind of satire that Twain was doing, he was aiming to draw blood. And our satire is aiming to draw laughs.

Ralph Nader: From what you're saying, it's more a medium for the written word than the printed word rather than the visual screen. Steve and David, you want to jump in here?

David Feldman: I often wonder - like Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" that was written before the potato famine. How much did he accomplish with "A Modest Proposal? Not that much, right?

Lewis Lapham: I don't know. I mean, probably the best satire being written in America at the turn of the Gilded Age is Thorsten Veblen. And he got thrown out of Columbia. You see what I mean? He tried to speak truth to power. You do not end up in retirement with a house in Nantucket and a funeral oration like the one that they gave to the blessed Tim Russert. Satire is not a good career move, unless it's very carefully neutered.

Ralph Nader: Unless it's reinvented. For example, Hitler went crazy regularly over a cartoonist in England, who portrayed him in all kinds of absurd and disgraceful manner. I mean he really went berserk. It was almost like he wanted to send a Messerschmitt over to do him in. It's hard to see that happening to a political leader today. Satire reinvented, maybe it should focus on big corporations and bosses that are sensitive to their PR and the value of their logo and their trademark. Maybe that's a better redirection, because politicians either laugh it off or ignore it. And I think satire is at a crossroads here. And we're not going to find the right fork in the road, because we're running out of time, Lew Lapham. We've been talking with Lew Lapham, the author of 30 Satires and the publisher of *Lapham's Quarterly*, which is one of the greatest quarterly historical productions in American history. It does a theme every three months like power, money, family, crime et cetera. And if you want to really bury yourself in excerpts from history, starting hundreds of years ago on an issue that is vibrant today and important to learn about, you can subscribe to *Lapham's Quarterly*. Any last observation, Steve?

Steve Skrovan: I'm just going to defend television satires now just for a second, because I think it does have a certain power. And I think Jon Stewart did a lot for veterans' causes, wherein he brought to light in a series of shows, the Veterans Administration and all the backlog of ...

David: But how hard is that to do? - I hate to interrupt you, and God bless him for doing that - but in terms of satire, you're really not taking a chance protecting veterans. In terms of satire, he's doing a good thing, but how dangerous is that?

Lewis Lapham: I don't think satire is intended to have a public effect that way. I think the idea is the freedom in the mind of the person who gets it. I mean, you're doing it in order to bring energy, hope, and freedom into the mind of your audience. I mean, it's for them. It's not to fix the next election or save the whales. It's aimed at the individual. And so you aim at the individual so that he or she will begin to take possession of his or her own mind.

Ralph Nader: It's got to stop short of muckraking, otherwise it's not satire.

Lewis Lapham: No, muckraking, that's different. And so is ridicule. I mean, there're different kinds of forms of it. But the satire that sets people free - I'm quoting again Twain - is the one that opens a window, opens a door, let's air into the minds of the reader or the viewer.

Ralph Nader: Steve?

Lewis Lapham: That's who it's for.

Steve Skrovan: I was just going to say, speaking of pressure cooker, I think the shows that David has worked on whether it's Bill Maher, Jon Stewart or if John Oliver today and Samantha B., I think they do appeal to a mass audience and anything that appeals to a mass audience is going to have to appeal on an emotional level to a certain extent. And I think it actually keeps people's sanity in this insane world.

Lewis Lapham: But does it bring them to a realization of something they didn't know? Or does it only confirm what they *do* know? And if it's the latter, it's not having it's desired effect.

David Feldman: Right. But what it does do is - I agree with you - but it builds community. It makes certain people feel that they're not alone. And I think there's some value to that.

Lewis Lapham: Okay.

David Feldman: But it's not earth shattering. It's not ground breaking. But there are lonely blue state people in Alabama, who watch Stephen Colbert, and they say, "I'm not alone." That is great.

Lewis Lapham: I absolutely agree with you. But there it is giving a kind of power to their own mind. Yes, "I'm not alone." That's a good thing.

Ralph Nader: We're really out of time, David. I'm sorry, this is a subject that can be continued. We've been talking with Lew Lapham, editor and publisher of *Lapham's Quarterly*, former long time editor of *Harper's* magazine, and the author among numerous books of a book titled 30 Satires, which I urge you to read. Thank you very much, Lew, and I hope we can continue with the elaboration of Trump's shall we call "twistifications," not to coin a word.

Lewis Lapham: Okay. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Yes.

Lewis Lapham: Thank you.

Ralph Nader: Bye now.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking to essayist and political satirist Lewis Lapham. His collection of essays is [30 Satires](#). We will link to all of the relevant work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. And sorry we didn't get to listener questions, but I think we're out of time here. I want to thank once again our guest Jim Hightower, America's number one populist and political satirist Lewis Lapham.

David Feldman: A transcript of this episode will be posted on ralphnaderradiohour.com.

Steve Skrovan: For Ralph's weekly blog, go to nader.org, for more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

David Feldman: Remember to visit the country's only law museum, the American Museum Tort Law in Winsted Connecticut, go to tortmuseum.org.

Steve Skrovan: The producers of the Ralph Nader Radio Hour Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran.

David Feldman: Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music Stand Up, Rise up was written and performed by Kemp Harris.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. We'll talk to you then Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you. And I hope, listeners, you will not just be spectators or bystanders with the new government underway in Washington DC. I hope you'll be participants in the political process. "Participants," one of Thomas Jefferson's favorite words. Thank you very much.

