

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 271 TRANSCRIPT

Steve Skrovan: From the KPFK Studios in Southern California, it's 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 along with the man of the hour Ralph Nader. How are you doing today, Ralph?

Ralph Nader: Well, we've got a great show again.

Steve Skrovan: Yes, it's another fascinating and provocative show today. First up, we're going to speak to Professor and Social Justice Advocate, Ruth Wilson Gilmore of The City University of New York. She was the subject of a recent *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "Is Prison Necessary?" As reported in the article, in the United States, we have more than 2 million people sitting in prison and most of them are black or brown and poor. Professor Gilmore argues for abolishing prisons and replacing them with social systems of support that will deter people from committing crime in the first place. It's an ambitious idea that we'll break down for you in the first half of the show. In the second half the show, we welcome journalist Adam Higginbotham. We've talked a lot about the dangers of nuclear power on this program. And this comes at it from yet another angle. Mr. Higginbotham has written a book entitled *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster*. And it's a gripping thriller. And personally, I'm curious about his take on whether he thinks nuclear power is a solution to the climate crisis. Maybe we'll ask him about that. In between as always, we will check in with our *Corporate Crime Reporter*, Russell Mohkiber and if we have time at the end, we'll try to answer some listener questions. But first, let's hear the case for abolishing prisons. Ruth Wilson Gilmore is Director of the Center for Place, Culture, and Politics and Professor of Geography in Earth and Environmental Sciences at The City University of New York. Professor Gilmore is a co-founder of many social justice organizations, including California Prison Moratorium Project, Critical Resistance and The Central California Environmental Justice Network. She was the subject of a recent article in the *New York Times* entitled "Is Prison Necessary?" Ruth Wilson Gilmore may change your mind. Welcome to The *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Professor Ruth Wilson Gilmore.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Thank you very much. It's good to be on.

Ralph Nader: Indeed well, the subject of course is titled abolishing prisons and I'm sure over 30 years of advocating for the reduction of prisons, Professor Gilmore, you know that this is a jolting phrase and tends to close people's minds, but you see it as a goal that we would like to have a society where peace reigns and where we don't need prisons. So, I want to make that point. And just so we can get a grip on the various issues, in the *New York Times* you were described as active in the movement for more than 30 years. And prison abolition or abolitionists as they're called, is both a long-term goal and a practical policy program calling for government investment in jobs, education, housing, health care--all the elements that are required for productive and violence-free life. Abolition means not just the closing of prisons, but the presence instead of vital systems of support that many communities lack. Instead of asking how in a future without prisons we will

deal with violent people, abolitionists ask, how can we resolve inequalities and get people the resources they need, before they mess up? That doesn't do justice to your full approach but I wanted to put that on the record so that people know that if we don't have utopian goals--practical utopian goals--whether it's abolishing poverty/abolishing war--we won't work toward them. And in reading what you've written on this, I see parallels with the military-industrial complex and its lock on our country. That is, if we assume that there are going to be wars, we will prepare for wars. And as now, Trump will be provoking wars with John Bolton and Mike Pompeo on Venezuela and Iran. If we envision a world of peace, we'll devote more resources, staff, thinking, civic activity for waging peace. Do you see that as an interesting analogy?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: That is exactly the analogy I was hoping you might draw from those pages. And I do want to give credit to the person who actually wrote the article, the fantastic novelist and essayist Rachel Kushner who had the idea for it and pitched it to the *Times* and brought it to fruition after two years of work. Yes, one of the things that you point toward in your analogy is that we live in a country that is dominated by a political culture that proposes the way you deal with a problem is by killing it. The fact that most people who go to prison are not themselves killed doesn't really make that much difference, because everybody's life is shortened by having gone to prison as against the kind of practical programs that we could easily realize with the brain power and money resources we have in this phenomenally wealthy country if we had the political will to do the work. Some years ago, I did a presentation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on my work and my book, which is called *Golden Gulag* about California [*Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*], and one of the discussants who was asked to come and talk about my work was a county sheriff bearer in the county where Milwaukee is, and I was quite nervous of course, because I thought he would be hostile--not at all. He said, "We live in an age of legislated criminality", which is to say that the way that the prison system has grown so phenomenally in the United States over the last 40 years has been one that has been provoked, not by something called crime, but rather by the cynical or perhaps not cynical, but guaranteed-to-win programs and policies that have come out of legislatures and then put into effect by federal, state and county governments.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. For example, if you criminalize drug use, you'll have more people being put in jail; if you criminalize cigarette use, which we don't or alcohol use which we don't, we don't put that many people in jail, just to take one example. But just to lay a factual predicate Professor Gilmore, there are over 2 million people in prison in the US, 90% of them are in state prison, about 10% of them in federal prison. It's a huge industry. And California where you've done a lot of studies, I believe they're up to 14 billion dollars, which is greater than the budget for the higher education system in California, 14 billion dollars or more for the prisons. And one quote in this *New York Times* article caught my attention that you gave the author you said, "You can find all the people who are dependent on wages paid out by the Department of Corrections in California, the most powerful lobby group in California, the guards. It's a single trade with one employer and it couldn't be easier for them to organize. They can elect everyone from district attorneys up to the governor. They gave California Governor Gray Davis a couple million dollars and he gave them a prison". Do you want to elaborate? I think more people will listen to what you and other abolitionists are saying if you describe just how prisons create the very problems

that allegedly they were established to correct; they create recidivism and brutality--spending years doing nothing in prison, not learning any trades, not getting ready for productive life when they leave.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: This is true. Contrary to what many people think about prisons in this country, as you pointed out, 90% of people locked up are locked up in state or county facilities. And of those 92% are public, public, public. So, this huge amount of money flows through these systems on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis, huge amount of money. Where does it go? It goes to salaries; it goes to the various kinds of overhead it takes to keep a prison humming. You think about a prison as a city, you can imagine what I'm talking about. The utilities are one of the big expenditures for any prison anywhere--water, lights, power. In addition, because so many of the prisons that are full-to-bursting today are relatively new, it means that the jurisdiction that built them borrowed money to do so and they are doing debt service on those prisons. They could have borrowed that same amount of money to build more universities, to build elementary schools, to create parks, to create museums to create all kinds of things that would be life affirming. So, it's not a matter of whether or not the resources are available, but again, the political will that determines how we use the resources.

Ralph Nader: Not to mention vocational schools and this is sort of like if we didn't spend all that money on the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex, we could rebuild and renovate our schools, our drinking-water systems, our public transit, our community health centers. So, you're talking about a great size sub-economy here, the prison economy. It's sort of like, if we build the prisons they will come; it's just a complete perverse incentive. Isn't that what you're talking about?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: That is exactly what I'm talking about. That if they build it, they will fill it. In fact, one of the organizations that I and some other people founded 21 years ago in California was called the California Prison Moratorium Project. And we had a really difficult but very focused goal, which was to keep California from building the 24th of 24 prisons that they were opening a prison a year over more than two decades. In order to stop that, what we had to do was make it crystal clear that despite what the Department of Corrections said about their purpose for building the prison, i.e., "reduce overcrowding" that was never going to be the result because every single time California opened a new prison by a year after its opening, it was bursting at the seams. So, there was never ever, ever a horizon of non-overcrowding that would justify the enormous expansion of prison infrastructure in that state or any other state for that matter. In fact, interestingly enough, in May of 2011, the United States Supreme Court with people like Antonin Scalia and others on it concluded, in agreement with the ninth district federal court, the notoriously liberal regional court of the federal system, the SCOTUS [Supreme Court of the United States] agreed that California could not build its way out of its problem. Now, let's ask what was the problem? The problem was that a prisoner a week, every week for more than two decades had been dying of easily treatable medical issues and therefore was dying of medical neglect. The Department said, oh, we'll just build more prisons; that will reduce overcrowding then we can treat everybody's medical issues. And even the Supreme Court of the United States, no friend to the prisoner said, Nope you can't do it. So, we can see in all kinds of ways how the growth and consolidation and normalization of mass imprisonment has become so ingrained in people's consciousness that for example, young people have no memory of before; just as young people

today have no memory of before the permanent wars that started at the beginning of this century. They have no memory of it. But that doesn't mean it is inevitable that things are the way they are.

Ralph Nader: Well lest our listeners think that Professor Ruth Gilmore is an armchair philosopher and a distinguished author, she has done a lot of street organizing--South Central Los Angeles. She comes from a distinguished civil rights family in New Haven. Her father among other things he did, desegregated Yale Medical School. And not only that, but you've helped stop building some of these colossal prisons. Didn't you help stop a proposed huge women's prison in Los Angeles?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: We helped stop some new women's prisons that were going to be dotted around California. And then subsequently, some of my colleagues, who are still there on the ground in Los Angeles every day, had managed to stop a huge new women's facility that had been proposed at the cost of some billions of dollars for the Los Angeles area. Yes, I have done grassroots work in urban and rural America. One of the questions we put to ourselves 20 some odd years ago was, why is it that people in urban areas assume that people in rural areas where most of the new prisons are put, want the prisons? And then we asked ourselves the flip side of that question, why is it that people in rural areas assume that there are all these problems in urban areas for which the rural prison is the solution? So we started organizing back and forth between rural and urban already organized people, people working on issues of environmental justice, who are trying to stop the use of pesticides that are causing cancer, people in urban areas who are organizing to clean the air so that their children would not suffer from childhood asthma, which has been deadly in many poor communities in urban and rural United States and so forth. So we put people together who assumed that they were antagonists, so that they could discover on their own, not because I lectured them, but because we came together and talked, they could discover what they had in common to try to build the world they wanted for themselves and their households, their children and their communities.

Ralph Nader: Which is exactly what should be done in the militarism area because the military budget is like a JOBS Program, instead of building public services and creating jobs. And the prison system is pushed like a JOBS Program. And they go to these legislators after some very severe violent crime and the legislator says, build more prisons, put them in there, lock them up throw the key away. So, it's easier to get revenue from state legislatures for the prison system than it is for prevention. When it is for a kind of economy that gives people meaning in life, dealing with younger people who've lost any sense of meaning in life and get into trouble. That's much harder, starting with young children for example, that's much harder to get money from. Isn't that the thing; it's much easier for politicians to throw the money into more prisons, more guards and all the sub-economy, as you have described in your writings, that feed off this. I mean, you name a job and it's associated with a prison. Accountants—yeah, they're associated with prisons. Construction—yeah, they're associated with the prisons. Transportation—yeah, they're associated with prison. So how do you turn that around? Because it's so absolutely destructive? It's monstrous; it's a cancer!

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: It is monstrous. And yet, the only way to think about these things without becoming completely depressed and locking oneself in one's closet, is to think well the size means there are all kinds of people who might become energized by working toward an alternative future

to the one that they can right now anticipate. So, for example, let's take all the people who work in prisons who are not guards. So, they are teachers, they are locksmiths, they're secretaries, sometimes they're janitors, although usually people who are locked up do the janitorial and cooking work--just ordinary people who make low-to-medium wages on their jobs. Many of them are organized, which is to say they belong to public-sector unions. AFSCME is one of the big parent unions and the SEIU is another one. And what they do could be done anywhere. A secretary is a secretary. A locksmith is a locksmith. A janitor is a janitor. A mechanic is a mechanic. A teacher is a teacher. And so, we organized in California, as well as in some other states, with people who had spent their careers teaching inside, because they knew that the people they taught inside prison who became literate--many people who go to prison are functionally not literate when they arrive; they became literate, but becoming literate, they also develop different ways of thinking about the world and themselves. They participated in classrooms and therefore did certain kinds of interaction with people they otherwise might not talk to and enlarged their sense of the world. Although their everyday life in prison seems very small, the teachers are the ones who, more than almost anyone else, watched the gargantuan bloating of the prison system from the early 80s to present. And they could see and like Cassandra, they kept saying it, they could see that this is going to come to no good because the rehabilitative work that we've ever been able to do inside is going to be completely erased. It's going away. It's not going to happen. And that is the case. Education Programs shrank; Bill Clinton cancelled a certain kind of federal grants for people in prisons who wanted to study college courses. So that closed their horizons. And people who are listening to this show have got to understand, most people who go to prison, no matter what the conviction, leave prison. So, imagining that somehow prison is this place for people are sent and then they stay there forever, unless the abolitionists have their way, is absurd. People go; they come out. So, one, why have people go? Why not have things in place before people mess up? And two, when people come out, why have this system of permanent punishment instead of the things that are necessary-- education, housing, healthcare, culture, well-being--not just for them, but for everyone.

Ralph Nader: Well said

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Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Everyone.

Ralph Nader: There are 2.2 million as I said, people in prison this country; a little over half are black and Latinos. There is a shrinking of the prison population, a modest one, I understand in the last couple years. So, it's not going in the wrong direction. I just want you to talk a bit about Scandinavian systems. There was a debate team in a penitentiary in New York, that debated the Harvard University debate team and they beat them. There are really great opportunities when they have access to law books; when they have access to athletics in the prison itself, how they can fulfill themselves instead of this is brutish, solitary confinement for saying the wrong word and the warden didn't like it or this brutish type of stuff in the Angola jail in Louisiana where they were in solitary confinement; several prisoners, were framed for a crime and they were there for 40 years. But what do you do about corporate criminals, who've killed thousands of people--like drug company executives not pulling a drug out that leads to all kinds of heart attacks and other mayhem? And what do you do about political criminals like Bush and Cheney, with a clear lying their way into an unconstitutional, illegal war in Iraq, which has killed over a million Iraqis and left millions in a devastated land as refugees? How would you deal with those?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: How would I deal with those? These are excellent questions. The first one is, obviously, if we could put a cage around Dick Cheney tomorrow--that's what being in prison is, you have a cage around you--would that change all of the relationships through which this permanent war in Iraq and elsewhere has been going on all these years? Of course not. Should we not go after those people who lied us into a war that has cost so much life and caused so much destruction and destroyed entire communities and ways of life? Yes, we should. What should the remedy be? Well, my view about corporate crime is give the firm to the workers. My view about corporate criminals is take all of their money, because that's why they did it and hand it out. They did it to get rich; take it from them. That's the thing they care about the most—money. If they didn't, they would have put the \$8 part in the Pinto gas engine and people wouldn't have died. This we know. So, going after certain kinds of wrongdoing that has demonstrated over and over and over to us that for these people, life is not precious, is one part of the problem. But in order to do that, what we have to do is through the practical things we try to achieve every day--make crystal clear how it is that life is precious. I mean, I teach at The City University of New York; we have half a million learners going through our doors every single day. I get out of bed in the morning tired; I'm 69 years old. And then I remember, there are half a million people, all walks of life, all ages, many of them first generation college students as I was, others first generation immigrants who are trying to make their way in this amazing city and in this country. The City University of New York is a practical solution to the problem of mass education. And of course, as you said way earlier in our conversation, people don't have to go to college; they can have vocational training. They can do whatever it is that they find enjoyable and meaningful for their lives. These are all abolitionists' moves. And I want to say one more thing; we're coming close to the end of our time. At the moment, as we speak, there are in the United States of America about 70 million, that's seven zero million people who will have a hard time getting or keeping a job, because of some record that they bear for arrest or conviction, whether or not they were locked up. But that includes many people who were formerly incarcerated. 70 million people is half of the workforce of this country/half of the labor force of this country is made so vulnerable, because of criminalization. If we add to that group, those people who are not documented to work in this country, that's another 7 or 8 million, we're getting close to 80 million people who are either documented not to work--those are the people who have been criminalized--or not documented to work; those are people who don't have documentation who themselves are becoming rapidly criminalized. This is an enormous problem that I prefer to think of as an enormous opportunity--the opportunity to reach out to people, through the ways they're already organized: unions, faith groups, worker centers you name it, the classroom and say, What can you do to make life better for yourself and other vulnerable people as soon as possible?

Ralph Nader: That's right. And there are so many opportunities, like the Time Dollar Program, where people don't have a job, but they have time and they do hours of service for other people and other people do similar service for them in their particular skilled capacity [<https://timebanks.org>] [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_time_bank_solution] Look it up listeners. Before we close, I like the way you step back and you step back to find the early causes of these situations. We all know about the Abu Ghraib prison disaster in Afghanistan and people would say, where did these people come from? And I would say, why don't you look at US prisons? That's where they learned how to do these things. And prosecutors, for example, requiring admission of guilt threatening them with 50 years if they don't agree to nine years; 85% of all prosecutions of ordinary people are forced to cop a plea. All this leads to the jail situation. But

here's one of my favorites: if Congress would pass two simple laws, one would say that when the country's plunging to war, because of the White House or war hawks in Congress, all the able-bodied, age-qualified children and grandchildren of all members of Congress are immediately drafted! You see all the violence that would prevent in terms of wars of choice. And the other one is that whatever benefits members of Congress give themselves, like healthcare and other amenities, have to be given to all the people in the country, or they don't get it in Congress.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Exactly. In fact, you remind me of one of the questions you asked me and I'll close out with this: Many people say, what do they do overseas? Where is it better and so forth. The places where we see that the number of people who ever get locked up is few, even when they are not free to come and go, they are not living in cages, even if they're living in locked secured communities, those are the places that also have a strong welfare state. "Welfare" should not be a dirty word nor should "entitlement". We should have entitlement to the wealth that we produce in this country. We are the workers; we make it; we should be able to use it for health, for education, for universal health care--for the things that make it possible to have a peaceful and joyful life are the things that I live for to see come into being. And I think you, Ralph Nader, have been living for the same.

Ralph Nader: Well, thank you very much. And you know, on that note, the prison system is not only not working, it's making things worse. By its own definition it's making things worse--more recidivism, more waste, more destruction of people's potential lives. That's why we have to think about this very insistently. Otherwise, the trajectory of this is more and more incarceration of more and more people for less and less reason--in order to keep the beds in the prisons and the cells in the prisons full. So how can people reach you, Professor Gilmore, if they want to learn more about what you're doing?

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: They can reach me at my email at The City University of New York. That's rgilmore@gc.cuny.edu. And if you can't remember that, just look me up online.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much. We've been talking with Professor Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who is, among other advocacies, a leader in the diminution of the prison population by allowing people to have what they've earned and allowing them to fulfill their life's possibilities before they get into trouble and end up in prison. Thank you very much.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore: Thank you for having me on. Bye, bye.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Professor Ruth Wilson Gilmore. We will link to her work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Right now, we're going to take a short break; when we come back, we will speak to journalist Adam Higginbotham about *The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* in history. But first we're going to run over to the National Press Building in Washington, D.C. to find out what's going on in the world of corporate crime with our *Corporate Crime Reporter*, Russell Mohkiber.

Russell Mohkiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* "Morning Minute" for Friday, May 17, 2019. I'm Russell Mohkiber. 40 years after the worst commercial nuclear power plant accident in United States history unfolded on Three

Mile Island in Pennsylvania, the only nuclear power reactor still operating there is preparing to shut down. That's according to a report in the *New York Times*. The facility near Middletown, Pennsylvania has been losing money and in a statement on Wednesday, Exelon Generation, the company that owns the plant, said it would be closed by September 30. The company and its employees had been hoping for a subsidy from the state and when that fell through a shutdown was the only option, the statement said. A company spokesman said, the cost of decommissioning the site was estimated around 1.2 billion dollars. Disaster struck in the early morning hours of March 28, 1979, when water cooling pumps failed and a reactor overheated. For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mohkiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you Russell. Now let's hear *The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster* in history. Adam Higginbotham is a journalist who began his career in magazines and newspapers in London. He is now based in New York City, where he has written for *The New Yorker*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Wired*, *GQ* and the *Smithsonian*. He's the author of *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster*. Welcome to The *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Adam Higginbotham.

Adam Higginbotham: Thank you for having me.

Ralph Nader: Welcome indeed. This is a real field research book, listeners. Adam Higginbotham interviewed, according to the description of the book, "Former Soviet Ministers, State Investigators, KGB officers, pilots, soldiers, as well as the scientists, nuclear engineers, plant workers, and ordinary citizens whose lives were changed forever. Many of these have never before spoken to a western journalist. The result is a definitive account that breaks through the propaganda, secrecy and myth to reveal the truth about one of the 20th century's greatest disasters". So, let me start with this: What is the propaganda, secrecy and myth that you exposed?

Adam Higginbotham: Well, I mean the Soviet government attempted to cover up the accident right from the outset and to conceal its very existence and then to diminish its scale. And subsequently, it took them a while, but they did, after a few weeks, manage to get a kind of propaganda handle on what they were allowing to be reported. So then they developed a kind of heroic tale that could be sold to, not only the Soviet population, but around the world that concentrated chiefly on the efforts of the firefighters who went in to contain the catastrophe in the immediate minutes after the first explosion, diverting attention away from all the things that they got wrong, and the subsequent disasters that almost developed and they said were going to develop after the first explosion. And then, you know, this effort continued for as long as the Soviet Union was in existence, because as the first anniversary of the disaster approached, the Propaganda Minister in the Politburo then presented Gorbachev and the other members of the Politburo with a series of communication strategies really, to kind of sell the world on the idea that the results of the catastrophe were not as great as everybody said, and that everything was really going to be okay. It goes from the largest strokes of cover-up to the most minor parts of spinning the news.

Ralph Nader: The people in the United States heard about it first from Sweden, where they detected the radiation that had reached Sweden. Of course, it reached northern Finland and they detected it in the animals there. It reached Scotland; the radiation was detected in Turkish ground

nuts. This wouldn't have happened today under social media. Could they have covered up as much today under social media?

Adam Higginbotham: Well, I don't know. I mean even if we look at the way in which Moscow to this day controls social media inside the borders of Russia and manipulates the news, I mean they didn't succeed in covering it up in 1986. So, I don't think that the profusion of more means of communication would have made it any easier to cover up.

Ralph Nader: Well as you pointed out in your book, this is the biggest release of radiation of any nuclear power plant disaster--bigger than Fukushima, I take it.

Adam Higginbotham: I think so. I mean it certainly, in terms of the public health impact and the amount of people whose lives were overturned by what happened, it's certainly the largest nuclear accident in history.

Ralph Nader: I remember that *The Phil Donahue Show*, which had audience of 10 million people, Phil actually went to the Chernobyl area, an hour and a half or two I guess from Kiev and he went into the abandoned villages. And I remember, he'd walk into an abandoned house and open the door and it would creek open. Tell our listeners, how large an area is to this day considered uninhabitable in Ukraine?

Adam Higginbotham: Well, the area that was evacuated immediately after the explosion of the month that followed was between 11,500 square miles in the area immediately surrounding the problem. And that's the area that remains abandoned and as has gradually been expanded by both the Ukrainian and the Belorussian government.

Ralph Nader: How many villages and towns and what was the biggest one that was evacuated?

Adam Higginbotham: That's a good question. I don't think I know the answer to that. I mean, Chernobyl itself, which was the county seat, the local administrative capital, was a pretty large town. The nearest place, which was Pripyat, which was the company town that built to house the workers who worked for the plant and their families. It had a population of around 50,000 people at the time of the accident and they were all evacuated, within two days after the explosion.

Ralph Nader: Tell us how the accident actually happened inside the plant? And are there any models like that in the United States or is it a distinctive Soviet model without a fail-safe containment shell. Was that the problem--that they didn't have a second shell?

Adam Higginbotham: I mean, that's one of the problems with it. But that's kind of the last in a whole chain of different problems.

Ralph Nader: Explain that.

Adam Higginbotham: No, you're right. The reactor, which is known by the acronym RBMK was a Soviet-designed reactor, which was never built outside the borders of the USSR and indeed couldn't have been because it wouldn't have passed any international safety regulations for nuclear

power plants. But the problems with it are sort of myriad and what's most shocking about the story really, is that the leaders of the Soviet nuclear industry knew that the reactor suffered from a series of design faults for more than 10 years before the accident happened, but did very little to rectify them and indeed tried to cover them up. The reactor itself had a series of profound problems that lead to instability in the course of normal operation and a series of design flaws, the worst of which was the emergency control rods that could be used to completely shut the reactor down in the case of an emergency or in fact, if you simply wanted to turn it off for the process of routine maintenance, which is ultimately what they were planning to do on the night of the accident, had a design fault, which meant that for the first few seconds/fractions of a second after the rods were inserted, instead of reducing the power of the reactor as they were supposed to, they could briefly increase the power of the reactor. So, it was as if when attempting to stop a car and you slammed on the brakes, the car leapt forward and accelerators, instead of slowing down and that was the final problem that instigated the accident on the night of the explosion. Then the fact that, in order to save money, the designers had dispensed with the containment building, which is the thick concrete structure that's constructed around all nuclear reactors in the west and designed to keep in radiation in the event of a reactor accident like this one; because there was no containment building, there was effectively just a sort of steel shed built around the reactor itself, what happened is the explosion tore apart the reactor, lifted the biological shield, the huge lid on the top of the reactor, clean off the top of it. And radionuclides then escaped into the building. There was a second explosion, which destroyed utterly the roof of the building, and then the radionuclides in this column of poisonous vapor just began roiling right into the atmosphere, where it was snatched away by high-altitude winds and began traveling ultimately around the whole of the Northern Hemisphere.

Ralph Nader: And what megawatt level was that plant and wasn't there more than one plant?

Adam Higginbotham: They were four reactors with 1000 megawatts each.

Ralph Nader: What happened to the other three reactors, Adam?

Adam Higginbotham: Over the course of the 24 hours after the explosion, the other three reactors were shut down. But then subsequently the buildings were all decontaminated and all three of those reactors were brought back online and began generating power again quite soon afterwards. And in fact, the last of those three reactors at Chernobyl did not stop operating until 2000.

Ralph Nader: How many reactors were operating throughout the Soviet Union at the time?

Adam Higginbotham: I don't know how many nuclear reactors in total of this model, I think there were another 12 operating after the explosion.

Ralph Nader: Did it slow down the construction of new nuclear reactors?

Adam Higginbotham: It did, because it created - eventually when information began to leak out and Glasnost really took hold - people in the Soviet Union began to discover the truth behind the accident and its consequences. It led to a series of incipient green movements in different Soviet

Republics, including Ukraine. And they put pressure on the government to either stop construction on several plants or to convert them into fossil fuel plants.

Ralph Nader: Of these people who lost their area of habitation and had to be evacuated in the tens and thousands, where did they go? I mean, they were never able to come back. Were they compensated for their losses? Where did they end up going?

Adam Higginbotham: They were compensated in the sense that, people who had to leave their homes and their belongings behind were given money to buy new furniture and clothes and they were found jobs elsewhere. Many of the people who lived in Pripyat for example, were rehoused in the same massive housing development on the outskirts of Kiev, where many of them still live today actually.

Ralph Nader: And you know from our point of view, I mean this occurred; the question was what could happen in the US? Could it happen at Indian Point, 30 miles north of Manhattan? And the answer always was "Well, our reactors are built with more defense and depth, more safeguards." But of course, in Fukushima and the cluster of plants there, those were US- manufactured plants. And of course, they had the tsunami difference and potential earthquake. But there's a whole configuration of events that could uniquely lead to any nuclear power plant meltdown. But what disturbed some of us the most was the attempt by pro-nuclear forces to downplay the number of casualties from Chernobyl, down to a few hundred deaths perhaps from cancer, radiation exposed the workers, the firefighters, some of the helicopter fighters. And when studies started being made in Eastern European and Russian technical journals, there was almost a sneering approach by the apologist for the nuclear industry. The New York Academy of Science, as you know, published one of the summary reports of the various research articles from Eastern European and Soviet scientific studies. And then suddenly, it had to withdraw it under pressure saying, well, those aren't really carefully done scientific-controlled studies etcetera. Did you dig into that at all? Because we located a very prominent biologist, one of the most prominent in the Soviet Union, won all the prizes, who questioned the playing down of these various studies in the Soviet bloc scientific journals.

Adam Higginbotham: I don't know as you know, it's an extremely controversial area. And it's very difficult to tell where the truth lies. So, what I can say is that, what I do in the book is I show the different parameters of the number of casualties that are connected to the accident. But certainly, most of the radiation scientists that I spoke to, suggested that the thing is definitely the lower end. I mean, the study done by Elisabeth Cardis in France for instance, estimates around 9,000 fatal cancers that can be directly attributed to the accident. And on the other end of the scale, you know these figures in Greenpeace that go up into the hundreds of thousands. I just think that the attempts to cover up and manipulate the data on behalf of the Soviet government at the beginning of the accident, as data could have been gathered, means that we're not really ever going to know the true answer to these questions.

Ralph Nader: There is always the question of how far out; how many years do you do the studies, because radiation lingers a long time, as we all know. And if you do the studies immediately after the accident, say six months you get one set of figures; if you do a longer range, which is what these Soviet bloc scientists were doing, you come up with a different. The reason why this is so

important is that every time there's a nuclear accident much less than the Chernobyl one, the industry puts out its usual press release, nobody died from Browns Ferry, nobody died from Fermi, nobody died from Three Mile Island. And the public doesn't have an independent source of scrutiny and data generation. We're left with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's predecessor, Atomic Energy Commission, which basically, has a promotional function as well as a safety function. And it's pretty well known which part of the duty of these agencies predominate, but you've had people who served on the Atomic Energy Commission, Nuclear Regulatory Commission like Peter Bradford, and the former chairman who just wrote a book on it. Are you getting any concern as you discuss this book around the US on media and perhaps in audiences--any concern that this *Midnight in Chernobyl*, while it had its unique Soviet problems and cover ups that it should send a roman candle up--a warning about nuclear power plants in our country?

Adam Higginbotham: I tend to think that although the Chernobyl accident has been used as an anti-nuclear talisman, I prefer to see it as emblematic more broadly of an overconfidence and excess of trust in high technology. I think that the accident was a result of secrecy and cover up and above all of technological hubris. And of people who treated a technology that needs to be treated with the utmost respect, with great recklessness. And the leaders of the Soviet nuclear industry were reckless in their approach to radiation; they were reckless in their approach to nuclear-reactor design. And above all, they were reckless in the way that they treated their duty of care to the public. Although I certainly agree that nuclear regulation around the world has got its problems and needs to be done a lot better, I don't think the problems are on the scale they were in the Soviet Union.

Ralph Nader: Well, it depends. We don't know much about how much the French are dumping nuclear waste and what's happening in the Bay of Bengal and India? So, it's not exactly freedom of information paradise here. The French are extremely secretive about what they're doing. But the argument is made by Amory Lovins and others, the physicist based in Colorado who has written so much about the soft energy path that apart from the arguments that have been put against nuclear power, that it's uneconomic, it's uninsurable, it's a national security problem in terms of sabotage, they haven't solved the long-range radioactive waste disposal; it's shrouded in secrecy. That is also unnecessary. And Amory Lovins says that if they take the same amount of money that they're investing in nuclear plants as you know the cost overruns are growing through the roof and in the Georgia plants, it's up to 20 billion dollars now for a couple of plants and I think it will go to 30 billion dollars just for 2000, each 1000 megawatt plants. And if they took that same money and invested it in community energy conservation--retrofitting buildings, housing so on--they would get much more energy bang for the buck. And it would create jobs and it would not have a problem of radioactive waste storage problems or potential meltdowns or daily, minimal leaks--and all the rest of the nuclear supply chain from the uranium mine tailings to the fully-used piles of radioactive material and in pools next to the plants and the storage problem. What do you say about that?

Adam Higginbotham: About which part of it?

Ralph Nader: The part that if you're going to invest this kind of money, invest it in energy efficiency and conservation, community by community. What you don't use in megawatts of electricity, you don't have to generate. That's the point.

Adam Higginbotham: No, I mean that sounds extremely sensible, but surely at the same time, you've also got to think of how we address the current climate catastrophe that we're already in the middle of. So, we need to eliminate fossil fuel plants. So, surely, we need to also to invest in alternative means of generating electricity whether it would be solar, wind or nuclear.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, but you see just in terms of the replacement of nuclear power with energy efficiency is huge potential. I mean, the efficiency engineers tell us that although we've saved a lot in the last 30 years, fuel efficiency for motor vehicles and more efficient refrigeration and so forth that there is huge, huge potential to cut dramatically up to 80% of our energy consumption by efficiency. Of course, efficiency doesn't increase sales; it reduces sales. So, the powers that be that hover over Washington have always been focused on expansion of energy production facilities. In fact, Reagan ran on the motto "America's great by producing energy, not by saving energy". So that's one argument that persuasive. And of course, the other is all kinds of renewables which are a broader displacement of fossil fuels. So, you coming out of this Chernobyl experience? And were you ever personally afraid of getting exposed to the residual radiation around Chernobyl? Because I know you were there?

Adam Higginbotham: Sure. I mean, I think that, I think that it would have been something wrong with me if I hadn't been concerned about it. But except in specific hotspots, the contamination is not such that there's any need to take precautions apart from being careful that you don't breathe in dust and you don't get down on your hands and knees and eat your meals off the ground.

Ralph Nader: Did you personally have a dosimeter?

Adam Higginbotham: Yes, I did. I mean certainly, when I first went there, because I began reporting on the story in 2006. Back then, I didn't have my own dosimeter. And the people that were guides who I worked with, that the Ukrainian government obliges you to have when you go into the exclusion zone, their attitude towards radiation was pretty reckless. And at that point, I did not have my own dosimeter. So certainly, when I began reporting for the book, one of the first things I did was to make sure I had my own, so I knew exactly what was going on radiation-wise at any given time.

Ralph Nader: Well it took a considerable degree of personal courage, I think. I'm saying it, not you, because why did it take so long for western journalists to do the definitive story, which you have done in this book, listeners--*Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster*. Why did it take so long for western journalists to tell the untold story?

Adam Higginbotham: Yeah, believe me. This is a question that occurred to me in middle of reporting the book myself. It wasn't easy because I don't speak Russian. So that's a pretty significant barrier to reporting a story where the majority of your sources, the majority of your contacts, documents and everything else is in a language that you don't speak. So that for a start is difficult, but then you've also got the fact that there was an awful lot sort of folktale and mythology that developed around the accident, almost as soon as it happened. And there were several books published in English and the immediate aftermath of the accident in the early 90s. Piers Paul Read, who wrote the book *Alive* about the survivors of the plane crash in the Andes. He wrote an excellent book that was published in 1993, but at that time, a lot of these documents that have been

declassified in the year since 1986, were not available. At the same time, there were people who wouldn't talk about it or couldn't talk about it; a lot of the technical material still remains unwritten. And at that point, when Piers Paul Read wrote that book, the internal report from within the Soviet atomic industry that revealed the true causes of the accident, not the whitewash that was presented to the public in Vienna in Austria by the Soviet government in August 1986, but the real investigation, that had only just come out. So, in the intervening 30 years, there is just an enormous amount of material has come out.

Ralph Nader: Did you find that in the Chernobyl museum in Kiev that it was a no-holds- barred museum; I mean, they weren't politically restrained or self-censored or censored?

Adam Higginbotham: I don't believe they are, which is remarkable given that it was originally set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. No, in fact, I mean, part of the reason I was able to write the book in the first place was because I had the cooperation of the Deputy Director for Science of the Chernobyl museum in Kiev, who was extremely generous with her time, contacts and information and provided me with original documents, with people who were eyewitnesses who I would have found it extremely hard to find, without her assistance. And at one point she presented me with the original police file that has been kept on the accident from the hour (after) the explosion, in the police station in Kiev, until early in May. And this was kind of goldmine of information that otherwise I would never been able to get my hands on.

Ralph Nader: And you had good interpreters and translators. Right?

Adam Higginbotham: Yeah, I mean I worked with excellent interpreters. So, I mean, I had simultaneous translations throughout all of the interviews I did and then had those recordings checked afterwards, when they were transcribed.

Ralph Nader: Is it true that there is a kind of bizarre tourism around Chernobyl? Actually, people come as tourists?

Adam Higginbotham: Absolutely. Absolutely, I mean when I first began work on the book, I sardonically remarked to my editor that, if I succeeded in writing the definitive account of what happened, then it would be the book that was sold in the souvenir shop in Chernobyl--never for a second suspecting that one day there really would be a souvenir shop in Chernobyl, which apparently there is; I mean, this has happened since I last went there. I was last there at the end of 2016. And since then, tourism has just expanded enormously in the zone. So, I think that 70,000 people visited the exclusion zone last year. And what I read now is that there are actually two souvenir shops on the perimeter of the exclusion zone.

Ralph Nader: There are ecologists are studying this uninhabited area, because the animals, for some reason, know that they can't be hunted. So, they have all kinds of animal life. And the question--we found this out at Hanford reservation in Washington State--when you had radioactive birds, and they flew off the reservation. Did you discover anything where these animals basically are radioactive? And they're going beyond reproducing, etcetera--going beyond the uninhabited circumference?

Adam Higginbotham: Well, they don't, they don't have to be living in the exclusion zone to become radioactive. Still there are wild boar in the forests of Southern Germany, but because of the food they eat, foraging in mushrooms and leaf litter and things like that, when they are hunted by people in Germany, these boars remain so radioactive that it's illegal to eat the meat.

Ralph Nader: Good heavens. That raises the other question that listeners may not know, that the effect way beyond the Soviet Union was felt I mean, there were domesticated animals in neighboring countries including Turkey for example, that were contaminated. And the question was, where do you get rid of that? Where do you get rid of contaminated waste in the countries outside of the Soviet Union? It became a black market. I mean, they would dump some of the stuff in Lebanon; people wouldn't even know that the stuff would be dumped in Lebanon.

Adam Higginbotham: Well and the Soviet government also had to deal with this. What they actually did was they would mix meat into sausages. So, they would put mixed contaminated radioactive meat with uncontaminated meat. So that each individual sausage would remain safe to eat and below official radiation limits. So, you didn't eat too many of them.

Ralph Nader: What country was this?

Adam Higginbotham: In the Soviet Union.

Ralph Nader: Was this done outside at all because there were animals in Scotland and Finland and reindeer that were contaminated.

Adam Higginbotham: Yeah, I know, they had to cull huge populations of reindeer in Scandinavia. And the restrictions are on the sale of meat from Hill Farms in Wales and Scotland was not listed until many years after the accident.

Ralph Nader: Well, unfortunately our time is up. Thank you very much, Adam. We've been talking with Adam Higginbotham, author of the gripping non-fiction book *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster*. It performs a lot of lessons for us listeners in terms of the kinds of choices we make in our energy economy. Thank you, Adam.

Adam Higginbotham: Thank you.

Steve Skrovan: As Ralph said, we've been speaking with Adam Higginbotham, author of *Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster*. We will link to that at ralphnaderradiohour.com. I want to thank our guests again, Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Adam Higginbotham. And join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when we speak to Journalist Andrew Cockburn about how bloated defense budgets actually weaken our armed forces. Thanks, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thanks, Steve, Jimmy and Elisabeth Solomon who does our transcripts. If you're really interested in changing this country for the better listeners, you know underneath all is the Congress. So, get copies of that paperback action manual *How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress*

and go to ratsreformcongress.org for a specific tutorial on how to set up a Congress Watch local, starting small and getting bigger, in your own congressional district.