

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 286 TRANSCRIPT

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

David Feldman: Good morning.

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

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody.

Steve Skrovan: Yes. We're going to kick off the show today by welcoming back old friend John Nichols, of *The Nation*. John knows a lot about a lot of things. Well, one of the things he knows the most about is the media landscape. He's co-authored at least three books on the subject. Today, we're going to talk to John about the proposed merger of the media company Gannett, which is the largest newspaper publisher in America, most notably *USA Today*, with a company called GateHouse, apparently the second largest newspaper chain.

Together, they would form a super media company that would own one out of every six daily newspapers in the country. Is this good thing, bad thing? That kind of concentrated power doesn't sound like a good thing. But is this an inevitable thing? John is here to give us his take on all of that and its implications for our democracy. That's the first half the show. In the second half the show we're going to discuss diets. Now, David, are you still a vegan?

David Feldman: Yes, I am. Well, I try to be. Occasionally I have cheese and pork and a hamburger -- no, I am.

Steve Skrovan: You are. Yes.

David Feldman: Yeah.

Steve Skrovan: Well, our second guest today has been exploring a plant-based diet for himself and writing about it for *The Washington Post*. His name is Courtland Milloy. He's written a number of columns this year on the topic as he tracks his own progress upon becoming a vegan. What's he learned? How's his health? Does he miss meat? We'll have a wide-ranging discussion about all of that in the second half of the show. As usual somewhere in between we will check in with our *Corporate Crime Reporter*, Russell Mohkiber, because as we all know, corporate crime never sleeps. But first, let's find out what this latest attempt and media consolidation means for the rest of us. David?

David Feldman: John Nichols is the National Affairs Correspondent for *The Nation Magazine*. In addition to that work, he has also written extensively on media issues with co-author Robert McChesney, including *Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex is Destroying America*, *The Death and Life of American Journalism: The Media Revolution that Will Begin the World Again* and *Tragedy & Farce: How the American Media Sells Wars, Spins Elections and Destroys Democracy*. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, John Nichols.

John Nichols: It is such an honor to be with you folks.

Ralph Nader: Welcome to our listeners, John. They're going to realize what happens when newspapers merge and they're stripped as if some of them haven't even experienced that in their own local communities. And this merger by the notorious GateHouse Media Group of all of the Gannett's newspapers, I mean who would ever dream the Gannett would be so hard-pressed it would sell out all our newspapers for a mere \$1.4 billion. In fact, the figure is considered so low that there are going to be investors probably challenging it. But this means that GateHouse Media will take control of *USA Today*, the *Detroit Free Press*, *Indianapolis Star*, *Des Moines Register*, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, up in your part of the country, and *The Arizona Republic*, among many others. It will bring about 200 newspapers under the power of what critics have called a stripper company. And that's what they did, apparently, to the City of Worcester in Massachusetts. They took over the *Telegram* newspaper and Mayor Joseph Petty was heard to say that basically there's no more real newspaper in the City of Worcester.

One of the things they did was cut costs, of course, to make more profit and they laid off their legendary columnist Clive McFarlane among many other reporters. And MacFarlane blasted on Facebook what he calls, "The Indignity of Corporate Management." Continuing his comment, "After 26 years writing for this community, I was unceremoniously shown the door today by Gate House, deprived even of the long-established protocol of allowing a columnist to bid farewell to his readers", he wrote according to Politico's "Massachusetts Playbook" [newsletter].

And here is where it affects you, listeners, in a very, very of civic manner. Margaret Sullivan who is the media columnist for *The Washington Post*, and a very astute one at that, says, "When local news withers, bad things happen, studies show. People vote less. They vote in a more politically polarized way; political corruption has more opportunity to flourish, unnoticed by the local watchdog, and municipal costs may rise. More than 2000 newspapers have gone out of business in the last 15 years in the United States; most are weeklies, but many metro dailies are in real trouble too. *The Vindicator* in Youngstown, Ohio will shut down and leave a substantial city without any daily newspaper." What do you think of all this, John Nichols?

John Nichols: I think it's a disaster and I think it is a disaster long in the making that people are now paying more attention to and I think that's great. But people need to understand this as a starting point: Gannett bought up regional and smaller dailies over the last many decades. And when Gannett came in to buy them up, that was not generally a good thing. Generally, when Gannett came in, they downsized; they did less not more. They consolidated. Now, as you see this sale of Gannett to a company that has a reputation for doing even more downsizing, even more doing-less journalism, you end up with a situation where a bad circumstance is about to get much worse. And one of the things that I would emphasize that kind of hidden in all this discussion, is talk about as much as \$300 million in cost saving. That's the term they used, \$300 million in cost saving as a result of this merger. The thing to understand is this, daily newspapers, regional dailies in this country, have already dramatically downsized. They've cut every corner; they've laid off everybody they could. They're way beyond failing to do their job, and now you're talking about dramatically greater cuts. I promise you this will lead to less journalism. And forget about investigative journalism; forget about that top-line, sort of high-flying, well-intended and well-

paid-attention-to journalism that we've talked about so much. I'm talking about the loss of the basic beats--people that cover the school board, people that cover the city council, people that cover the day in and day outs of neighborhoods and some of the rural areas outside of these cities.

The bottom line is, journalism will be harmed and when journalism is harmed, democracy is dramatically undermined. This is a bad deal.

Ralph Nader: For sure. In fact, there are a lot of daily newspapers that are being in my word strip-mined, the daily paper in New Orleans, the daily paper in Portland, Oregon.

John Nichols: Cleveland, you can run down the list. Yeah. Yeah.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. Last I heard, those papers are down to three days a week that they even print. And of course, it's all being blamed on the internet and digital advertising, moving advertisers from print to digital and everybody is talking about the end of newspapers. I sat with Marty Baron, the Managing Editor of *The Washington Post*, who said that in 10 years there may be no more print newspapers with very few exceptions, maybe the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post* or *The Wall Street Journal*. That's the excuse they use. Now, you've thought a lot about this and tell our listeners, you and McChesney's proposal among others, based on the premise that newspapers in our democratic society are too important to be left up to some massive media baron takeover artists.

John Nichols: That's exactly right. And so, let's understand why we talk about newspapers. It's not because we're attached to paper. It's not because we don't engage with and celebrate the arrival of the internet and the digital age. We recognize that, celebrate it. It's great. But here is the problem, the daily newspaper, historically, has been the institution in communities beginning at about you know 20,000 and working your way up that population chain, if you will, to our biggest city, to New York, to LA, to wherever. It's the great daily newspapers that historically set up a newsroom that sought to cover the whole of what was going on. Now, did they always get it right? No. Did they always get on the right side of the issues? No. This is not to create some fantasy of a golden age. It is simply to say that in cities across this country, not that long ago, you had institutions that at least tried to cover what was going on. Sometimes you had competing institutions which is even better, multiple voices. Now, in the peak age of the daily newspaper, these are owned by corporations, owned by rich people, they set a certain number of reporters were needed to cover a community. Maybe in a place like Cleveland, they would say you needed 300 reporters to do that. Now, they weren't giving things away. They weren't being overly generous. They were saying that's just what you needed. Now, after all these mergers, buyouts, concessions, downsizings, if you will, some of which are impacted by the internet, no question with that but a lot of other factors including just greed, we've ended up in situations where they now tell us, no, no, we can cover that community, not with 300 reporters but with 30 reporters, with 20. Some of these big newsrooms have been so hollowed out that all you got is people sitting at computers who are basically pulling together press releases at best. Now, these are wonderful people, sincere folks who want to do a good job, but they cannot possibly cover communities. And so when you combine that downsizing of the main newsroom in a town with the consolidation of ownership of radio, because of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which means the radio newsrooms have

been decimated, with the dumbing down of local television, where they simply replaced a lot of reporting with weather and some sports, you end up in a situation where communities across this country, big communities, are becoming news deserts. They literally don't have the coverage necessary to sustain a democratic discourse.

Ralph Nader: The local television - which lanches off the local newspaper - becomes worse too when they do the evening news. So, it affects television and radio as well. Is there a chance that there's going to be opposition to break up this deal? Is there any antitrust issue here? Are there any investor actions, before we go into other issues on this subject?

John Nichols: Sure. There are a number of places where interventions can be proposed, including Anne Pointer and other folks who have talked about the prospect of even a Justice Department intervention on some antitrust issues. It's legitimate to discuss that and to consider it. I have to tell you that this Justice Department has not impressed me with its commitment to antitrust or to journalism or to democracy. There are also possibilities of some investor actions. I hope there are. There are also possibilities of community actions. And this is an important thing.

Communities that are going to be subjected to this and in some cases whole state, in places like my state of Wisconsin, Gannett is a very, very, very big company that owns papers in a lot of places, not just Milwaukee. They ought to be talking about this. Governors, legislators and others ought to be saying, along with mayors and city council members, we're not satisfied with the downsizing. We're going to watch this. We're going to monitor it as a threat to democratic discourse in this place. And making noise about mergers like this, whether there is an official intervention by Justice Department or by anybody else on antitrust or anything like that, making noise is the critical thing. Letting people know that this is not natural; this doesn't just happen. This is multinational and national corporations cutting deals that sacrifice journalism in order to make bigger profits. And that needs to be discussed.

Ralph Nader: Tell our listeners to what Thomas Jefferson says.

John Nichols: Well, Jefferson said, if you had to choose between a free press and I'll paraphrase it; free press covering our politicians and our politics versus our politicians, our politics, I'd choose the free press, because you can't have -- you can't have it. You can't have a democracy. You can't have a democratic discourse. You can't have governance that represents an extension of people unless you have a lot of freedom of press, a lot of journalism, a lot of discourse. And Madison, James Madison, also had a wonderful line on this. He said, if you don't have this free flow of information, if you don't maintain it, then quickly you will degenerate toward tragedy or farce or both.

Ralph Nader: We're talking to John Nichols, National Political Correspondent for *The Nation*, a versatile author and he also works in Wisconsin in Madison. John, it really comes down also to two things, local philanthropy, because local philanthropy can certainly step up and restore some of those weeklies, if not the dailies.

John Nichols: And they can buy dailies. Sure.

Ralph Nader: Yes. And the readers themselves. Now, let me give you an example. Warren Buffett, a few years ago, bought a whole series of weeklies in places like Virginia, because he thought, while the digital revolution is going to wreak havoc on the international and national news, local news cannot be replicated by the internet; it has to be produced locally. So, everybody said, well, Warren Buffett, major investor, genius, foreseer, that's good news. Well, Margaret Sullivan quotes him, and it looks like he's had a change of mind. And he said, "The local newspaper business is toast."

So, I've seen this in New England as well. Part of it is how active in demanding for their own newspaper are the readers? In Brattleboro, Vermont, there's a regular daily paper, [that is] so, so. But there's a vibrant community-based weekly that's quite thick and it's been around for over a decade because the readers demand it. In places in Connecticut, they've lost their weekly newspaper and it's very easy to resurrect it. For example, in my town, Winsted, Connecticut, we lost the *Winsted Journal* which was a weekly. It was closed by a larger paper in Lakeville, Connecticut. And I figured out that if a thousand people in the six-town area served by this newspaper, simply paid for a subscription equivalent to one Dunkin Donuts' coffee a week--the equivalent of one Dunkin Donuts' coffee a week--it would be a viable weekly and it would cover the town halls. It would cover the sports, the schools; it would cover civic activity. It would cover nature in six towns. Now, why do we make excuses for people, John Nichols?

John Nichols: Well, right off the, bat you've gotten exactly where I want to go, because the fact to the matter is, corporations do what corporations are going to do. Our job is to build around them, to stop them where it's possible, to do alternatives where necessary. And as we look at what's happening, not just with this merger we're talking about, but really with what's happening to local news in this country, it's a nightmare scenario. It's really, really bad. And you're ending up with a dumbing down and diminishing of coverage of the communities where we live, where most of the decisions about our lives are made by school boards and city councils and county boards and county commissions. And we're sort of pushing all of our politics up to a DC-pundit coverage and we think that's news. We're losing the heart and soul of it. And so, we have to intervene. What you're talking about, Ralph, is essential. That's the model of citizens banding together, providing support to sustain institutions that give them the information they need. I want to supercharge that. I want to take that at the next stage. Bob McChesney and I have proposed that at the local, state or national level, governments that tax want to create a tax credit, a tax benefit, where you can deduct from your taxes your subscriptions to a local newspaper or to a local website, your support for a non-profit, community focused, news-generating institution. People ought to be able to take that off their taxes--to say we basically have a democracy tax credit of maybe a \$100, \$200. Imagine if in your community, you're talking about there, if everybody had the ability to knock \$100 off their taxes, if they chose to make a contribution or make a subscription, make a support for a local newspaper or a great website or a great radio station, *Democracy Now*, if you want to go up to the national level with Amy Goodman, something like that, this model can work. And if people might say, but we can't do that, you can't have that sort of system.

Do you know who gets to deduct their subscriptions now? Billionaires and millionaires and businessmen get to deduct subscriptions to like *The Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune* because they say it's a business expense. Well, isn't it time that we started to say that citizens have a right to deduct a democracy expense and that being their local news?

Ralph Nader: Inform our listeners, John Nichols, about some of the initiatives around the country like Center for Public Integrity and other more decentralized groups that are supported by philanthropy.

John Nichols: Yeah. There's a ton of them. And the fact of the matter is that there's a lot of institutions doing journalism in this country with the eye toward making it work. In some cases where newspapers have been shut down or dramatically downsized, there have been efforts to create expanded newsrooms associated with public radio stations as an example. And these expanded newsrooms often are supported by local and national foundations. There are a lot of interventions from philanthropy, again at the local and national level, to support local journalism. There are also national projects which are funded by philanthropy usually, sometimes by collaboration with existing news outlets, with the idea of doing national-level investigative reporting.

The fact is there's a lot of this going on around the country. It's lively, it's creative and it works. It has worked in a lot of places. But I will counsel, it is insufficient. Certainly, philanthropies can step in, in emergency situations and that's great. But where we really have to get to is a situation where we have small “d” democratic support for local media across this country. And that's where we get back to some of the stuff Ralph was talking about there--the idea of having groups of people come together in coalition to give small amounts of money, each individual, to support and sustain local media. It's also where we get to this idea that Bob and I have been talking about with these vouchers at the local, state or national level where people can take a little bit of money off their taxes and support independent media, non-profit at a local level. The bottom line on this is we need to be incredibly innovative at this moment. And we need to try everything we can. This is an urgent, emergency situation. And one final thing that we should be very passionate about is supercharging funding for public and community broadcasting. Every three years there's a debate in Congress about cutting it out altogether. No, we should be going the exact opposite direction and especially the community side of that, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, other institutions at the federal level, should be providing lots of support for local media especially in rural areas. And if I can just emphasize this, there's a lot of discussion now about why rural areas have become much more predictable politically--why they no longer have the level of competition they had, even a few years ago. You can put that right to the decline of local media. As people get all their information from Washington and New York, from Fox and from maybe syndicated Rush Limbaugh that radically changes the discourse. And we're starting to see the development of huge news deserts in rural areas that needs to be countered not with propaganda, not with political spending; it needs to be countered with journalism. And the way you can do that is by supercharging public funding of community radio, especially in rural areas.

Ralph Nader: And by the way compared to other countries--like Canada, Norway and France, Germany--taxpayers give less per capita by far than the taxpayers do in Western Europe, or Canada, for example, to support the Canadian Broadcast system, CBT or the BBC in Britain. That's one approach. And by the way, I've accused Rush Limbaugh of being a corporate welfare king. He said, “What's Nader talking about? It's crazy”. I said, well, because he's making millions and his company is making millions using our public airwaves free with radio stations all over the country. He doesn't pay any rent to we, the landlords. So, we've got to straighten out our subsidies

here. It's not just as you say, John Nichols, that companies deduct their subscriptions as ordinary, necessary business expenses, not to mention there are other deductions and then they get their nose out of joint when it is recommended that ordinary readers deduct their subscriptions to small newspapers. I heard a town manager not long ago in New England say, why don't we just raise the mill rate and put it up for local referendum and support the newspaper in a trust based on the tax rate. Just like that. Well, I mean, municipally control newspaper, well, wouldn't be really controlled, there'd be a trust as an intermediary. But there'd be a steady source of income. And what about newspapers controlled by big advertisers?

John Nichols: Exactly. So, we don't want that. We don't want big corporate controlling and we don't want big government controlling. What we want is the people having control. So, there's an easy way to do this. And again, that is tax credits. Let the people make their commitments and then let them get a bounce back on their taxes. Let them get a slight reduction in their taxes because they're supporting democracy sustaining media. And let's not worry about the fact that some of them will support conservative media and some of them will support more liberal media. But by and large, especially in rural areas, you're going to see people, I believe, support media that simply tells their stories, that goes out and does journalism. And so, the thing is, there are models here that can work. This is not hard. The problem that we've got is the discussion about the future of local journalism is largely being run through the corporate sphere. And it's largely being left to the "market." And the fact of the matter is, what you get if you leave it to the corporate sphere and the market, is a constant buying of the local newspapers, the regional dailies by companies like the ones we're talking about today, and they keep merging and every time they merge, here is what happens; every time they merge they "cut costs." At the end of the day, the people that buy local papers, buy regional papers, buy chains of papers, take out a whole bunch of money for themselves and put it in their pockets and then after they've done that, they do a whole bunch of cost-cutting and then after they've done that they often sell off the building downtown because it's good real estate. And once they've stripped all of this out and pocketed all this money, then they say, well, we're going to sell it again. And then the next guy comes along or the next hedge fund or the next corporation and they do the exact same thing. So, don't just blame the internet. Don't be in that fantasy of thinking the internet competition is the problem. The problem is that we keep having local daily newspapers sold and resold and stripped and gutted and at the end of the day we end up with virtually no news.

Ralph Nader: And you know, John Nichols, I once wrote a column on the personal aspect of this. You have thousands of dedicated journalists, thousands of editors, who've given their life to their profession. And some guy who makes a tax-subsidized mega fortune in real estate wheels in talks to his tax lawyers and says, "You know, if I buy the Chicago Tribune and some other newspapers, I can play it for even greater tax benefits for my fortune". And in the meantime, all these people are just laid off. They're fired; their work is curtailed, and they don't have a single say in it. That's corporate managerial capitalism.

John Nichols: And there's also the community doesn't have a say either. And so, we end up in this situation where we lose thousands and thousands of years of experience and knowledge that which the journalists have of people who are really passionate, willing to work and it's not very hot pay to go out and cover the stories, to speak truth to power, you lose that and then also the community itself loses an escape valve because what used to be the way that we dealt with the

problem, if you had a problem, you said I'm going to call up the newspaper. I'm going to tell 'em to go cover this story. And this was an incredible check and balance on power and in many parts of the country we're losing it.

Ralph Nader: Well, there are two other things that listeners might be interested. There was, for a number of years, starting around 1940 in New York City, there was a newspaper called *PM*, which was basically owned by its staff, its workers. And it was a great investigative paper for over a dozen years before it closed down. I don't know what the reason was. But you know about the *Weekly Reader* [Chicago Reader], the very vibrant weekly paper in Chicago that was about to fail, and a philanthropist Leonard Goodman took it over and it's thriving. So, there are these models around but it's not what's called community steady base all over the country. There aren't these philanthropists around that will support these newspapers and not interfere with them.

John Nichols: (chuckling) We don't have enough billionaires.

Ralph Nader: Yeah.

John Nichols: There's not enough billionaires to bail everybody out.

Ralph Nader: The right kind of billionaires. Yeah. Before we get to a question by David or Steve, how can people find out more about what you're writing, John Nichols?

John Nichols: Sure. I write for *The Nation* magazine as you've so generously mentioned, and people can always go to www.thenation.com. People can also Google on their or wherever they are, on their websites. They can look up Free Press. Free Press is the national organization that Bob McChesney and I and some other folks started a number of years ago, with the goal of promoting some of these ideas, promoting media reform. Finally, if they want, they can certainly pick up some of the books that Bob McChesney and I have written, including one that I would especially point people to and that's the *Death and Life of American Journalism*, which is a real look at a lot of these issues.

Ralph Nader: Steve, David, any comments questions for John Nichols?

Steve Skrovan: Yeah. I love this tax credit idea. It sounds perfectly reasonable, perfectly doable, simple. What would be the political obstacles? Who would oppose this?

John Nichols: I can tell you exactly who would oppose it. The big profiteers, the people who want to make a lot of money off the current system, because what we're talking about is that if let's say if you were a newsroom that was accepting this kind of support, you'd have to give something back; you'd have to commit that you're going to serve the community. And so, you'd take down your pay walls, right? You would rely less on advertising, if at all. You know what I mean? And so that's a real change in the system. And so, you might have some resistance from some folks. But the fact of the matter is local journalism is dying at such a rapid rate that I think the political balance is now on the side of plans and ideas like this. And so, what do we need? We need political leadership on it. We need candidates for office to step up and start to talk about, not just what Bob

McChesney and I proposed or what Ralph Nader proposes, but to talk about a creative palette, if you will, a host of ideas that might get us out of this circumstance. And make it a part of our discourse. Bernie Sanders, to his credit, the other day in an article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, did begin to do that and talk about some of these ideas. And I give him tremendous credit for that beginning, but I emphasized, it's only a start. We need our political leaders in both parties across the spectrum to be debating about how to save local journalism, how to save local news across this country. And as a part of that debate, they do need to be talking about these mergers and things because that's not moving us in the right direction.

Ralph Nader: David?

David Feldman: So, kids are still going to journalism school, right?

John Nichols: Yeah.

David Feldman: Are they being taught to be entrepreneurs? And are we missing something? Maybe the business model of a newspaper has passed, and the new breed of journalist is an entrepreneur who has a blog and knows how to write, edit and do it all by himself without the benefit of a newsroom or a community, something more of a narcissistic pursuit?

John Nichols: Sometimes, to some extent there is some truth in that. And some people have done reasonably well. But Bob McChesney and I have studied where journalism jobs are. And what we ascertained [this was just] a few years ago, that for every 10 paid journalism jobs that were lost you're getting about one, maybe one, in a digital setting. And that might be within a bigger digital newsroom; it might be the blogger. It might be something else. But the end result is, we're not getting a replacement. And here's where that problem comes in. And I'll sum it up for the easiest of ways. Let's say that you are an entrepreneur. Let's say that you're also a good citizen, that you really want to do a great job. So, you're super creative, you know how to do digital stuff, you set up a website and are you going to cover the most minute local news or are you going to go big and talk about national stuff? Well, because you need clicks and you need traffic on your website, you're going to go big and go national. And as a result, local news still suffers in even the most creative and entrepreneurial models here. To get good coverage of our communities, we're going to have to have a host of other interventions and some of those interventions may well sustain the young, creative person who wants to cover the hell out of their community. But here's one of the things that we learned. I talk to a lot of people coming out of journalism school. They're filled with enthusiasm; they're filled with idealism. They're ready to work and frankly ready to work for relatively low pay, painfully low at sometimes. But at a certain point, they get a little older, they want insurance, or they want healthcare; they want maybe a little bit of security. And at the end of the day, the terrible loss is as these great, young journalists kind of get out of their 20s, move into their 30s, maybe get married, have kids, and so often we see them just say, I want to do this; I love doing this but I can't sustain myself. And so, we need to find ways that people who want to do journalism can make a decent living at it.

Ralph Nader: On that point, we're out of time, unfortunately. Thank you very much, John Nichols, and I hope you'll keep informing people on how to stop this merger between GateHouse and Gannett because over 200 newspapers, maybe one out of every six daily newspapers in

America, will be controlled by these strip miners. And the people in the community see it right away [as] the paper gets thinner, columnist news is less, ads or swarming over, just clearly a strip-mine operation and that's what they have ready for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and *The Arizona Republic*. And I wonder what they're going to do with *USA Today*, which is all over the country, the arguably biggest circulation newspaper in the country. Thank you very much, John Nichols.

John Nichols: Thank you so much for having the discussion. I'm glad we're focusing on the GateHouse and Gannett merger but also on these broader journalism issues. And if I can just close out by saying that Ralph Nader has been talking about and focusing on these issues since before Bob McChesney and I started taking it up. And so, it's a real honor to be a part of this discourse.

Ralph Nader: Thank you very much, John.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with John Nichols. As always, we will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. We're going to take a short break. When we come back, we're going to be speaking with *Washington Post* columnist, Courtland Milloy, about the efficacy of plant-based diets. But first, let's head over the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., and find out what our *Corporate Crime Reporter*, Russell Mohkiber is finding out. You're listening to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Back after this.

Russell Mohkiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, DC, this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter* "Morning Minute" for Friday, August 30, 2019. I'm Russell Mohkiber. A patient in Illinois is the first to die of a mysterious lung illness linked to vaping. That's according to a report in the *New York Times*. With death occurred, as doctors and hospitals nationwide report an increasing number of vaping-related respiratory illnesses this summer. 193 cases have now been reported in 22 states including 22 cases in Illinois. They have been stumped in recent weeks by the cause. State investigators have not found a common link other than vaping in general among the patients turning up in emergency rooms. Officials don't know whether the ailments have been caused by marijuana-type products, e-cigarettes or some type of street concoction that was vaped or whether a contaminant or defective device may have been involved. For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mohkiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan along with David Feldman and Ralph. Late last year, our next guest got into a food fight. He was fighting with himself in a battle to get fit. This started him on a journey to explore a plant-based diet. Now he's here to report on the results. David?

David Feldman: Courtland Milloy is a columnist for *The Washington Post*. In his career, he has covered a wide variety of topics--local crime, politics, foreign policy, lifestyle and many more. These days, he's writing a lot about health, his own and that of the friends and family around him. He's written a number of columns on this topic, which started with one, entitled, "I Will Eat Healthier and This Time I Mean It". Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Courtland Milloy.

Courtland Milloy: Thank you. My pleasure to be here.

Ralph Nader: Well, what caught my eye, Courtland, was articles you've written in the last year

that really bring down to earth the effect of a plant-based diet. I mean, I've been dealing with food-safety issues for many years and we allude to studies showing if you eat more vegetables and fruits and less fat meat and so on, it'll be better for you. But the way you reacted after just a few weeks really stunned me. And I just want to read a couple lines from your column, "My old eating habits verged on corporate-sponsored suicide by food, especially that artery-clogging, mind-numbing fear I get from fast-food joints. Within days of making the change, I began experiencing health benefits, lower cholesterol, normal blood pressure, reasonable weight; even mental acuity improves when the brain is not saturated with fried chicken fat." And then there have been weeks since that column. Give us an idea of what kind of food you transferred from and to, and really how do you feel?

Courtland Milloy: Yeah. Thanks, Ralph, for that -- if you will permit me a personal reflection just to let people know how sharp my mental acuity is, I remember back in the early seventies when I first came to *The Post*, it was Halloween and the editors decided they wanted to do a Washington, D.C., celebrity trick-or-treat. Different reporters would go to different celebrities' homes and see what they were passing out to the children for Halloween. And I was assigned to stop by your house, among others. And when I got there, I saw kids looking a little bewildered. They were going, what is this?

And you, this is in the 70s or late 70s., early 80s and you were passing out apples and oranges to the kids. And they're like, where are the candy? No, no, no.

Steve Skrovan: Why does that not surprise me?

Courtland Milloy: The point being that you have, in fact, after all these years, you're still pushing apples and oranges on the children is what I'm saying.

Ralph Nader: That's right. And we're going to get to the broccoli too.

Courtland Milloy: I knew with the broccoli. Look, I'm at a point of being somewhat bewildered as to why I didn't know. Well, not why I didn't know because I knew but plant-based diet, I knew things would work. I did not know that you could really live on it and I did not know that the effects of really being serious about it, when I say serious, I don't mean necessarily hard but I mean just doing away with the habitual stuff, breaking the habit, that the effects would be so profound and so quick. I pause here because I am a little bit ambivalent. I had worked so hard trying to figure out what am I going to do to break the habit. And now that it has been broken, I'm like, knock on wood, man, don't boast too much. Don't go around showing off. Although I do let people see that I have chopped my belt up and put new notches on it. My pants are rolled over in the waist almost to the point that I could fit another person in it. And this is what has happened just since January.

Ralph Nader: Tell us what you used to eat and more interestingly what your diet is now?

Courtland Milloy: Well, yeah. But what I used to eat is very important because when you take out what I used to eat, that goes a long way toward detoxifying the body. It's just such a miraculous thing and if you stop killing it, it'll do some wonderful things for you. And what I was doing -- I

just have a sugar thing. I am so -- well, was, but knock wood; I just like creamy, sugary, syrupy and everything from eggnog to cheeses, to everything like that. All the best artery-clogging foods were my favorites. The things that would kill you the quickest, those were always my favorite--fried food, barbecue, red meat. Ralph, I made a list of all the animals that I've eaten, and it occurred to me I would eat anything that they put on my plate. I ate alligator, I ate snake, I ate all kind of birds, I ate all kind of farm animals, because I never had to watch them [being] processed. I didn't have to watch them go from farm to plate. So, I took the meat out, the red meat, I took it all out. But it was particularly that red meat, and I stopped with the dairy products. And what was the other...oh yes, the sugary stuff. My dessert, I love coconut, walnut; oh God, I thought I was going to die if I couldn't eat that again. But I found that you can do plant-based things that are just as tasty. So basically, I got rid of the sugar, much of the salt as you can, much of the fat, much of the blood, stopped eating animals and brought in beans, rice, legumes, corn, you know, things with roots on them instead of legs. That's basically it.

Ralph Nader: You actually finally heeded the admonition of your mother, who, by the way, championed a vegetarian fruit diet. For years you didn't listen to her according to your column and now you even are relishing broccoli.

Courtland Milloy: Well, I will not gag on broccoli. Look, the broccoli that mom was serving back in the 50s, it was that oily crap in a can, to be frank. And you pour it out and you look at it and this is like, these look like snails. So over time, I see there's a different broccoli. I still have a deep psychological reaction to it. So, it's not my favorite food, but you can disguise it in things, and I will eat it.

Ralph Nader: And one of your columns, you refer to a Baltimore scientist who worked at Johns Hopkins who was the first to document, the anti-cancer ingredients in broccoli. And of course, there are all kinds of beneficial, natural ingredients that reduce people's chance of getting all kinds of diseases, which you've pointed out. You had an article once recently, where you say, "How often do you see fruits and veggies on billboards? The answer depends on who you are and where you live". And you talked about someone who lives in Rockville, Maryland whose name is Eric O'Gray. Tell us about him.

Courtland Milloy: Yeah. Eric. Yeah, Eric is a fascinating guy--talk about almost killing himself eating. I remember he described to me eating, like he can eat three large pizzas at a time and things like that. He was so big and he's literally not a tall guy, 5'6" but he'd blown up to almost more than 300 pounds. But what stopped him was trying to get a seat on an airplane because he was a salesman and he travelled and he noticed the look on people's faces when they saw this big dude, walking down the aisle and everybody was going--you could just read it--oh no, please don't let him sit by me. And then he sat and couldn't get the seat belt around him and they had to go get an extension off of another plane, so there was a delay. And he said, the humiliation--it took that kind of humiliation. He said, no more. So, he went from just guzzling down food to plant-based, based on what a doctor... He finally, finally came across a doctor who would not say let me cut out part of your intestines. Let's see if we can do this another way. And now he's down to like, he just runs marathons, all of these...he qualified for the New York City Marathon. It all started, by the way, with walking his dog, Petey. And he couldn't do much exercise, but he could walk his dog and the dog--you got a rescue dog, that's what it is and walk the dog to good health, that's it. So yeah.

Miracles will that happen.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. You quote him at the end of your article. It said, "I've seen fast food ads followed by ads for pharmaceutical products--medications for conditions caused by fast foods in some cases. And those commercials are sometimes followed by ads for lawyers and probably class-action lawsuits against the pharmaceutical companies. It's a circle of insanity. Why not just eat more fruits and vegetables?"

Courtland Milloy: Yeah. And he's living proof that it works.

Ralph Nader: Now, you've expressed concern, listeners should know that Courtland Milloy is the chief writer on things going on that are not good in the District of Columbia. And you are concerned about the lack in nutrition among children and people who should know better. Can you elaborate that?

Courtland Milloy: Yeah. At the district, there's a serious problem. This is one of the things that made me go public on my efforts, to see if I could be some kind of an example, because there's an epidemic of obesity, epidemic of diabetes. And it really hits hardest among the lower-income African American children. And God, it is really to see kids going to school with potato chips and sodas for breakfast, because they live in what are called food deserts. There's a part of the city where about quarter of a million people, mostly African Americans are served by two grocery stores and what they call food swamps, which are those corner stores where you can get beer or liquor or some pickled pig-feet type stuff, pork skins. So, nobody is going to starve, but they'll be in a dialysis clinic before you know it. You have to get in something cut off.

Ralph Nader: It's so tragic that the schools should really make nutritional education and its effect, connecting it to being vigorous and good in sports and healthy, part of the curriculum. And it's so obvious; this has been known for years. I see kids on their way to school in the District of Columbia and they go through these chain drugstores, and where half of the drug store is candy.

Courtland Milloy: That's right.

Ralph Nader: And sugar. I mean massive displays.

Courtland Milloy: Strategically placed.

Ralph Nader: Yes. And Ward 8, you remember, it didn't even have one supermarket, that's 80,000 people. Finally, the government had to subsidize, I guess, it was Giant food to open up?

Courtland Milloy: Yes. That's right.

Ralph Nader: So, you have the answer to your article which said, how often do you see fruits and veggies on billboards? The answer depends on who you are and where you live. And that means lower-income people get more of these junk promotions. In fact, in your column you say, "The

bad food industry is a formidable foe. Its marketing schemes make big tobacco look like amateurs [with] burgers and fries on highway billboards, buckets of chicken and biscuits on TV, pop-up ads for hot dogs and sodas on my phone, two-for-one pizza ads on my radio." What do you think can be done with the DC City Council and various groups to revolutionize the teaching of nutrition in DC schools?

Courtland Milloy: Well, and I tell you, I'm a reporter and I am just restraining myself not to start interviewing you on these very topics, because like I said you were out pushing those apples and oranges, before I was even thinking about this kind of thing. I can tell you this, I sense a convergence of some powerfully positive forces, awakening of consciousness and maybe it's just mine and I'm imagining all this stuff. But when I look at the outrage over what's happening in the Amazon, with the fires to make more land, to grow more cattle, so the US can have bigger steaks or steaks any time even though they waste more than the -- waste a lot of stuff, there's an outcry over that. And people are seeing global connections and understanding food sustainability. And I think that that along with a renewed activism around climate change and the growth of urban gardening and the fact that people are starting to link the worst parts of our diet with some of our worst behaviors, our mental states, our inability to control temper and the relationship with sugar jags, ups and downs and what it does to our serotonin and dopamine. I mean we're talking putting chemicals on top of chemicals that just weren't intended to match that well.

Ralph Nader: I call it corporate chemotherapy. Deadly.

Courtland Milloy: Very good.

Ralph Nader: Yeah in mentioned in your article a recent conference in the District of Columbia, the International Conference on Nutrition and Medicine, which included topics about how bad food triggers pathological processes and how foods can reverse chronic diseases. That all used to be considered unscientific. But now the Mediterranean diet, the diet of my ancestors in Lebanon, is now considered the best diet in America.

Courtland Milloy: That's right.

Ralph Nader: More and more people are eating hummus and consuming lentils and as you say reducing salt, sugar and fat in their diet. When I was a kid, Courtland, I don't think 2% of the school kids were obese. And now it's over 30% and 60% of all adults are either overweight or obese. And the tide is just beginning to turn, wouldn't you say?

Courtland Milloy: Yes. Back at the turn of 2000, a lot of jurisdictions, organizations made these target, futuristic kind of plans by the year 2020, it's what a lot of them were; 2010 to 2020, we are going to reduce poverty. We're going to stop violence; we're going to reduce obesity and stuff. And on the question of food, not a lot of headway has been made, but people will be putting renewed attention. When they look at the indices after 20 years--what opportunities were missed and how many deaths and bad health outcomes could have been avoided if we'd taken this more seriously. And I think that part will be jumpstarted again.

Ralph Nader: There's a bit of a downturn with Trump and the Department of Agriculture now

that are making food lunch more full of salt, sugar and fat.

Courtland Milloy: Exactly. I've never seen anybody just push the toxic stuff; want to bring a football team in and say, here help these McDonald burgers. There's going to be a film coming out. I hope your esteemed audience will keep an eye out for what's called *Game Changers*. And it's about elite athletes who went from the big state, especially men, the boxers, football players, the marathoners, especially big guys, the football players and steak was the manly man thing. And these guys found that when they just dropped the steak and went to plant-based diet, everything changed. This is not cosmetic stuff, about just getting thinner, but being able to recover from injury, being able to think, just quicker, lighter. Ralph, it's hard to describe the benefits of what feeling good is for people who've never really felt good but thought they did. Because men, if they're not bleeding or in pain, they think everything is okay. But when you start getting inflammation out of the body to the extent that plant-based does and you say, wait a minute, I've never felt like this before, just because we've become accustomed to just being unhealthy. So yeah.

Ralph Nader: Yeah. These athletes or these big guys, they're role models for youngsters. So maybe, are they ever believers now, the ones who have gone off in big diets and yeah, really big because they see the difference, not only how they feel but how they perform, how resilient they are.

Courtland Milloy: Exactly.

Ralph Nader: Well, this has been very interesting. We've been speaking with *Washington Post* columnist, Courtland Milloy. We look forward to future articles on the transformation of people you know and including yourself, moving into a plant-based diet. Thank you very much.

Courtland Milloy: Well, thank you for having me on the show.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Courtland Milloy of *The Washington Post*. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. I want to thank our guests, again, John Nichols and of course Courtland Milloy. For those you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material, we call the "Wrap-Up", we get a lot of interesting stuff going there. A transcript of this show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel and for Ralph's weekly column, it's free, go to nader.org. For more from Russell Mohkiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: And as you should know by now, Ralph has got two new books out. The fable, *How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress*. To acquire a copy of that, go to ratsreformcongress.org and *To The Ramparts: How Bush and Obama Paved the Way for the Trump Presidency, and Why It Isn't Too Late to Reverse Course*. We will link to that also.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our Executive Producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music, “Stand Up Rise Up” was written and performed by Kemp Harris; our proof-reader is Elisabeth Solomon.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, when we speak with Professor Tim Woo on antitrust and big tech. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody and listeners, check out your local elementary and high school for nutritional progress.