

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EP 296 TRANSCRIPT

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

David Feldman: Hello everybody. Another important show this morning.

Steve Skrovan: Yes, indeed. And to help us through that is the man of the hour Ralph Nader. Hello there, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello everybody. We're going to show what heroism is really about.

Steve Skrovan: That's correct. Today we continue our series on whistleblowing. On the show, we're going to feature a winner of the Joe A. Callaway Civic Courage Awards. Ralph, why don't you tell us what the Joe A. Callaway Awards are and how they came about.

Ralph Nader: It's quite a story Joe A. Callaway was an empresario on Broadway and he wanted to leave some of his estate to good works. And he figured out that one would be an annual award for people demonstrating civic courage, not political, not business, not military, [but] civic courage in our country who are unsung, often shoved aside from their employment and mistreated. And so he contacted us by letter and my sister, Claire Nader, has been administering these awards for the last 30 years. This is the 30th anniversary. And Joe Callaway stipulated that he wanted the award to go, not only to people who demonstrated civic courage, but did so at some personal risk like they risked their job; they risked their career; they risked their sustenance, whatever. And that stipulation has brought forth some of the finest people one could ever meet all over the country, taking their conscience to work, blowing the whistle, risking their careers, and trying to save lives, prevent injuries, prevent disease, save taxpayer money, and generally try to keep the country on straight and narrow path of moral probity.

Steve Skrovan: Our guest is George Luber who was in charge of the climate change program at the Centers for Disease Control. In other words, he was studying how a hotter planet will affect human health. But at the dawn of the Trump Administration, not only was the term "climate change" removed from the CDC website, but Dr. Luber was directed to cancel a conference on climate change. He objected and the CDC first attempted to fire him then decided just to send him home on administrative leave and banned him from the building. Eventually he went public with his story and groups from across the world, have begun campaigns to restore the climate change and health program. And as always, we will take a moment to find out what's happening in the dark recesses of the corporate underworld with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mokhiber. And if we have time at the end, Ralph will answer some of your listener questions. But first, let's meet our Callaway Award Winner. David?

David Feldman: Dr. George Luber is an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. His research interests include the health impacts of environmental change and biodiversity loss, harmful algal blooms, and the health effects of climate change. Dr. Luber headed the CDC's Climate Health Program until it was downgraded and diluted by the Trump White House in 2018. The nation's premier health protection agency continues to retaliate against him for

speaking out on the climate crisis and its public health effects. He has since filed for whistleblower status with the Justice Department's Office of Special Counsel and has just received the Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dr. George Luber.

George Luber: Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

Ralph Nader: Welcome, yes, Dr. Luber and congratulations on your Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage, supremely deserved. I think before started, please explain what does an epidemiologist do? I don't think there's enough of them in this country and they're desperately needed. What does an epidemiologist do and what different areas of health and safety have they been working on--before we get into your situation?

George Luber: Sure. Well an epidemiologist is somebody that studies the patterns of diseases and the causes of diseases covering almost an infinite amount of exposures and health outcomes. We look for a statistical association between a particular exposure, so bad air quality. And look for what that might do to certain parts of the population or to the population as a whole. We essentially dive through data looking for causes of illness and death. And my expertise covers a wide range of environmental exposures, which include bad water quality, air quality, extreme weather events and the like, and try to build a case for why certain exposures are harmful to people's health.

Ralph Nader: Just to give a specific example from your own experience, epidemiologists such as yourself, make connections. They make causal connections; they make all kinds of relationships that make us understand what's going on. And for example, if a new disease comes up and it's infectious, epidemiologists will try to find where it came from, the causes. They're try to find who's most vulnerable, where the vulnerability is, and maybe find situations where people are not as vulnerable. It's so absolutely critical in a highly technological society and there are just only a few thousand epidemiologists operating in the United States. So let's get to your area, the Centers for Disease Control arguably is the single most important agency in the federal government, because if you're dealing with global pandemics, viral pandemics, bacterial pandemics and the such, you're dealing with potentially tens of millions of fatalities and hundreds of millions of sicknesses. And yet its budget is about seven and a half billion dollars, which is half of what the Pentagon spends on the ballistic missile defense program that has never worked since Reagan opened it with great fanfare. They're now spending about \$14 billion a year, that's the kind of priorities. Now, you had an 18-person staff inside the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia. I believe the budget was about \$10 million and you were supposed to be looking into the connection between global public health and climate disruptions--tornadoes, destruction of habitats, droughts, widespread fires, hurricanes and, for example, if you change the habitats, the malarial carrying mosquitoes will spread malaria beyond its present regions now. That's an example of how epidemiology works. You're working away at this and then the Trump regime opens its doors in January 2017. So explain to our listeners what happened.

George Luber: Well, I'd be happy to. Before I begin though, it's important that I make it clear that what I'm presenting to you today is my own statement. It doesn't represent the federal government or the agency in which I work. These are my own opinions and my own statements and that I'm sitting here talking with you while I am on vacation leave, so I'm not using government

time or resources to do so just to make clear to everybody that this is on my own. So, yeah, the election happened in the fall of 2016 and a few weeks later, I got called into the director's office, the director for the center, the National Center for Environmental Health that I work in. And he told me that we've got a problem. I had been working on a large scientific meeting, a 3-day meeting that was going to be held in the CDC headquarters in Atlanta called The Climate & Health Summit. It was a science meeting for three days and it was intended to raise awareness both within CDC and the broader public health community that hey, there are folks working on climate change and health; we're actually kind of an obscure part of public health, but because of recent statements by the World Health Organization Director-General Margaret Chan, stating that climate change is the single greatest threat to public health in the 21st century, since the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC] released its 2014 report stating unequivocally that humans are changing the earth climate system and so on, that we wanted to get public health who have their traditional bunkers that they work in that there is groundbreaking work going on in climate change and health. We had organized this meeting, again with a blind eye to politics, which was rather naive considering what had been going on in the country. And in my infinite wisdom, I wanted to get high-level speakers for our meeting and called on Al Gore [to see] if he would like to be our keynote speaker. I thought he's a great advocate for climate change. And apparently that was a mistake because the director said, you know you have this meeting planned for February--this was three weeks after the inauguration. And he said, "You're going to have to cancel meeting." And I was blown away! We've spent this past six, seven months working on this thing. We got a full agenda. We've got invitees; it's all paid for. Money's out the door; why are we cancelling this meeting? He said, "the optics aren't good." And I said, "Do you think the optics would be good if you cancel the meeting and the news press got ahold of this?" This kind of sounds like scientific censorship and we have a scientific integrity policy that prohibits us from doing this. And they said, "The optics aren't good. I want you to send out a letter of cancellation." And I said, "I'm not going to do that. I'm not sending out a letter with my name on it belying my scientific belief that this is an important topic." And they were surprised that I would be so obstinate, but I said, "No, this is my professional credibility here. If you want to cancel the meeting, well, you're my boss; you can cancel the meeting, but I'm not doing it." And so they sent out a press release shortly after that meeting was canceled. And I just steeled myself for some difficult times.

Ralph Nader: And this was a very technical agenda here. It wasn't just a celebrity speaker. We have books on the subject. These are really people who've sunk their teeth into the nuances of this whole problem.

George Luber: We had the best scientists . . . what we did was we solicited abstracts or short blurbs on the research they'd like to speak on. We had a panel select the appropriate speakers. We had numerous sessions on very specific topics--changes in hydro-geology and waterborne diseases, and very specific technical topics for public health that we'd organized into sessions of several speakers, and we were aiming to have the biggest and best meeting of this type today. And I think we had it. We had pulled together a fantastic meeting with all kinds of partners, congressional organizations.

Ralph Nader: And it was open to the press, right?

George Luber: Yes.

Ralph Nader: Okay. So I always thought the CDC was about as impervious to partisan political intrusion as a federal agency. I mean in the past, Republican and Democrat administrations would not compete to manipulate politically what the CDC does. They didn't fund it adequately, but it was considered an agency of professional independence. And so I was pretty astonished, even with my minimal regard for the Trump people, that they began moving in. Now how did they move in? Did they appoint a new director who was taking orders? Did they put people at secondary levels under the new director? I mean it's astonishing that an agency that is full of PhDs and MDs, etcetera, suddenly became a political football for Donald Trump who has called climate disruption "a Chinese hoax." So how did this happen and it came down on you like a hammer, we'll talk about that in a moment.

George Luber: Yeah, in my 17 years of the agency, I held the exact same view, that this was a science-driven agency done so for the protection of people's health and that politics had nothing to do with it. And I had operated my program and strategies that we'd employ, including unfortunately inviting Al Gore in a political environment. You know, it's a wonderful organization with incredibly passionate and driven scientists that are so hungry for their mission that we spend inordinate amount of hours working on work that we just have enormous pride in. And I have no direct knowledge of how this happened. The individual that . . . Pat Breysse, the center director that asked me to cancel the meeting was put in place during the Obama Administration. I think at that time we had a director that was on his way out; we knew that. But I don't know who made the decision . . . or the most frightening thing actually, is that somebody would make a decision like this and anticipating the potential blowback for the administration. And that to me is frightening, because it's the most insidious form of power. And when you can get people to do things for you without even asking them, that, I think, is the most frightening thing that people will act on your behalf in ways that they normally wouldn't, merely out of fear of what you might do. So, I suspect that's the case. And it frightens me that we would go down that path.

Ralph Nader: Well one of the ways they kept you down was to reorganize, which is a typical bureaucratic technique. So what they took your 18-person climate and health program and subsumed it under a larger program dedicated to the problems of asthma, and so it was fair to say that your program, while technically not abolished, it was degraded and diluted, and then they pushed you out, forbade you to even talk to your 18-member staff. And I understand that if you wanted to come back to where you worked for a visit, you had to get permission and you were in a state of limbo, suspended but not fired. Could you describe that?

George Luber: In addition, I was escorted by armed guards. When I needed to get some books out of my office and I had an armed escort, they asked me to come at 11:00 a.m., which is the height of the day when everybody's around intending to humiliate me and marched me through our large 10-story office building with a large armed guard behind me that even followed me to the bathroom.

Ralph Nader: Everything but shackles and irons?

George Luber: Correct. And Ralph, in my 17 years at the CDC, I have never been spoken to sideways. I'd never been reprimanded in any way; I'd received outstanding performance reviews

and promotions that belie any attempt at making my character unsavory. So they did a number of things to the climate health program, which is appropriated in a discreet line item in the budget, which means Congress appropriated \$10 million for climate and health programs at CDC. Since it's a direct line, it cannot be, by law, used in any other way. And I as a manager in charge of that appropriation, am responsible for making sure that the public's money is managed in an appropriate way and that that I'm a good steward of the public's money. And if Congress says work on climate and health, I cannot decide that this needs to be worked on for asthma prevention and management. So what they did was they took the climate health program that was standalone and the asthma program that was standalone, along with a number of other programs, and they blended them together and my program got merged with asthma. And I was made the acting branch chief of the program and immediately my superiors had asked me to dismantle the team that I had built in climate change, which is a highly unique team with unique set of expertise from climatology to geographic information systems. And the team that I'd built, whose sole purpose was to work on this unique set of challenges, they wanted me to move those individuals to other teams in the asthma program. And I said, "Well, you can't do that because they're going to be supervising your supervisors; people are working on different lines, and how are we going to get around that fact that you can't merge the personnel . . . the expenditure of their time between different programs?" And there was a woman, one of my managers above me, refused to answer that question, but she had --her name is Laurie Johnson-- she had two contractors from PricewaterhouseCoopers, which I found highly unusual and odd and I'd never seen this before, work with me on an organizational plan for this new branch, and encouraged me to accept this new organizational plan that would essentially blend the money. And I kept telling the contractors, "You can't do this." They're like, "Well, Laurie says you can." And I said, "Well, you can't. I've taken appropriations classes, I have to, and why isn't Laurie in this meeting?" "Oh, well, she couldn't come." And this went on for several weeks and I refused. I said, "Listen, unless we can address this topic of the appropriations, which I am responsible for, so I could get in trouble if I allow this to happen because I know that it's illegal." And I said, "Laurie, tell me what the workaround is for this mixing of the money, because I don't see how it could happen and I'm not happy with this." And as we went back and forth, back and forth, never with a response from Laurie about the appropriateness of this, I was called into a meeting with the senior managers in the center. And it was quite odd because I'd gotten a call up to the director's office one day and I sat down and one of the deputy directors for the center, Donna Knutson, said "We have some troubling allegations against you." And I was like, "What? What are you talking about?" And she said, "Did you author a book in 2015?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I authored a textbook on climate change and health." And she said, "Well, we have no records in the ethics approval office." Because this was an activity I did on my own and I got the approval to do it. And since I had to let CDC ethics approval office know, that's what I was working on. She said, "We have no evidence that you actually received ethics approval for it." I said, "Well, I did. I have the form in my office. Let me go get it." She's like, "No, you need to hand me your phone, your badge, and your keys, and we're going to . . . you need to leave campus now."

Ralph Nader: Let me interrupt here. This is, listeners, the kind of top-down inquisition that they impose on people of conscience and competence in the state bureaucracies, federal, state, local and corporate bureaucracies. The larger point that Dr. Luber is making is that he refused to spend money contrary to what was authorized for his program by the US Congress. He refused to spend money. Because if you spend money in an unauthorized way, that is a violation of the

Antideficiency Act, which prescribes a felony as a punishment. Now to take an even bigger arc, what Donald Trump was doing was doing this throughout federal regulatory agencies, moving money around for purposes that wasn't authorized such as moving money from the Defense Department for schools and other social services for the children of military families to build his so-called Wall on the Mexican Border; that's a crime! That's not just an impeachable offense; it's a crime under the Antideficiency Law. And the other web you were caught up with--we're talking with Dr. Georgie E. Luber, who was the head of the Climate and Health program at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta; the other aspect of this is that he is aiding and abetting a tremendous threat to our national security, which is climate disruption. It's already blowing apart communities and you see it on TV news. And so it's not just that he's stopping you from trying to head it off in your particular way and stopping others from trying to minimize or mitigate these huge storms and tornadoes and droughts, etcetera, short-term and long-term, he's actually making it worse by unleashing coal-burning pollution and scrapping control standards on greenhouse gases--go oil gas--go coal. He calls coal clean, beautiful coal. So he's aiding and abetting a massive assault from an abused nature against the health and safety and property values of our country and actually making it worse. That should be an impeachable offense that Congress should pay attention to. Anyway, where are you now? I mean you're sitting outside your workplace, outside the Centers for Disease Control, you've given the media interviews; you're very good about communicating with the media. Are they trying to stop you from doing that? Have they suspended your pay?

George Luber: No. Fortunately they had served me charges in October of last year, in '18. And with the help of lawyers from an organization called PEER, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, we were able to have those charges completely removed. They had accused me of all kinds of fabricated and just . . . I mean so poorly done. I mean they . . . I'm also a professor at Emory University, and I teach a class their regularly on climate and health. And they had accused me of having my subordinates teach classes for me and, --which I didn't-- and they said I was having them teach classes that I never even taught. They never bothered to check the class schedule to see if that course even existed. And they said you had somebody teach this class. I'm like, "I never taught that class; that's somebody else." And numbers of just anonymous accusations of something that I was able to concretely show evidence that it wasn't even true. And it was just remarkably poorly done, which maybe, I think I'm grateful for, the incompetence of the staff at the center. They were not able to put together a credible set of charges. Maybe it was done in order to help me. I'm hoping that some folks on the inside felt some solidarity in this.

Ralph Nader: Talk about trumped-up charges, eh?

George Luber: Yes, um-hum, it was. And they removed all of them.

Ralph Nader: So they suspended you for 120 days to prevent you from speaking to the media?

George Luber: They prevented me from speaking to the media going back before they removed me from my position. This goes back right after the Al Gore debacle they cut off all my media access and travel access. And that dragged on for about a year plus. And then after my absence with not doing their dirty work with the appropriations money, that's when I was removed from campus. And since then, that was March of '18, I have been moved to different assignments around CDC in assignments that are unrelated to frankly anything that I have expertise in and I've been

bounced around to . . . I'm on my fourth assignment and I'm still working and I'm prohibited from coming to the campus in which I'm assigned to. I work from home 100% of the time, isolated. And I review now scientific manuscripts on laboratory analysis of environmental exposure, something which I am profoundly unqualified to do. So I'm part of the clearance chain for laboratory manuscripts.

Ralph Nader: Listeners should know that one of the first things Donald Trump did was ordered the banning of the use of the term "climate change" not only to Centers for Disease Control, but at the Environmental Protection Agency and other agencies. This is like right out of the Kremlin and Stalinist Russia. And the second thing, they didn't like you appearing with Matt Damon in a show called *Years of Living Dangerously*.

George Luber: Well that was during the Obama years and actually we got a good bit of support for that. I think perhaps with the current crop of managers at the center don't like the attention the topic is getting, and you know, it is . . . our little unit was one of the most productive in the center and was also the one that they felt gave them the most vulnerability politically. And so anything they could do to . . . and they said to me, we . . . you need to lay low, take a low profile. And I saw this as a tremendous opportunity to raise our profile and I refused to do so. We were in discussions with the National Geographic channel on "Mars" series, which is a very successful show there, for me to be a regular contributor to and I received an email saying "George Luber will never be on that show" (capitals, bolded, underlined). And they did not want me to seek media attention and part of my job is to raise awareness on this issue. It is critically important that we take every opportunity we can to let the public know that this is a real and credible threat to you now in your communities and you should be worried.

Ralph Nader: Well fortunately you're being represented pro bono by this wonderful nonprofit group in Washington and Eugene, Oregon called PEER, which started out to protect the scientific integrity of foresters in US Forest Service who opposed clear cutting on behalf of companies like Weyerhaeuser and were retaliated against. So you're in good hands. You have filed through them a whistleblower retaliation complaint with the Office of Special Counsel, which is in the Justice Department, seeking an investigation and defense of your rights. What are you seeing in terms of your 18 colleagues--are they distancing themselves; are they silently supporting you? How's the personal impact on you?

George Luber: Well, the personal impact was tremendous, but it'd be much worse without the folks up here especially Kevin Bell, one of the most competent and dedicated lawyers that I've ever encountered. And they work tirelessly on this issue. And they remind me of my staff who took this issue of climate change to heart and made it their life's mission, their life's work. These people are driven to work on this topic because they want to contribute. And of the 18 staff, several have left. You know, we're a group that has different skillsets, project managers, etcetera, communicators, and so on and so forth, but the heart of the scientific knowledge base at that group is all gone. Myself, I've been the lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I've written the textbook on this issue. I've been a convening lead author for the Third and Fourth US National Climate Assessment, on and on. And what's left in the program unfortunately is not much expertise. And that is really what loss is--the core knowledge base that we need in order to move this forward. We're left with individuals with not much experience or credentials on this.

And yes, I do keep in contact with some of them, but frankly, it is a culture of fear right now. And many are so . . . they have told me, "George, I support you, I can provide evidence that would exonerate you on this charge undoubtedly. But I cannot do so because I fear that I will be retaliated against." They have been told directly by the new person who took over from me, Josephine Malilay, that if they speak to the press . . . and which is a . . . we have a First Amendment right to be able to do so on our own time and I've been advised of that by CDC general counsel on numerous occasions, that you will get in trouble if you speak to the press. And if you do get contacted by the press, you need to report it to me immediately. That's the typical type of intimidation factors that go along with this. And so we have a group of young, smart, and scared individuals.

Ralph Nader: Well, George, some listeners may be wondering, how can these federal employees over you, do such things to you? What recourse you have against them personally? What lawsuits can be filed against them personally all the way up to the White House level? Are they all immune?

George Luber: I wish I had Kevin here to help me with that question, because I really don't know the answer to that. You know, we're focused on CDC restoring the program as it was intended by Congress to do, having it in hands of managers that are good stewards of the public's money in order to run this program and care about this topic. There are parts of the CDC that would love to have this program and see it flourish.

Ralph Nader: Well, do you have a patron or two in Congress? When there was a whistleblower, Ernie Fitzgerald in the Pentagon on the C-5A air cargo plane and he showed that the plane had a tendency to lose a wing now and then, he was really pounced on in the Pentagon and he went to Senator Proxmire, William Proxmire from Wisconsin, who became one of his defenders and had hearings on the subject. Do you have any backers by name in the House and Senate, and if not, why not?

George Luber: Well, we do. Actually just about a half an hour ago I recorded a video for social media for Senator Bernie Sanders. And you of course know, that his stance on this topic is very strong and they've been supportive. On the House side, there've been a number of efforts to support this. Congresswoman Lauren Underwood from Michigan has proposed legislation to have the climate program restored as an individual unit. And Congressman Shalala as well has expressed tremendous support for this issue and is working, I believe with Appropriations on what can be done about this.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, I may add, Congressman Shalala was a Former Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Clinton Administration and she ran for Congress after being president of a major university in Florida. Why don't you try Senator Edward Markey to back you, too?

George Luber: Again, yes, I believe the legislative affairs folks at PEER and another whistleblower group called the Government Accountability Project are working with Markey as well as a few others, Senator Whitehouse, I believe.

Ralph Nader: Well listen, listeners, this is not just about Dr. George Luber. Let me read you a passage in the Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage about Dr. Luber. "His unremitting

position on behalf of scientific method, integrity and expertise, presently under attack as never before in history is an unwavering beacon for other federal government climate scientists suffering similar retaliation. Using his many splendored approach in communication skills through academic publications and in popular media, Dr. Luber pledged he will “not go away” tenaciously responding to intensifying climate chaos." I have a little point to make to any Trump voters who are listening to this program. I know that you love Donald Trump. In fact, you may be part of many Trump voters who say when they're asked the following: "People say Trump is crazy, but what he's saying is what I'm thinking. Does that mean I'm crazy?" Well let me tell you, we'll leave that judgment to yourself Trump voters, but what Dr. Luber wants to make sure is that you don't get an infectious disease and infect others because you're under health and safety protection. That's what he's looking for. It doesn't matter whether you're a Republican, Democrat, Conservative, or Liberal, you better pay attention. There's the smasharoos who are breaking up the Centers for Disease Control, politicizing them, favoring the big corporations who don't want certain things done and stifling people like George Luber, who relentlessly were determined to take their conscience to work so they can help save your lives or anticipate and prevent global pandemics and epidemics. David and Steve, jump in here.

David Feldman: I'm confused about the hierarchy over at the CDC. Who are you taking orders from in terms of their education? What kind of degrees do these people have who are giving you these orders? Are these doctors, are these PhDs?

George Luber: Yeah, well the center directors are PhDs and industrial hygienists. But the . . . I believe the real direction of whether the meeting should be canceled was not . . . this is a director that is frequently on travel, unlike, I think this is my fifth center director; this center director spends a tremendous amount of time out of town and is remarkably absent for much of his tenure here and therefore the shop is run by folks without PhDs. These are policy people and that's the trend that I've noticed at CDC over my 17 years and we've always, you know, impressed the fact that science directs policy, right, at this agency. However that's changed, now policy directs science in very prescriptive ways. And so the policy people stepped in and have their wisdom about how to manage the Trump Administration and this is where we're at. I think that a lot of these efforts are just done without care, you know, managing the public's money or being good stewards or being conscious as to our scientific integrity policy, which should drive all of our efforts. The folks that were trying to directly get me to move the money around don't have advanced degrees that I'm aware of. They're budget people and managers of non-science; we have two tracks--a science management and a management side. Irregardless, I would maintain that we should play by the rules and do it the way it was intended and let the science lead the way.

David Feldman: Yeah, I don't understand why doctors allow themselves to be ordered around by their inferiors. And it seems to happen in the healthcare debate.

George Luber: It's just abdicating the responsibility for that, frankly.

David Feldman: So just to be clear, you said the person who told you the optics would be bad was not a Trump political appointee, just someone feeling the pressure either directly or indirectly that this would be a bad idea to do with the new regime, is that correct?

George Luber: That's my understanding. So he had started during the Obama years. And I don't have any knowledge . . . this was . . . could have been right around the time that the transition teams, Beachhead Crew or something they call it, where the people come to the agency immediately. And I had heard from another source through a Union of Concerned Scientists' anonymous survey that a senior manager at CDC had said there were five key areas that the Trump Administration wanted to be targeted during this administration. It would be anything under the Affordable Care Act, birth control, gun violence, abortion rights, and climate change. These are the topics that they're interested in. Now I don't know if this advance team had already made these wishes known to my leadership, but it was odd for me to get called in and said going to have to cancel this meeting that we spent a good bit of time. We had already spent the money and a good bit of personnel time to get this going. And it was a solid conference. And plus, I said the optics are terrible on cancelling the meeting and certainly, of course, *The Washington Post* ran a story critical of CDC on cancelling the meeting. Is this censorship? And it was very odd that they would make that, because their argument for laying low certainly didn't work. Because who would really honestly write a story about a science meeting at CDC about climate change? No one would write a national level media story about a climate meeting at CDC. But now they did write about it because it was canceled.

Ralph Nader: Let me ask you this, would you return to your position with a change of administrations that wanted to reinstate your program?

George Luber: Absolutely. I decided . . . I got my PhD right at 9/11. And sitting there watching those images, I actually turned down an offer at Stanford and decided to pursue a life of public service. I made it my goal to provide a service to this country, and I felt obliged to do it. And sitting there watching those towers come down and two weeks later, I applied to CDC and got a post doc and have dedicated my life to doing that. And I'm not giving up now. And I don't . . . these people come and go. I mean I've watched senior directors come and go, CDC directors and my managers come and go. But the people who do the science, who do the work on the ground, they stay and they're dedicated. And we've gotten used to seeing these people come and go. And I've maintained my . . . I also teach where I mentioned [Emory University], and they have been wanting me to come over there. And I said, "I'm in this fight and I am going to make sure that this comes out well, because if people like me walk away, who's left to care?"

Ralph Nader: How has the pressure been on you professionally and personally?

George Luber: Incredible sense of isolation. Many of my colleagues throughout the government have essentially ghosted me. Now that's counterbalanced by a tremendous amount of support from the folks at the Callaway Awards, The Hugh Hefner Foundation [and] from news reporting and colleagues around the world. I received a stack the other day of around 20 postcards that was part of a letter-writing campaign encouraging me to keep on my fight and that really helps keep me going. But my colleagues at CDC are afraid and many of them have disappeared. And I think . . . you know, I tell myself that it's a measure of somebody's character in how they respond in moments like this. And that folks would slink away and ignore it, well that's the measure of their character. And for those who stand up and fight and support me, well then I know a little bit more about.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Dr. George E. Luber who was formerly the head of the critically important, Climate and Health Program as an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia and a professor adjunct at Emory University. If you were in charge of climate disruption policy, what would you do in terms of the federal government? What kind of resources, what priorities beyond your own program at the CDC?

George Luber: Well, it's funny you asked that because . . . and that was a question the Hillary campaign asked me four months before the election. And they reached out to me, again my personal email and all that, and we spent the time coming up with the . . . because we've got \$10 million. It might sound like a lot of money, but in a federal program, it's really kind of a pilot-type program. You mentioned the difference between the DoD budget and CDC, but ten million for the CDC program is quite small. But what we had developed with the program was directed right at the on-the-ground public health; this is local, city, and state public health. And to deliver to them all the tools and intelligence that they needed in order to identify which threats should be relevant in the area because frankly the threats in climate change in Florida are going to be dramatically different from those in Maine or in Oregon and a whole different set of issues, wildfires versus mosquitos, etcetera. So we had a tailor-made program called the BRACE program, Building Resilience Against Climate Effects, that would work with these high-resolution-type efforts at getting help to the most vulnerable in our state, in our community, and in our country. And our plan with the . . . what I described to the Hillary campaign was that we would scale-up this program and bring it to all . . . we currently work with 16 states and two cities, and we'd bring it to all 50 states, the territories, to tribal governments, and to large cities around the country. And that we would also, along with CDC, that we would need to bring money to NIH [National Institutes of Health] to fund Regional Centers of Excellence. The EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] would need some funding to help support the environmental monitoring aspect of our program that was so critical. The NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] would be required to dedicate some resources to giving us the high-resolution climate models that we would need to project what these risks are. So we detailed the intergovernmental program that had been in the works because I had spent time working with my colleagues around the government in order to kind of make those connections; where is this information; how can we get the resources that we need to attack this on a grand scale? But we had done it in a way that would be scalable, and so for the last seven years had been testing the proof of concept and we're confident that we could scale it up. The first thing in the world actually, national level adaptation program from climate and health, was so successful that the government of England, Public Health England, the governments of Austria, Peru, and Chile and Canada as well, had adopted our framework as the gold standard for preparing public health for climate change.

Ralph Nader: And what would you have Congress do in terms of informing the public? What kind of hearings do you think they're not having they should have? And in that context, how do you expand the number of epidemiologists?

George Luber: Well you have to train the epidemiologists and that was what the shame was, was that I trained a cadre of young professionals that were highly skilled in order to have the skillset and they're very, very unique. It's not like you just hire somebody [or] you go to a job site and you find the skills. You have to train them; you have to nurture them. They've all disappeared so we have to start it all over again--the momentum that we've lost. I'm a bit naïve as to the workings of

Congress, but the fact that our nation's or the world's leading public health agency is stepping away from its principle of scientific integrity, it's not just troubling for climate change, but if you think about it, the integrity, the respect or the honesty of an agency like CDC is all that it has. If the public can't trust that this is the best science of an agency like that, and we always learned at the CDC . . . that what you do reflects upon the integrity of this agency and that's essentially all we have, so protect it with your life.

Ralph Nader: And you know, listeners should realize that with climatologists and epidemiologists making the connection between the burning of oil, gas and coal and all kinds of diseases and property damage, and affecting flora and fauna, points the way to shifting our economy toward renewable energy like solar energy, wind energy, passive solar, solar voltaic, maybe even geothermal, and in that sense reducing the greenhouse gases and reducing the causal effects of increasing climate disruption. So you see, that's the importance of the kind of work that Dr. Luber and his colleagues are doing. And to literally try to destroy it is a crime against humanity! When you try to destroy someone, let's say who's trying to find the cure for malaria, that would be considered a crime against humanity. So whenever you evaluate what we should expect of presidents of the United States, it's important to crank in these kinds of functions that are not going to be advanced by Exxon/Mobil or Peabody Coal. They're going to be advanced by public servants such as Dr. George Luber. Before we end, any more comments or questions from Steve and David?

Steve Skrovan: Dr. Luber, this is a scientific question. What do you think the biggest threat is as a result of this climate crisis?

George Luber: Well, you know we've always said at the Climate Health program that the effects of climate change are place-specific and past-dependent. And that's kind of a scientific way of saying, "Gosh, it all depends." The biggest threat in my opinion, ironically, this is the biggest threat overall long-term, is the threat that increased carbon dioxide has on the acidity of the oceans and the impact that that CO₂ has on plants. What we are learning is that CO₂ in elevated levels, six, seven . . . we're at 415/418 parts-per-million right now. But if we have the atmospheric concentration of around 600 parts-per-million, which we expect by the latter part of the century, what we're realizing is that plants are negatively affected by this elevated CO₂, especially C₃, C₄ photosynthetic plants, which form the kind of core of our food crop--rice, wheat, barley, sorghum, millet. All of the starches that we feed the planet on, show that under elevated CO₂ levels that we would expect by the end of this latter part of this century, that the protein levels are reduced by 15 to 20 percent, the crude protein. The plants are actually stressed under these elevated CO₂ levels. And they're rising so fast that plants cannot adapt. It's the rate of change is so fast that the plants cannot adapt to these elevated CO₂ and they are stressed, and as a result, not only the crude protein reduces by 15 to 20 percent, the micro-nutrients, vitamins are also reduced as well, so we have a nutritional crisis. Imagine a planet of seven billion people now and crop production stays the same but we're at nine billion people, and we have crops that are 15 to 20 percent less nutritious. That is an impending nutritional crisis! And everybody in public health knows that at the cornerstone of any healthy population is a healthy immune system and undernourished people don't have healthy immune systems.

Ralph Nader: Doctor, expand that to the impact on the ocean and how the boomerang comes back on land.

George Luber: So the ocean also experiences stress at high CO2 levels; it actually absorbs CO2 and becomes more acidic. What we learned is that under high-acidity conditions, which are already occurring now, that the organisms that form the basis of food web of the ocean, the calcareous organisms--these are the phytoplankton and the zooplankton that form hard exoskeleton shells under those elevated acidity levels--cannot form their shells that their shells are weak and dissolved. And under higher CO2 levels, the potential for the collapse of the food base of the oceans is apparent and that we lose the food base to smaller units, that again, feed the rest the food web up. We could have a crash in marine ecosystems, which are tremendously important for human nutrition.

Ralph Nader: And then much more intense hurricanes coming out of warming patterns that are changing in the oceans, can you say a few words about that?

George Luber: Well we do know that most weather events, extreme weather events, are intensifying under climate change; heat waves are of longer duration and more intense, hotter. Hurricanes appear to show a signal of getting more intense; we're not sure if they're getting more frequent. Precipitation is increasingly coming down in heavy short bursts rather than gentle rain. All of those things affect public health. Now those things are things that, given the appropriate attention, we can adapt to. What I was describing earlier with the CO2 problem is intractable. This is a problem that we don't have solutions for. And what's ironic about it is that they are a major problem that have nothing to do with weather or climate. They have to do with a carbon pollution problem. It's related to climate changes that an excess carbon changes weather, but it also changes fundamental parts of our ecosystem that we rely on.

Ralph Nader: But one of the more fearful results are the melting of the glaciers and the building up of sea levels inundating cities with hundreds of millions of people around the globe from India to the United States. Explain that a bit.

George Luber: Well, 80% of the world's population lives near oceans, so there's going to be a major retreat from the coastlines with sea levels depending on the climate model or what we're learning--how quickly that might happen, but it's certainly happening and will happen. Those are our problems that, again, given the amount of resources enough that we can retreat from the oceans. We're going to have to. But there will be a tremendous amount of suffering associated with that. And while we're waiting to retreat or waiting to come to terms with this problem, we will certainly have coastal inundation events that will kill many thousands of people and the time to act on that is now.

Ralph Nader: We learned from an earlier program, Dr. Luber, that Miami Beach in Florida has a plan to evacuate, not just people close to the ocean, but to evacuate Miami Beach.

George Luber: Yes. They are already experiencing regular inundation events with high tides. I mean this is a regular occurrence right now. And places that experience these types of events, they get it. They understand the threat in the disruption to life and economy and community that this happens. When people get displaced, they don't just lose their home, they lose their community, they lose their livelihoods and those have consequences as well.

Steve Skrovan: Well I'm sitting here in Southern California right now in Los Angeles area where wild fires are raging and at any moment they're telling me I'm getting notices from Southern California Edison that they're going to turn off the power. Fortunately, they didn't do it during the show, because their fear the high winds will knock down power lines and start another wild fire, so I can personally attest to the effects of what you're talking about. And exactly what you're talking about is exactly what the Trump Administration and his backers don't want anybody to hear and why you were in the situation.

George Luber: One of my colleagues and one of the top people on climate and health, Kirk R. Smith out of U.C. Berkeley, had once said . . . and this is a very important quote, I guess, that you know “in a world of climate change, the rich will find the world to be more polluted, more uncomfortable, colorless, and a bleaker world. The poor will die”.

Ralph Nader: As the poor pay more in our economy as well. You're quite right there. The most vulnerable areas are populated by low-income people. Well, one last thing, I hope we don't hear the word climate change anymore, not because of Trump's censorship, but because it's too benign a phrase created by Frank Luntz, the right-wing Republican wordsmith in 2002 to replace the more alarming global warming phrase. So I hope we all use words like climate crisis, climate disruption, climate catastrophe, global warming, and deprive Frank Luntz of his semantic colonialism. Well, we're out of time. Thank you very much, Dr. George Luber. Congratulations on your Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage. Congratulations to PEER for holding up its defense of your rights as a civil servant. And congratulations to all of you listening who are alert and come to the rescue of courageous people like Dr. George Luber.

George Luber: Thank you so much.

Steve Skrovan: We have been speaking with Dr. George Luber. We will link to more of his story and the Callaway Awards at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Right now we're going to take a short break. When we come back, Ralph is going to answer some of your questions, but first, let's check in with our corporate crime reporter Russell Mokhiber. You're listening to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, back after this.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute for Friday, November 8, 2019. I'm Russell Mokhiber. Oregon worker safety inspectors found serious workplace safety violations at a Dollar Tree in Portland, Oregon after a rodent infestation. That's according to a report from television station KGW in Portland. Oregon OSHA fined the company \$1900. In August, the Dollar Tree store in Portland's Lloyd District temporarily shut down after a KGW investigation found ripped food packaging, chewed food labels, rodent feces on shelves and a dead mouse in an air vent. The store had since re-opened. Employees complained of nausea, light-headedness and headaches after being exposed to dead mice, rodent urine and droppings. Oregon OSHA records indicate Dollar Tree didn't do enough to keep rodents out of the store and failed to provide proper safety equipment for employees who were asked to clean up. For the Corporate Crime Reporter, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Now before we do listener questions, Ralph, John Conyers died recently and I know you had worked closely with him over the years. He was in Congress for almost 60 years, I believe, or more than 60 years. Tell us a little about your relationship . . . about John Conyers and your relationship with him.

Ralph Nader: Well Congressman Conyers was the Dean of the African-American delegation in the House as they called it. And he helped start the Black Caucus. He was extremely responsive. You could get him on the phone. He would return calls. That's a very rare trait today for members of Congress, because if you can't get through to people, you can't get anything underway to begin with; that's how critical it is. And he'd invite you down to his office, a group of civic advocates and leaders and obviously he was great on civil rights. But he also tried to jumpstart a federal intense program on cracking down on corporate crime. It never got anywhere, but at least he introduced the legislation and he proposed it when he was a senior figure on the House Judiciary. He was also a champion of ballot access for third parties even though he was a longstanding member of the Democratic Party and he introduced legislation to that effect. And he's clearly one of the most progressive members of the House of Representatives on numerous fronts including being anti-war in our modern times. He left Congress a couple of years ago under a cloud of personal matters, but that doesn't really take away from what he did over about a half a century of representing portions of Detroit, Michigan in the House of Representatives and taking seriously his title of US Representative, not just Representative from Detroit.

Steve Skrovan: Well, thank you for that, Ralph. Let's do some listener questions now. This next one comes from Jay Goldberg who is a regular listener. I think we did one of his questions a couple of weeks ago and he said, "In the Wrap Up to this week's show, Ralph offered a couple of reasons why Medicare for some is a bad idea. But I think he overlooked the most obvious one, people would have to buy into it, so instead of being funded through progressive taxation, it would be an option only for those who could afford it or whose employers provide it as private insurance is now. I suppose there could be a government subsidy for low-income groups similar to what Obamacare provides, but they would never be as progressive as the taxes Bernie and Liz are proposing and it would never be provided to the majority of working people. Also Medicare for some would have to call for deductibles and co-pays, or no one would opt for private insurance." Is Jay correct there, Ralph?

Ralph Nader: Yeah, he makes a good point and he provokes even further good points. Number one, it's a setup to be taken over the way Medicare Advantage corporate-run is now taken over one out of every three elderly people's Medicare insurance. People don't realize it [that] all these ads they hear about Medicare Advantage is just a euphemism for takeover by companies like United Healthcare and Aetna of Medicare under contract. And as Dr. Fred Hyde said, "It's not what you pay; it's what you get." And there are a lot of trap doors in Medicare Advantage and elderly people should be aware of it and so should people be if there was a Medicare for some or public option. The other thing Medicare for some does not control costs. When you have full Medicare for All, the corollary is restraint on skyrocketing drug prices, restraint on skyrocketing hospital prices, minimizing fraud in the healthcare area. That's the experience in Canada.

Steve Skrovan: It's funny Ralph, I had this discussion after we did that show with a college classmate of mine who I happened to run into. And one of my college classmates is Tom Steyer

who's running for president. And this woman, who I also know, said "Hey, you're supporting Tom?" And I said, "Well I like a lot of what Tom says about corporate power, and obviously he's been a leader on the climate crisis, but I'm not sure about his healthcare policy. She says, "But he's talking about choice." And so I ran down basically what we talked about last week, and she kept a smile on her face, but her eyes just went completely dead.

Ralph Nader: [laughter] It's amazing. People make up their minds; permanently they close off the kind of information that I think otherwise they would be more receptive of.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you for your questions. Keep them coming on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website. I want to thank our guest again, George Luber from the CDC. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call the Wrap Up. A transcript of the 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 Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: And 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 proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* when we speak to another whistleblower who won his Callaway Prize by taking on Boeing, John Barnett. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you everybody. More stations, more podcast listeners. Spread the word, listeners.