Bret Weinstein and Matt Taibbi\_ Corruption and its Consequen...

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**SPEAKERS**

Matt Taibbi, Bret

**Bret** 00:08

Hey folks, welcome to the Dark Horse podcast, I have the distinct pleasure of being here with Matt Taibbi, who is a reporter for Rolling Stone and substack. Many of you will know him. For those who don't you should definitely look into his writings, he has been utterly fantastic and consistent for decades on some of the most difficult topics that there are to report on. I would say he is a singular voice in journalism today. Welcome, Matt.

**Matt Taibbi** 00:36

Thank you so much for having me on bread. It's a it's an honor.

**Bret** 00:40

Well, I'm not quite sure where to start, I have to tell you, 2020 is proving to be a remarkable year. And I think you and I are both seeing a disturbing and complex picture emerging. And I suppose the thing to do is just to figure out whether we can make any useful sense of it.

**Matt Taibbi** 01:02

Yeah, I mean, I think the the first place for me that that's interesting is I think a lot of us in journalism, are coming around slowly to the fact that we we missed some big stories that took place on campuses a few years ago. No, yours, the obviously the one in Yale. But really, you know, we've heard from academics over the years about certain things that were going on. And we I think the reflexive reaction among most people in the press, and most of us are kind of liberal leaning in our political orientation was to say, Okay, well, that's a right wing talking point. And you know, we're gonna have trouble selling that story anyway, if we try to do it. And so let's not even bother. And so there was a combination of not taking it seriously. And then there's a little bit of like, canceled culture, we're already working in into the thought process with journalists, because we just knew that we couldn't get that past editors, right. But now, you know, this is this has come into our business in a huge way, in particular, in the last couple of months, as you know, so you know, people like me, I think, oh, people like you an apology for coming around to this late. If anything?

**Bret** 02:30

Yeah, well, I have a rule of thumb when it comes to such things, which is I welcome anybody without the need for an apology, who recognizes that they got it wrong, and says, so my feeling is, there's a point at which you didn't get it. And this is true for all of us. And then there's a point at which you do. And, you know, you didn't see it as close up as we did on campuses. But anyway, thank you for acknowledging that there was something to see and that it wasn't seen by you and others. early enough. I have to say, from my perspective, you know, it, it emerged and became very apparent, and there was this experience of trying to alert people to what was coming, and there were so many ways of dismissing it, as it's free speech. If you get to college campus, if you you're making a mountain out of a molehill, you're a grifter, all the things that get thrown at you. And now we're in a situation where I don't know what kind of blindness you would need not to see that the thing that happened at evergreen and elsewhere, is suddenly in every institution that we've got and spilled out into the streets. But it is the least satisfying, I told you so imaginable. I mean, I'm just watching civilization burn, because we couldn't make this point, you know, a few years ago, and wow, what are we going to do now that it's at this scale?

**Matt Taibbi** 03:58

It's really interesting, I think there is going to be some blowback in the media world, because obviously, I think what happened and I'm only just starting to do the research on what happened in academia, because I think that's Now the important backgrounds for all of us who are trying to figure out what's going on in institutional America. But that, you know, the things that are happening in the journalism world are kind of similar to what happened in academia, there's this schism between people who kind of believe in the traditional fact finding mission of the news that that can't be linked to any kind of ideological imperative. And then there's a new school that's coming up in there, it's being expressed by people like Wesley Lowery who were talking about something called moral clarity which is You know, I think a lot of young journalists really believe in and they, they believe in it for different reasons. I think some of them are just very socially committed. And they really believe they want their work to be impactful. But there's a, there's a lack of understanding about what the purpose of the old model was, and why it was good for audiences and for the institutions themselves. And I think only now, is it starting to dawn on some of the people who are kind of in the middle, like what those changes are meaning? And so I do, I have a little bit of hope, because I didn't a month ago. But But I'm starting to see people within a lot of these institutions, you know, say things that I hadn't heard before, and you're seeing voices like Matt Iglesias said at Vox, who was kind of on the other side of this issue. Come around. And I don't know, I'm hoping there's sort of a reckoning within the media, although, you know, who knows how successful that will be. But what I mean, what does it look like to you from the outside?

**Bret** 06:11

Well, I'm fascinated to hear that you have hope. I'm thinking that, you know, with an hour's investment here, we should be able to kill that off. So yeah, I mean, to be honest with you, Matt, I've been an admirer of yours for a long time, since the financial crisis in your courageous reporting about that. And I do think I mean, you're gonna see what I'm seeing soon. And at that point, this is a, you know, it's a break glass in case of emergency moment for the Republic, I just see almost no decent way out of this if we don't thread a very particular needle. But I do see what you're seeing. I mean, you know, Matt Yglesias is a classic example. He did come around. To his credit, he acknowledged that he had gotten it wrong. But I'm reminded a little bit of remember the Boxing Day tsunami in Asia? Oh, yeah, there were all these videos. So the thing is, tsunamis were not regular enough in the Indian Ocean for people to have a sense about what they were. And, you know, most of these people had not been living on the coast for generations. So when the water receded, people walked out. They looked at the fish flopping around on the, the sea floor that had suddenly been exposed, and it was all very curious until the water suddenly came back. And there are just all these videos of these people just getting completely engulfed in a tsunami from which they never emerged. And the sense that the hope that you are seeing, with people waking up in journalism, I've already seen this movie, I know about the little glimmers of hope, and I know what washes over them. And we're there. So there's now going to be a phase in which and then I think we saw this in the Harper's letter is going to be a phase in which people who thought that they were safe, or that this wasn't a big deal, are suddenly going to recognize that they have no mechanism whatsoever to protect themselves from, from the movement, that the quality of the arguments The movement is making are not high, but the quality of the strategy is, it's spectacular. And, you know, it's

**Matt Taibbi** 08:37

it's, it's got this viral power to it. And, you know, one of the only reasons that I, I feel like I was a little bit a lot more wise to it, maybe than some of the other people in the business is because I spent 10 years of my life in Russia, I went to school in the Soviet Union. And I remember, a lot of these thought patterns, you know, I don't have a terribly distinguished academic career, but one of the few things I do know about is Russian history. And you know, that ideas can be dangerous, you know, they, they can be more dangerous than really anything. And I think the other there's an imperative that we have in reporting, and it's very reinforced by Twitter, which is, when you veer off into a topic that the majority of your colleagues decide is not important or not as important as something else. In the Trump era. This this comes up a lot, like why are you looking at this when we have to deal with Trump? You know, there's so many more there's kids in cages, you shouldn't be paying attention to X, Y, and Z. And as a result, things that actually are really important often get short shrift. And I do think I think you're right. This, this whole thing is really about it's about an intellectual freedom. It's about the values of the Enlightenment, it's the center about the sort of core ideas of the American experiment, are now under fire. And, you know, there's there's a lack of a willingness to look at what that means or what that might mean going forward, I think because people just don't recognize how serious it is. And it's, again, it's similar to what happened in Russian history, people thought that this little clan of, you know, super motivated Bolsheviks, were never going to go anywhere, because even within the relatively small minority of socialists who were very active, they were considered, you know, nuts. But they're, they had a way of thinking that was very difficult to counter in an institutional setting. And this is kind of a similar thing, I think, and people are seeing this, that, you know, once once it gets installed into an institution, it's just really difficult to oppose, like, you know, the people don't want to be the person to stand up and say, I'm against anti racism measures, or I'm against, you know, the expansion of the equity and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee. Because it just sounds bad. And they don't want to risk the possibility of public public canceling, as well.

**Bret** 11:26

Well, a couple things. One, I heard a little bit of hope bubble up there for you, you said it's very difficult to counter. I think if there's one thing we know, it's that it's impossible to counter. The way we know that is that no institution resists, right best examples in terms of let's say, a college that that resists is the University of Chicago and it's not a shining example. It's barely ahead of its its competitors. So when you have something that washes over every institution, you know, that there, there isn't at that level a solution. And I'm not arguing there's no solution possible. In fact, I want to talk to you about a possible solution later on in the podcast, but but there's, there's a clear pattern here. You don't think that this is serious until it comes for you, at which point it's too late. Right? It's like that formulation. And you said a bunch of things I want to bring into the mix here. One is you say you're familiar with some of this from Russian history. In part, the parallel to Russian history is a little misleading, because it's really Chinese history is the relevant example, the mechanism, the social mechanism of action is much closer to the Chinese version of this. And you know, a lot of the parallels are just incredibly close. And then there's obviously parallels to the the French Revolution as well, the reign of terror, but but you know, it's not going to be any of these things. Exactly. It's going to be a new version. And the real question for people like you and me, I think is, does this process that we are watching unfold in 2020. land on that list of remarkable tragedies brought on by movements, this this land on the list with the Bolshevik Revolution, with the Nazis with the Cambodian revolution? With the Rwandan genocide? Do we end up in one of those? Or is there some conceivable way out of this?

**Matt Taibbi** 13:31

Uh, yeah, I have no idea. I mean, it, you know, obviously, those movements were more violent. To begin with, they were they were taking place in more open, more openly destabilized political environments. So this, this one's pretty bad as well. But so far, the penetration of this is almost entirely been intellectual, right and bureaucratic. And when we talk about canceled culture, what we're usually talking about is people losing their jobs, and then the accompanying problem and people being afraid to speak out. You know, it's not yet at the level of people going, you know, being dragged off to basements and put up against the wall as they did, you know, in the early days of the Soviet Union or, you know, thrown in the ditches or whatever it is. So, you know, it's, it's not that yet. But, you know, just in the last month, we've seen so many headlines suggesting that institutional America is already almost completely consumed by these ideas. And we saw yesterday that's like tweeting about this with the federal government, you know, is that is adopting ideas that are, you know, frankly, crazy, right? And it's it's very troubling you know, the the July 4 letter to open letter in Princeton, which I'm something I'm looking to now. Like if that can happen at Princeton, and it hasn't happened yet, right? Like it, like the things that they're asking for in that letter have not yet been approved. But, um, you know, if that if the person who is speaking out against that can be denounced by the president in a place like Princeton, which actually was one of the few universities to adopt the University of Chicago principles that you talked about, then that's a significant blow, right? I mean, that the, it speaks a lot to the, the problem that's, you know, that's going on across the country. And you know, as a reporter, I'm finding out all kinds of stuff that I never knew, like, if you're an academic now, and you're applying for a job, you know, in probably half the cases, you have to submit a statement to HR with your sort of diversity ideas. And that's a prerequisite before your application even gets to the department that might even be interested in you for whatever the subject matter is. So this idea of having like this, these political comments ours, in the middle of, of, you know, sort of every level of intellectual work in this country, I think it's just people don't recognize the extent to which it's already happened. And, you know, from the journalistic perspective, I think we have a long way to go to get people to understand that.

**Bret** 16:37

Yeah, one thing I want to just adjust about what I heard you say earlier, you said that it was about free expression and an enlightenment ideas. And in one way, I think it is about that, from the perspective of those of us defending those things, because we know how important they are, from the point of view of the movement, I don't think it's about those things. It's almost purely about power over material things, and the ability to speak openly about what's wrong with this plan, the ability to invoke something like science in order to demonstrate that a claim might be false, the ability to appeal to normal rules of due process in order to establish a claim, all of these things have to be disrupted in order for a movement based on fictions in order for it to take over. So I think, the, the, I believe it was an ex NSA officer William Binney described any of the, the structures that were put in place after 911 as a turnkey totalitarian state, you know, the idea being that the structures were in place, but the key hadn't been turned. So it didn't feel totalitarian, but it could at any moment, and this movement actually has that element to it, where it is disrupting the things that would allow you to get in the way of it's our grab. But the key hasn't been fully turned yet. It's you know, why do you want to get rid of the police? Right? Well, there's an excuse for why you want to get rid of the police. But then there's also what you're going to do after the police are gone, because the police are really the mechanism through which all of the other mechanisms keep people from just taking what they can. Hmm. So I guess, as bad as things are, for the things that are very important, I don't think I think eliminating those things as a means to an end. And I worry about, about not only the disruption of the essential foundational stuff, but the end that is ultimately being pursued, which I don't think most of the people participating even know about. Yeah,

**Matt Taibbi** 18:47

I think you're you're right about that a lot, a lot of people who are marching who are protesting and think they're talking about one thing, and maybe there's a minority of people who actually know what it's about. But the important, the important thing is what's going on institutionally. And, you know, both in terms of the sort of explosion of new administrative staff that tick is taking place on campuses, but increasingly also is taking place and, and companies like media companies, this sort of new decision makers who are inserting their imperatives into the work right so even even in media, we're having situations where like the the intercept, right, which is one of the most liberal media companies there is, you know, there's a, there was a strong push to put in the Charter of the organization that its journalistic mission was to advance anti racist causes. Now, they haven't quite big gone there yet. They they sort of took a little bit of a left term before they They went all the way there. But that's something that's being pressed in a lot of media companies right now is this idea of writing it into the mission. And, and that's more important, I think, then how many people are on the streets? It's like, is the institution now fully captured? Is the is it already demonstrated that the leaders of these institutions will respond to letters and calls for firings by indulging them? Right? And I think, as you pointed out, in pretty much every case, that's already been proven to be the, you know, true, right. So until until somebody starts standing up, and, and, you know, resisting some of these things, and showing away to do it, it's just gonna spread to everything to the big, big tech corporations, big media companies, you know, academia already. So yeah, it's hard. It's hard to know what to do.

**Bret** 20:59

Yeah. So I don't I mean, I do think some of us have demonstrated how you resist, and it's not a pretty picture, you know, my wife and I were both driven out of tenured positions that we bought, were secure. And we discovered they weren't. That said, we're surviving. And we're not the only ones. But there's a limited number of spots, for people to famously get ejected from an institution and make it in the outside. Well, it's just not it's not a program that can support all of the people who need to stand up. So that's really frightening. I think there's people a false sense of hope, because they see an example that worked out and they think, okay, maybe that's the way and it just can't be. But But that said, The real problem is not that nobody stands up, or that there's no way to do it. There is and you know, it's a learning process, right? Every time I look at a tweet, and I look at the button that sends it, I think, is this the one? Right? Is this though am I about to end my ability to earn a living by hitting that button? And so far, it hasn't worked out that way. But it could at any time? So the problem, though, is that no institution and resist, and so yes, the intercept out of the intercept, had a frightening encounter with this thing? It did not Oh, yeah, it's an ongoing, and I mean, I should say, for my audience, you wrote an excellent piece about this being widespread in journalistic institutions. And it is absolutely worth the read, I would recommend everybody sign up for your site and look at what you're writing, because it really is like the front lines, and it's so well described. But the point is, okay, the intercept, showed some sign of being able to resist, but the way the game works, all of the institutions that show no sign of being able to resist topple, than the ones that do show some sine and some inclination to resist, have called attention to themselves as needing particular pressure and higher quality tools brought to bear and ultimately they all fall. So what are we going to do when all of the voices that make sense exist outside of the institutional structure? Because if they had stayed, they would have been compelled to go through this struggle session, kind of nonsense. You know, what happens when the institutions are all captured? And everybody who knows what's going on is no longer part of them?

**Matt Taibbi** 23:35

Well, it depends on what field you're talking about, because in journalism, it might end up being a positive process, because I think what we're seeing now, like there was already a huge collapse in trust in traditional media. In fact, I would argue that was one of the major factors that got Donald Trump elected in 2016. You know, journalists rarely talk about this papers, like the New York Times, rarely talk about it, but Trump really built his campaign around campaigning against us, the people who are covering um, I remember I was one of the people in the, you know, following him around. And he sort of organizes speeches around the press, as a representative of a corruptly that that doesn't speak to the ordinary person. And that process has been growing on both the left and the right. For a couple of decades now a bit, it's been sort of a curiosity for me to watch. You know, on the right, you started to see it, I would say in the early 2000s, and then especially after the occupy movement, and particularly with the Bernie Sanders campaign, there's been a huge amount of disaffection on the left too. So the the authority of institutions like the New York Times The Washington Post's CBS, NBC, MSNBC, CNN. They are they've already crumbled just just as, as consumer operations, they were already in a bit, I would say, basically, in a state of failure, before even this problem started to rear its head in a big way. And what we already started seeing prior to this year was that independent media voices, including people that you know very well, like Joe Rogan, were becoming hugely successful, just by not being that, you know, because the audience now and I'm seeing this with my own site, a lot of other independent journalists are seeing the same thing people are so I'm so disenchanted with the didactic, politicize tone of media, institutional media that they're they're looking for anything that isn't that. And so I am, I'm sort of hopeful that new institutions will grow out of that. And that has been a little bit the history of, of this business. You know, it's not, it's not like academia where you can't you can't just wipe out Princeton and all the Ivy's and another day, build a whole bunch of new media companies. So there's a possibility that we're going to build something better. But it will just take up a lot of energy. And then what's going to happen with those institutions, once they get big enough is the problem, you know, so I right now we have this model where there's no alternative big institutions, really. But there's a lot of voices who are sort of growing in import. But they're all just sort of individual people. I don't know if that's sustainable as a replacement for what we had in the press. But you know, I don't know if that answers your question, but it's a thought it does.

**Bret** 26:55

But I cannot resist pointing out where I think this goes. Because again, I mean, you even use the word hope which at this moment, that's a that's a dangerous, let's just say, here's the problem is that those of us on the outside, there are two phenomena that I think we need to pay attention to. One is that even the Joe Rogan's of the world are dependent on the institutions of the world, right? Joe Rogan brings his message and his guests to the world by things like YouTube. YouTube, which has no accountability, definitely has this movement inside of it on the market all the time has incredible power to wield tools that we don't even understand as outsiders to it. And there's almost nowhere to go, right? You can abandon ship. And you could go to some platform that is not subject to these kinds of pressures. But then what happened? Well, okay, then you're grouped with all of the truly noxious stuff that also is not welcome on YouTube. And so you get tainted, as all right or worse. So, kind of damned if you do and damned if you don't. And the other factor that I want to point out not only are there these institutions which have this revolution on the march within every single one of them. But there is the very real sense that there is a censorious instinct, marketing in our direction, and it's knocking off people and some of the people that it started with are truly terrible, right? And then it's come to people who are much more in a gray area. And you know, it's beginning we can see it even experimenting with people, that there's nothing wrong with that. All right, all they are is a brace it so you know, James Lindsay found himself frozen out of his Twitter account the other day, right? And it's like, okay, it was Sargon of a cod, two years ago. And now we're at James Lindsay, how much longer is it before it gets to me, frankly, I mean, I think they would have done it if they could have and the problem is at the moment, it's still it would be very awkward. You know, James, Lindsay is still on Twitter. So apparently, that's, that's still not within the power of the movement. But of course, it would love to get rid of James Lindsay, because he's a huge embarrassment to them, because he just simply says, flat out how their strategy works. Right? So between the institutions that have the ability, given that there's no real public square, the quasi public square that we have is owned by institutions in which the revolution is on the march or the the counter revolution as it were. And we see this thing experimenting with how to come for those voices that you're describing who are independent and might constitute some kind of a, you know, a renaissance in journalism or an equivalent By being independent and not subject to an institution.

**Matt Taibbi** 30:04

Yeah, you're right. You know, and I, now I'm checking myself for the optimism because, you know, I actually when he talked about the beauty that came from the noxious folks first, I mean, I think we're talking about probably Alex Jones was was was one of the first big ones. When that happened, I was one of the few people in media who popped up and said, Hey, you know, this is not necessarily a good thing, like, you have to look at what this means for the rest of the business. Today, it's gonna be Alex Jones. And if this mechanism proves successful, just by its nature, it's going to start looking for the next thing, it's going to decide Ben Shapiro's next, and then it's going to start looking around. And then there's going to be a process where groups are going to start demanding that we take the extreme version on the other side off to compensate for this person, and it's going to narrow the field progressively. That started to happen. And then additionally, right after, if you remember what the alex jones thing, some of the platforms started to the height of the Russia mania, they started to zap pages that they were calling coordinated, inauthentic content. And some of them were just regular old, you know, sort of alternative media sites who happen to be deemed inauthentic by Facebook and some other of these big platforms. And I, I tried to get people in the business interested in this problem, which was that the press traditionally got its independence from having its own distribution, at least print journalism, right. So the newspaper, in a locality built its power up over decades, by having its own trucks, by having its own distribution routes, its own sales points, its own paper, kids, even they were the only people in town, in the area who were able to reach all those millions of people. And so that's how they had their power, you couldn't take it from them. But in the internet age, that vanishes overnight. Distribution is now wholly in the hands of a couple of companies. Basically, the overwhelming majority of people in this country get their news from Google, or Facebook or Twitter. And so what happens if these companies start making censorious decisions, which is, which is what they were doing. And I, I was amazed, really, at the lack of interest in this topic. among people in in the press, I mean, I grew up you know, I, my father was a reporter, I grew up around people. My first internship was The Village Voice. So I remember being people like Nat hentoff, and Wayne Barrett, it's like the the standard position of a journalist in the 70s 80s and 90s, was to be hypersensitive to any possibility of censorship or control over us as an institution. And that spirit has completely vanished from, from the press, like people people don't even in fact, they're at, they're actively asking to be controlled more, if you even see any op eds about this subject at all. And so we're in a situation now where people are being removed, or D ranked, or shadow banned, or whatever it is, constantly, there's no transparency about it. It's effectively a, you know, a media regulator that, that, you know, that is unelected, and doesn't answer to the public at all. And it's a very serious problem, because you're right, you know, we're all Joe Rogan success at any minute, you know, somebody could say, yeah, enough of that, you know, and, you know, he'd be reduced to I don't know what, you know, sending CDs through the mail, the people, you know, I mean, it could happen,

**Bret** 34:16

right. And we haven't seen very much of some other layers that actually will come into play here. So first, let me just say, one of the things that is most disturbing, and I don't hear talked about enough is that not only is there this desire to eliminate certain perspectives, so that they just simply can't be voiced where anybody can hear them. But it's also rather arbitrary, right? I I can tweet that men are not women. I won't get tossed off Twitter. I think the only reason I won't get tossed off Twitter is that I can pull the biologist card, and certain people would, you know, would riot in the aftermath of me being tossed off For that, but Megan Murphy's gone for saying that, and so I guess the question is, what exactly is this rule that some people can say it and some people can't like? What universe Do you think that's going to result in. Um, so there's the arbitrariness which results in, you know, the inevitable outcome here, which is just, there's going to be favoritism there's going to be this is going to be pure mythmaking, we're going to decide certain perspectives are okay, certain people can voice other things, this is going to create advantages. It's just, it's every value that we hold dear, evaporated all at once. But as far as the layers go, yes, there's Twitter and YouTube and Facebook, and Instagram and Reddit and all of these properties. But then there's also the layers below them. Right? There's, there's MasterCard, and we've seen this in the past, there are certain instances actually before the current kancil culture era, in which we have seen the MasterCard piece pulled out. So I remember, early in Wikileaks, before they had been successfully portrayed as a Republican slash Russian

**Matt Taibbi** 36:14

asset in that amazing story, by the way, but anyway, yeah. Well, I

**Bret** 36:17

want you to say more about that. But let me just finish it out here. In the early days of Wikileaks, there was a point at which Wikileaks, to many of us looked like a very positive force that was doing something very important. It was bringing transparency to these really despicable processes, and it became impossible to donate to them. Right? I did donate to them at one point. And then there was some point at which it became too complicated to do. And so how much of a when was that against Wikileaks that suddenly, the fact that MasterCard couldn't be or whatever it was, really, it was all the credit card things. And then there was another one, you know, totally unrelated. Daniel, maybe his name is Daniel Siebert guy who, Ms who actually isolated the hallucinogenic molecule in salvia. salvia, which is illegal hallucinogen, which he was distributing suddenly became impossible to buy from his site with any sort of normal currency. So my point is, there's a, there's a failsafe underneath the platform layer, which can be pulled out from under everything. And then below that, there's another one, and I have a feeling in the end, we're going to discover that net neutrality was about something we didn't really understand that in the end, the ability of ISP is to take certain people out of circulation will be invoked, if nothing else works to silence them.

**Matt Taibbi** 37:46

Hmm. Yeah, that's interesting. I hadn't thought of that. That all very possible. And, you know, we we haven't gotten there yet, it probably hasn't been necessary. But I think the embarrassing thing is, it hasn't been necessary. Because we just haven't seen anything like a wide scale rebellion, on the part of the people you would expect it to come from. I mean, you know, the, the people in Mao's China or Soviet Russia who worked in the press, they had an excuse for not raising a ruckus about certain things. The thing that's always bothered me about journalists in the United States is you don't even really need to offer them anything to make them conform. There's no particularly even any special benefits that you get from doing so. It's just a very timid and inquisitive group of people. And, and they're uniquely ill suited, I think, to the mission of trying to oppose this thing. But you're absolutely right. I hadn't thought about those other other layers. But there Yeah, those will probably come into play as well.

**Bret** 39:03

They will if and if they need to, you know, it'll stop sort of them if it can do it with the other layer. But the problem is, you know, you say exactly the right thing. It hasn't been necessary yet. But the same principle applies. As soon as it's necessary, it will be too late. Right? You have to see it coming and what you describe in journalism, I call the epidemic of cowardice, but it's also a kind of learned helplessness. And that's exactly what I saw in academia. And I think the problem is, it's civilization wide, that our developmental environment has cultivated these weaknesses and now they are being exploited.

**Matt Taibbi** 39:39

Not for nothing, a lot of people are saying, This is the Evergreen of United States right now, your your story is kind of the great metaphor for all of this stuff. And, you know, I remember, if I remember correctly, there was that vote initial vote where You objected to that one provision, whether I guess they were asking you to put down on paper, your thoughts about equity, diversity inclusion or something like that right now

**Bret** 40:11

it was to reflect on our own prog progress relative to our internal racism annually in a document that was then going to go into our file.

**Matt Taibbi** 40:21

First of all, I just can't even imagine being a person and thinking that, like, that would be a good idea. And for a variety of reasons, putting any of that down on paper is, but anyway, the the notion that the vote ended up being 70 to two or whatever it was, you know, that kind of speaks to all the things that are going on now. And in the press, we, you hear a lot from journalists were saying, you cannot believe what's going on in our shop right now. Right? Or they're meaning they're meeting out after work in bars. Sometimes people are only willing to talk about what's going on at work if they work with their spouses. Right. So this is again, Rick recalls that kind of the Soviet cliche of the husband and wife was we spoke under the covers at night, you know, about what was going on at work? You know, that's, that's going on in this business now. And yeah, I mean, that the the problem is that people keep thinking that it's not going to come for them, that if they just go along that eventually, like, they'll get to keep their job. And, you know, it's not going to be a problem. But eventually it does. You know, it's it's this you out. And people are mistaken. And they think they're not going to end up having to collide with it at some point or another.

**Bret** 41:42

Yeah. Yeah. Eventually, it's gonna come for you and eventually is like, by the end of July,

**Matt Taibbi** 41:47

right? Exactly, exactly.

**Bret** 41:49

So here's the thing. You're right, everybody, every guy, you can imagine how many people are telling me Oh, my God, we're all evergreen now, right? It's like, okay, yes, you are now, can we go the next step? And it's like, I just, I want just emblazoned the word extrapolate. Right on something that I can hold in front of people, because the point is, okay. If this is evergreen, and it is, I mean, on the parallel is almost too close to believe, right? If this is evergreen, what happens next? I mean, first of all, look at evergreen, right? evergreen is a failing college, it has a quarter of the students it's supposed to have, it has no plan going forward. And it has continued down this road without ever acknowledging it made a mistake. Right. That's the that's the Democratic Party. Right. Joe Biden is George bridges. And the United States is about to be evergreen, except that in the United States, there's another force that this is going to collide with, which is the well armed, rural population that has a right to be terrified that this is coming for it. Right?

**Matt Taibbi** 43:00

Yeah. I saw a news article yesterday that not only our gun sales going up, but that 40% of the sales are for first time buyers. Which I thought was pretty amazing. Statistics good. Because we've seen in the past, you know, various moral manias that come up in the press, convinced people to go out and buy guns, but it's usually the people who are already the gun of guns. Yeah, exactly. This is this is something new. I don't know what that means. yet. I think I think you're probably onto something that people are gearing up for some kind of conflict that they imagine will happen, which I hope it doesn't. But But yeah, absolutely. There's that. And the only thing I would push back on with with the metaphor of Biden, as bridges is that she knows, for all the craziness of all of this. You know, Trump is an extraordinarily ineffective vehicle for harnessing the discontent and anger towards towards all of these processes. He did. He did fairly well with it, I would say, just cynically watching him in 2016. But he was an unknown quantity then. And his total is in competence to deal with, you know, this unique crisis that we're in right now is I mean, I'm not going to make the same mistake of predicting, again, that it's going to he's going to lose, but you know, it's very possible that Biden's gonna win. And even though the Democratic Party is intellectually I think it's just completely broken. It doesn't stand for anything anymore except for not being something else. And even that doesn't stand for that all that strongly. It could still sputter on for a little while. And what I I guess what I worry about is that it will succumb to the same institutional pressures that happened at evergreen and have happened more recently, the New York Times. It's, you know, it doesn't, because it's not strong and its own identity, it's susceptible to being taken over by zealots. And I don't know how much he would worry about that. But I worry about that a little bit.

**Bret** 45:24

I think it's far worse than that. Yeah, this is becoming a theme, I guess. But the the Democratic Party stands for nothing, because it has become an influence peddling racket as the Republican Party is. And as such, the only thing it does is protect its access to power. And what has happened is it has lost its argument for being awarded that power by voters. And what it is now going to do is it is going to rally a constituency by giving it something real, but what it's giving it is power over other citizens. In other words, and this is why I say it is George bridges, right. Joe Biden is the George bridges play because what it's going to do is it's going to empower this counter revolution that is now marching in our streets and marketing in every single institution is going to empower them to keep them from going after the real culprits. So right. You know, the anger in the streets is about something real americans have been frozen out of a large fraction of the well being that they've created. And in an effort to stave off the French Revolution, yet one more election cycle. The people with the pitchforks and the torches are going to be awarded rights to extract stuff from other citizens. And that is what's I just don't even see how that will be avoided. It's not that the zealots will take over the Democratic Party is that the Democratic Party will foolishly empower them will cynically empower them in order to win this election and potentially future ones. And that will be the final straw.

**Matt Taibbi** 47:05

Yeah, I think you're probably right. I remember in 2016, watching, you know, when Bernie was first becoming a thing, and it was surprising to see how well he was, I guess it wasn't surprising very much, because the democrats are their messages says so unsuccessful when they try to present it, you know, unvarnished in front of audiences, it's amazing the lack of response they get. So Bernie starts doing well. And one of the first things that starts happening is that the Clinton campaign starts dusting off the language of campus intersectionality to go after the Sanders movement, which I thought was fascinating, because I had watched Hillary do exactly the opposite. In 2008, when Barack Obama was the candidate, you know, she was basically trying to run as George Wallace in places like Pennsylvania. Now they they figured, because this is how they're wired that well, let's just go for whatever cynically will get us through the night. Bernie is vulnerable. And we'll call him a sis white man, we'll get all of our our aides to whisper in the ears of journalists that night. Hillary publicly says things like, yes, if we broke up the banks tomorrow, would that end racism, which was an extraordinarily effective line, because Bernie didn't know how to answer that, for some reason. He was afraid of the connotation of answering that answering that charge. And he backed off from it. And that became successful. And I think that's, that's the seat. That was the seed of what you're talking about where the trade for the democrats became, alright, so the resist to stop us from having to deal with offending all of our donors in the health insurance industry, in the military industrial complex on Wall Street, and this is our power base, right? And they and they transparently, if you talk to people in the party, they transparently see their job as finding the middle ground between getting elected and, and making sure that the donors are happy, and their donors are, you know, not people. They're these big institutions. So they saw that the way forward was to start adopting the language of wokeness. I don't think at any level they ever believed it in any meaningful way. But they, and they did it again this year, even you know, with Bernie, again, but I think you're right, I think what they're going to end up doing is rather than go forward with Medicare for all or any other kind of serious structural reform or breaking up the banks on Wall Street, or any of the other things that people have been asking for They're gonna they are going to give them something I think they're gonna give them this institutional revolution that some people are asking for, which conveniently will exclude some of their biggest donors from impacts for a while, you know, and I think that's that's a good analysis that that you that you have the situation, it troubles me that that we don't see that in the press very much when when they're talking about what the democrats are doing with this language. Why is Nancy Pelosi you know, dressing and Kente cloth scarves, and, you know, they're participating, and they're talking about knocking down all these statues? were only a few months ago, they were denouncing Sanders on patriotic grounds as being a Russian agent. Like they don't see the contradiction there. It's just it's, it's an odd thing. Yeah.

**Bret** 50:55

It's odd, again, reminds me of those people walking out to look at the fish flopping on the sea. Right?

**Matt Taibbi** 51:01

Exactly. Well, that perfectly describes the democrats in like, a million ways in a

**Bret** 51:05

million ways. Right, exactly. And, you know, of course, in 2020, that just puts us in such an amazing bind, because nothing stands between us and this revolution, getting it's everywhere, which, you know, I guess on the bright side, the very tails it's talking about aren't going to function. So it's not going to be long term successful, but it can wreck everything in the process. And, you know, not only are Americans depending on all the things that's going to wreck, but the world is depending on us to, to keep it together. Because if we don't, I mean, look, what we're doing to the international picked.

**Matt Taibbi** 51:50

Yeah, that. And also, another huge issue there is what happens when we don't get a fake Trump, the next time What happens when we get a real fascists In response, which for sure is going to happen. If, if things continue in a certain direction, right, because it Trump for all of his faults, and there, you could list them from now until tomorrow, he's everything that a lot of people have said about him. His personality is sufficiently disorganized. And, and inward focus that he was never able to commit to any policy of any kind. He was not even, you know, even when he brought in Steve Bannon, which I thought was a dangerous moment, because it wedded an actual strategic mind to the horsepower political horsepower that Trump was capable of bringing, he just couldn't get along with that person for very long Trump is like, he's so profoundly insecure, in his relationships, that he can't, he can't have any for any extended period of time. So prevented him from doing a lot of the dangerous things that people predicted that he would do. But there's gonna come a time when someone is going to, is going to try to get elected using the same formula the Trump use, but it's going to be not a dummy, and not a narcissistic, you know, sort of psychological psychologically disabled person. And, you know, that's going to be a serious problem, right? Because there's, there's all those people who are buying guns for the first time, you know, they're going to be receptive to the message that comes from, you know, the, the face in the crowd, Andy Griffith figures who is inevitably going to inevitably going to rise from all this.

**Bret** 53:46

Now, I exactly agree with this analysis that as troubling as Trump is the fact that, you know, he's a narcissist are the equivalent actually limits the damage, right? Because, you know, his objective function is not to turn us into something else. He's, you know, he's not an organic fascist, he's, he's selfish. Right? And so, yeah, this is coming in. It's like, somehow we're having this incredibly foolish argument where people see that they don't want Trump and of course, they are blinded by it. And you know, Trump derangement syndrome is real. Right? And it is the entire argument for the Democratic Party winning at this point, it's not a good argument. But but it's like, it's like quitting smoking, right? The argument against quitting smoking cannot be it's very, very hard to quit smoking, because it's going to get harder, right? So right if if Trump is the focus, it's the only thing you can see, then the answer is well, now is the time we have to break out of this duopoly nonsense because the next time it's going to be way worse. It's been Gonna be the thing you said it was this time that it didn't turn out to be.

**Matt Taibbi** 55:03

Right. Yeah, absolutely. And if I could nerd out on the on the coverage of Trump for a minute, because this has bothered me a lot ever since he got elected, did the storyline about Trump should have been the extraordinary black comedy that happened in 2016. Like here was a guy who basically was not trying to win, who was running for a variety of reasons that were preposterous on like, multiple levels, who was actively sabotaging himself multiple times throughout the campaign. And yet he wins anyway. Right? Like, in other words, he's trying to lose, but America does not let him lose. Mm hmm. And rather than focus on Oh, my God, how could that possibly have happened? Like how, what, like profound structural flaws in our system, what could possibly have disenchanted people so much that they would even override Trump's natural self destructive urges to put him in office. Nobody did that analysis, they immediately went for this other thing, which was to portray Trump as something that he wasn't which was this sort of otherworldly hit Larian existential threat, who was, you know, any minute now going to be putting us on concentration camps or are surrendering us to Russia, which created this air of unreality around everything. And I think, like, like all mislead, like, sort of journalistic efforts to to try to put paint Trump in a bad light, they went too far. And ultimately, the damage to their own cause in doing so, you know, I like they discredited themselves by painting Trump is something that he isn't like, the entire argument for Donald Trump now, is the best argument is that institutional America has lied about him. And he's, if he if he ends up getting elected again, it'll be because of that. Anyway, that's, that's a, it's a, it's a private thing that really, really bothers me about that. The whole narrative is that, you know, they got him elected the first time, and they're gonna do it again, if it happens again. Oh, I

**Bret** 57:35

completely agree with this. To the extent that you have Trump derangement syndrome, you should be looking at the Democratic Party and saying, how could you have done this to us? And how can you possibly put us in danger of this again? Right? There are actually two arguments for Trump now. One is that he has faced a conspiracy to eliminate him from office from day one, which is true, and I'm not saying that there was nothing to the impeachment, I think there was, but the point is, they would have impeached him whether or not there was right. It was impeachment first, and then let's find grounds. So that's one thing. But the other thing is by delivering us, Joe Biden as the alternative, Joe Biden in his enfeebled state, they have created another argument, a rational person could say, well, at the end of the day, I want somebody in the Oval Office who is capable of processing the information necessary, who, let's say, avoid a nuclear conflict. I don't want it to be Trump, because he could get us into a nuclear conflict. On the other hand, Joe Biden two years from now, as compared to Donald Trump two years from now, who is going to be more capable of integrating information? I can't say that I think it's Joe Biden. Maybe I can say that. I think that there, he's going to step down. But then the point is, Since when is electing a president really a means of getting a vice president into the presidency? You know, this is party rule. So I think that, you know, I'm certainly not voting for Trump. I'm also not voting for Biden. But I can see now the democrats have created arguments for voting for Trump, and that audit tell us something is way off.

**Matt Taibbi** 59:16

Yeah, I think you're, you're exactly right. If the pandemic hadn't happened, I would be betting a lot of money on Trump to win. Oh, yeah. And the, the, his inability to deal with this, well, you know, all of his worst qualities have come out here. And so you know, that they're going to they're going to make the argument that Yeah, well, Joe, Joe Biden is basically a corpse. And we all understand that and that's why we're not going to put him on television at all if we can avoid it, but we're really electing the people behind him. And those people are going to, you know, be relatively sane, which is going to be a new thing for this country. You know, least going back For years, so they're gonna make that argument. But, you know, for a lot of people, for a lot of voters, they don't think, you know, that many levels down, they look at what the images they see on television and Biden next to Trump, you know it, it doesn't look great, you know, to the ordinary voter. So yeah, you're right. It's It's It's very frustrating that they have created this condition again.

**Bret** 1:00:31

Yeah. So let's talk a little bit about what we should do and what we might do. One thing I wanted to go back a little bit in our conversation and talk about, if we look at the fact that there are all of these layers where we have a vulnerability, and these layers can be triggered if the institutional layer fails to create the requisite power that the movement wants, it can be the payment layer, or it can be the ISP, net neutrality layer. But there are a lot of places. One thing that we say is, if you were smart, you'd build now. Right? So cryptocurrency, for example, provides a solution to the payment layer, but you want to build it. Now the problem with crypto or at least one of them is that it's not simple enough for it to simply replace a compromised credit card layer, it needs, it needs to be that simple in order for it to actually constitute a solution. And the other thing is, you have to figure out how you're going to navigate the internet without the major platforms which have organized it for us and given us access in a way that is fundamental to how we actually use it. But it's a fascinating bargain, because it gives them control over who has access. And you know, it's in this murky gray area where, you know, it's like a public utility except it isn't. Right. So anyway, we should be building those things now, rather than waiting to discover that those layers are insecure, because they're definitely insecure. And it's definitely coming. And it's marketing faster than we think which we can extrapolate from everything we've seen so far. We've just gotten there very quickly, you know. So anyway, I don't know that there's much more to say, except if we were smart, we'd be building those alternative plans now, rather than assuming you're crossing our fingers or whatever it is that we're doing.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:02:22

Yeah, I you know, I've never been very much in the solutions business. I'm always much more in the describing the the actual misery that's happening, side of things. But the but yeah, clearly, clearly, people definitely need to start thinking about whatever the alternative structures might be. And, you know, one thing that gets me I'm not gonna use this word, because it triggers you clearly is hope, as the I remember, during the more or less ineffectual Occupy Wall Street movement, but one thing that did come out of that was a lot of thinking about, well, if we don't want an oligopoly of massive transnational banks running the, the economy, what, what do we want. And there there were some ideas that came out of that. Public banking, some of some of the cryptocurrency stuff came out of some of the problems that took place. You know, there were there were people who were pushed in that direction, I know by by some of the events in 2008. So maybe that will happen here to like the there, there'll be a political crisis that will cause a bunch of people to get together. And I mean, I know you've got a political solution that you've been that you've been pushing, which I think is great. But clearly, after the spectacle of 2016, people are going to be very ready for some kind of alternative political movement in a way that they probably haven't been in this country for, for a very, very long time. So it's, it's, it's probably a good time for people to get those ideas ready for vote for mass presentation, it seems.

**Bret** 1:04:13

Well, I agree. It's, it's a good idea to, you know, to sketch those things out for the moment at which they could be introduced, but I'm very concerned that there's a there's just a general pattern where you have two things fuse together, right? This movement is an organic rebellion against the corrupt system. And it is a coup in one and you know, the organic rebellion doesn't really understand that the coup is not about making things better, it's about taking power. And that's what all of these false syllogisms are about, that it portrays. But I think the problem is a this is occupy By 2.0, but it's not the occupier that started after the financial collapse and had legitimate complaints and had some idea what direction it wanted to go with structural change. It's what it's the it's picked up from the end of occupy, which was thoroughly infused by this anarchism. And this belief that the structure has to be torn down in order to make a new one. And of course, that that is an argument being deployed by people who I don't think know anything about how international relations work, how a nuclear reactor functions that a nuclear reactor requires power 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and you can't screw that up for even a day without it turning into a nuclear volcano, right. And people who don't understand what the haber Bosch process is, and what it has to do with beating more than half the world's population. So the idea of tear it down is a very naive one. And it is now gaining power at amazing at an amazing rate. And so those solutions you're talking about on this path, I don't see how they actually end up in a position to make positive change.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:06:06

Right? Yeah. Well, there are some general ideas that might, that that would help. Right. So one of the things I like about your unity idea is that it sort of introduces the idea of politics is not a purely adversarial process, right? That he this is this is something where you would get a bunch of people in the room, and they would have to come up with a thing that they would agree on in a collaborative way, which is what Congress used to be, right. I mean, you if you talk to people in Congress, I've done a lot of reporting on Congress, where they, they talked about how in the 60s and 70s, it was a much different situation, the politicians would get up and give a speech on Friday, but then on Saturday, the Republicans and Democrats, their families would get together, you know, they would sometimes play golf, sometimes do whatever it was, and they would actually work out the thing. And they would sort of patriotically have in mind, how that works. And that all started to break down in the 90s. And everything became, you know, just shouting at each other. The media has broken down in the same way, right, like so now, it's just basically two camps of monocultures that are yelling at each other. I think there's a strong urge, and you talk about this in the stats that you cite about how people self identify politically, if you could just attach a political idea to, or express it in a way that all those people who identify as independence and don't identify, as, you know, far left far right. could have a place where they could, you know, vote and put somebody in power, I think it would be very, very successful. But again, to be on the optimist in this in this conversation, so

**Bret** 1:08:16

Well, here here, I like your optimism a lot. Yeah, the thing is, we know I mean, you can Intuit if you talk to people, but we now know from careful study, that the vast majority of Americans actually agree and that this is the fringes driving the discussion. And most of us don't sign up for either of the perspectives that we see being broadcast at such a high decibel level. So yes, that constituency, were you to try to make a political move, the obvious way to win every election is to agree to represent the American public. Right, that's a slam dunk as the strategy goes. Now, the reason that our parties never find that strategy is they can't it's it's mutually exclusive with their business model, right? They're not many times Yeah, of course, you have it's your it's your stock and trade, or at least one of them. But But here's the question. What stops I mean, look, occupy, in my mind did one useful thing, really just one. But it was important. And it was the idea that there was something that you could even plausibly describe the conflict as between the 1% and the 99%. How does the democracy get rigged against 99% of its population, right? That tells you it's not a democracy. It tells you some other force has taken over. So the point is, you can't interfere. You can't honorably interfere in a normal election cycle because you're told that if you do, if you try to represent the people and get elected on that basis that you will elect the the party that is less in line With your values rather than more, so you're going to do more harm than good because of the lesser evil paradox. So unity 20 2020 addresses that so that we don't have to face the lesser evil paradox. And we can reach the public and say, Look, we've got a plan for actually having your interest represented at the highest level of government, which, frankly, I see as the only thing that could conceivably head off the calamity to which we are currently aimed. But that requires this other thing that we talked about earlier, to somehow be knocked out of its normal pattern of residence, which is to say, that same pattern of cowardice and of passivity. Basically, I see it as people having been turned in their own minds from being citizens into being consumers. A citizen is an active thing, a consumer is a passive thing. And because people consume everything, including the political landscape, they don't understand that actually, the thing that is necessary to escape the trap that has been set for them in which they will vote for one or the other terrible and highly corrupt options, is that they have to actually take ownership of the choice to do something different. They have to figure out how to talk to their friends, for example, right? So I don't know, you know, you're you're an interesting guy. And I want to, I want to find out a little bit about how you ended up there. We know a little bit about your background in Russia, which I think gave you a very different perspective on the west. But it is also the case that your focus as a journalist has created immensely powerful enemies, or it has put you in their sights. Yeah, right. That's true. And yet, here you are. That's a little bit surprising. So you have beaten the odds, in a way few journalists have been able to by reporting accurately and courageously on phenomena that are deeply embarrassing to the most powerful forces in our system. And you have stayed, you stayed afloat. So hey, do you know how that happened?

**Matt Taibbi** 1:12:28

Ah, well, you know, in terms of why you do that, um, you know, my, again, my, my father was a journalist. And I, I grew up in an atmosphere, and my childhood was like the movie anchorman. I, you know, he was a TV reporter, all the bad facial hair, everything. But reporters, when I was growing up, they came from a different class of people than they do today. They were a lot of them were kind of more working class like, they were more likely their parents were more likely to be plumbers or electricians than they were to be doctors or lawyers like the this thing where, you know, the journalist is an Ivy League grad, that's a relatively new thing that I think came up, you know, about in the 70s and 80s, with my generation. But reporters basically just instinctively hated rich people, they hated powerful people. Like if you put up a poster of a politician, and in a newsroom, it was defaced instantaneously. Like, there were darts on it, you know, the, the reporter saw it as their job to stick it to the man, right? Like That was the that was the attitude, I think it's very ably embodied by people like her, she'd never seen him in public. Like, that's just the person who just lives to make people uncomfortable, right. And by digging, and digging, and digging, and so that was the ethos that I grew up around. And I always understood it, the purpose of the job to be to look in all directions and say, like, what, where's the biggest, most of noxious thing that's happening right now? And, you know, what? What, how can I have an impact that other reporters maybe aren't paying attention to? You know, and so, you know, something like the the financial crisis in 2008, one of the first things that I learned about that is that the only people who are covering Wall Street were sympathetic to Wall Street because nobody else understood it right? So that there was a an opportunity there to, to do this kind of work where we're just basically translating things for ordinary people, and that's very revelatory, but that that mode of understanding the job to be that and being willing To take all the crap that comes with it, it used to be, I think, standard in the profession. And I don't really see that so much anymore. Although there are a lot of people who were coming up who, you know, are that way, you know, people like lifan at the intercept, Glenn Greenwald is different. He's like, you come from the reporting tradition, but he's got that same personality quirk of just wanting to kiss people off. And But mostly, the job is different now. Right? Like, I think the, if you ever seen the movie primary colors, it was the sort of sort of a book that was made into a movie. It was about the Clinton campaign and 92 was written by journalists named joe klein, who initially was anonymous. He wrote it as a novel, but the fantasy among reporters, and then in the 90s, about politician started to be, I want to be the person who hangs out with the candidate after the speech and has a beer, and it's sort of close to power. And that's, that's kind of the model. That's where we're at right now. That's kind of the problem is, is that basically people in the business want to be behind the rope line with people of influence. And, you know, it's gonna be it's gonna be a problem trying to get us back to the other adversarial posture. The past?

**Bret** 1:16:31

Yep, I agree. In in some sense, I mean, that that's important history. And I think it's, it's useful insight, and I'm glad to hear it. But you know, it is the easier part of the puzzle, I understand why you would want to do what you do, what I don't understand is how you've succeeded at it. Just as with institutions, we see there's almost not an institution and maybe really not an institution that has shown us how to resist this movement, there's very little indication that what you do is possible, which is to confront these very powerful entities and live to tell the tale and not be driven off the map or co opted, or I don't know what,

**Matt Taibbi** 1:17:16

well, I mean, I definitely been, you know, bruised a little bit. Over the years, I've gone I've gone through a couple episodes that haven't been all that pleasant, but I think if you, you know, in terms of what I've done to try to retain an audience over the years, there's only a couple of ways to really do it, you either have to do what sy Hersh does, which is Get, get the story that no one else can get. And that that's just, you know, a way of amassing power in this business, right? Like you have something and no one else has, people are going to come to you no matter what. And, incidentally, he's basically been driven out of the business if you notice, he only publishes in like the London Review of Books now. And, you know, this is the person who, from Ely to, to Abu Ghraib has always gotten the biggest story, right? So there's, there's even for the best of us, it's a very difficult road. But the other way to do it, I think, is the way that I and I take probably the easier road, which is just, you know, I focus a lot on trying to make the work entertaining, clear. And have some kind of popular appeal to it, which is very difficult to suppress, right. So if you if people just, if you're got a little bit of humor, you know, it's difficult to get to get people to stop reading something that they just enjoy reading, you know, and so that mixed with being super careful about the investigative stuff, like you don't want to, you know, in this business, one bad mistake that labels you as dishonest is usually fatal. Or it used to be anyway. So that's been my that's been my formula is like be be really, really careful and then try to try to think in terms of how you're really really think in terms of rhetorically how to reach a wide audience, which is a lot harder than people think it is. It's it's a very difficult thing to do. But you know, that's the job, right? I mean, so it's, I've been lucky that that also that there there are processes, like you know, this subscription site that I have available now, that make it possible to be a little bit braver than maybe would be if I was only working in an institution but but there is a way forward to do it. It's just It's not fair. Really easy, that's all.

**Bret** 1:20:01

Alright, so there are a couple lessons in there that I resonate with strongly. One is, you've built this site outside of your day job as it were at Rolling Stone. And I believe this is actually a fundamental mechanism for surviving in this era. Because if your own if everything if your mortgage, your health care, your retirement, your income, if all of that stuff comes through your employer, and something catches the attention of your employer and decides to go after you, then you have very few options. Whereas if you have built something on the outside ahead of time, and the point is, well, you may not want to lose your day job, but at least you're not starting from scratch at the point that you do. Hmm. So this was true. For Heather and me when we got driven out of evergreen, which is that we were already we were not well known, but we were already reaching out and trying to figure out how to bring evolutionary biology to a wider audience. And it made a huge difference, because we were not at square one. Right. The other thing you mentioned, which I think maybe in some sense, the most important factor in all of this is I think you have pointed to a conspicuous lack of humor. The movement

**Matt Taibbi** 1:21:20

it's amazing, actually,

**Bret** 1:21:22

it's amazing. And it is I think it is the thing that frightens me most. Yeah, you know, I have this this when students used to ask me, they asked me for advice, but all sorts of things. Because at evergreen, we knew our students really, really well, so many of them were friends at one level or another. And I used to tell them, You should not consider marrying anyone who does not have a sense of humor about himself, that just not married material, right? Because you're going to need the sense of humor, everybody's got to have a sense of humor about themselves just to navigate something as complex as marriage. For sure. Anyway, that's an aside about marriage. But the point is, the lack of a sense of humor on the part of this movement tells you something about a kind of rigidity of thinking. And a I don't know what it is, but it's it's a very old brightening absence. Yeah, and once you spot it, you can't miss it.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:22:22

You're absolutely right. I just wrote about this last week, actually, that, you know, the the 60s liberation movements. They had this enormous power to spread because they were incredibly attractive to people even even who were politically resistant. to them. The music was great. The Comedy was amazing, like even people who were abject racist, they listened to Richard Pryor's comedy and they they couldn't help themselves they laughed right and and I think it was because that movement was very much about celebrating the common humanity of people they were trying to dig down and and get to deeper truths about all of us and even if it was kind of disturbing and unpleasant like they were gonna put it out there and and that was really liberating for everybody and it was a very attractive message you know, I think that's what I was trying to do is contrast that with this, which has no art no no music, no cotton certainly no comedy right? There's the the there's no such thing as comedy in this conception. It's actually it's almost definitionally impossible because comedy by its nature is daring. And it's iconoclastic in all directions, right? The the urge to be funny, always ends up dressing down everybody, not just a specific target. You know, it's not just the emperor has no clothes. It's everybody. Right? So when you're trying to have a very didactic politics, comedy just doesn't go well with it, you know, and, and that's a conspicuous weakness of this movement. I think a lot about there was a book I read a long time ago, was a biography of Lenin called the Bolsheviks that was written by this historian Adam Lum, who is a very funny writer himself, but he was obsessed with Lenin and it shines through in the book that the think it's almost an admiration like he was he was amazed by the scale of linens, humor lessness. And, and he was almost like a 700 page Ode to a person who was incapable of laughing right. And that feels a little bit like what we're dealing with with a lot of this new ideology like you just can't believe that in any in every direction. You look. There's there's no possibility of like, any kind of relief or looseness or anything. It just gets the It gets tighter and tighter. So it's fascinating, you know? And also it's weird because young people by their nature want to joke and and they don't, you know? I don't, I don't know where it leads, honestly, it's it's strange.

**Bret** 1:25:15

Well, so I have an evolutionary take on that switch. Humor is actually a mechanism whereby we discover what hangs out on the fringes of our consciousness, you know, if somebody makes a joke, and it reveals if people laugh, and it's organic laughter rather than that stupid applause that you see people do these days, when somebody makes a joke. If they earnestly laugh, you can actually tell that they know the truth of that statement. Right? And it may be it may not be a straightforward truth, but there's some truth in it, and they know it, and you know it. And now you both know that each other knows, right. So evolutionarily, humor is like a mechanism for exploring things that are at the fringes of consciousness, often because they're a bit uncomfortable, right? So it's like signing on to an acknowledgment that Yeah, we all know that thing is true, right? And so the flip side of this is, if your movement is composed, at least at the level of what it claims of pure nonsense, a humor is almost inconceivable, because humor would reveal that, you know, how feeble these arguments are, or you don't? And that makes you even more of a fool. Right? Right. So the point is, we're not going to even allow joking, because if we allowed joking, that'd be it. Move it over in an hour, you know? Yeah. So that's the frightening thing is that the humor lessness kind of goes along with a power grab, that cannot afford to be candid, cannot afford for anybody to be candid about what they see and know about how it functions and what it's after?

**Matt Taibbi** 1:26:57

Yeah, you're absolutely right. But I think it's a huge weakness, though, of this thing, because people just, they just can't go for long without laughing at something, you know. And this, this, this movement has gotten progressively more and more constrained and paranoid and unable to have any kind of sense of humor about itself. Here, even even like commercial humor, like the center live version of humor. It was bad enough when basically all the jokes that you saw on television, were put and coming down the chimney or some other thing, but there's like a over leaden political message attached to it. But you don't even really get that anymore. Like there's there's just not even an attempt. And, you know, people want something eventually somebody is going to be brave and funny enough to come up and just rip through it the way Richard Pryor Did you know like, there's going to be just a genius. You know, Lenny Bruce type who's going to take advantage of the this constricted atmosphere and and it's, I think that's gonna be devastating to it. You know, what, once the right comedian mixes with this material, which is amazing material. It's gonna be devastating.

**Bret** 1:28:30

Yeah, I think I think we can say two things for sure. One you just said, which is that somebody is going to figure out how to do this, and it's going to be devastating. And the other thing we can say is that it's going to be Dave Chappelle.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:28:41

That's true. That's true. Yeah, you can tell. I mean, he, he's, he's the perfect person to do it. And he's on cancelable. So yeah, I think we await with interest to see how, how he but you know, he's gonna have to commit to it when he does it, too. You know what I mean? It's gonna have to be an ongoing, like slugfest. So

**Bret** 1:29:05

personally, I'm hoping that his August calendar is clear for that job, because I don't know how much longer we can hold out.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:29:13

Absolutely,

**Bret** 1:29:13

yep. All right. So before we close this out, is there anything you think we should cover? I mean, I'd love to have you back anytime you want to come but anything you think we should cover today? No, I

**Matt Taibbi** 1:29:24

think we went we went through most of it. I mean, honestly, I'm, you know, I was going to ask you a few things. Because I'm starting to sort of lose a lot of the origins of this stuff. And you know, one thing I'm really interested in is like the proliferation of administrative staff and what when that started, like, why do you think that that happened like, so I've had some people suggest to me that university suddenly became awash in money because of Guaranteed student loans or whatever it was, like, Where did all these extra people come from? And what's what's worth looking at? If I was, you know, going to try to look at the origins of that?

**Bret** 1:30:14

Yeah, I think George bridges actually taught me the answer to this. I'm trying to figure out whether, you know, he and I had a very adversarial relationship, but it involved a certain number of private conversations in which there was more candor than you might imagine. And, you know, he was the worst offender in this regard. He brought in he massively increased the size of the administration of the college. And he boosted some people to positions of power who weren't qualified for it didn't bring anything to the table that would make you want them in those positions. And it became clear that in some sense, he was building a structure that was self protect. A, you know, you can imagine you take somebody who, you know, I don't know, maybe they're earning, you know, $50,000 a year, and suddenly, you get them a job where they're earning $150,000 a year, right? That's going to be a loyal person. When your malfeasance come to the surface, that's somebody who's going to stand by you, right? So I think the general rubric was, in George's case, he was solving a George problem. And the George problem was he was going to do some stuff that was going to put him in jeopardy, he needed people who could be sacrificed and a large number of them so that as people came for him, you know, heads could roll, and they wouldn't be his. And he needed to have more votes than he had. And the way you get more votes as you get people who, you know, will, Clarence Thomas to your Antonin Scalia, right. So I don't know how general it is. But I guess I would say game theoretically, I think the basic answer is much of what goes wrong goes wrong, because individuals are serving a narrow, individual purpose. And we look at the collective consequences of this and imagine that an institutional purpose is being solved.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:32:13

Right? Right. Interesting, huh?

**Bret** 1:32:16

So that's, that's my best guess. The other thing is, actually, this is something. some point I had dinner Heather and I did with Jordan Peterson, and he said that he had seen this phenomenon, which I'm sure you're going to be as familiar with, as anybody, which is that you, you have an institution, and it's constructed to solve a problem. But over time, it evolves to continue to exist, that becomes its purpose. And so lots of things that are designed to accomplish some goal, suddenly shift to actually not solving the problem, because that would be reason to go extinct. Right? And rather than do that, they come up with self justifying explanations for the need to have them go on forever. And you know, you can even hear this in this movement, about how, you know, this contradiction. White supremacy is a terrible political problem in the United States that requires us to address it immediately. And in profound ways. It's also an incurable problem. So there's really no point in addressing it. We will be doing this forever,

**Matt Taibbi** 1:33:23

right? It's a lifetime commitment. Yeah, it's a

**Bret** 1:33:27

permanent job. It's it's the goal we will never reach. So anyway, I think this this tendency for things that have gained power gained access to resources to come up with reasons that they need to continue doing what they're doing, as more to say about why these administration's become bloated now why it suddenly took off. Clearly, there was some sort of tipping point or phase transition, that gave whatever it is that wants to create more administration, the power to do so. And it's a little harder to spot what that might be. But somewhere in that neighborhood, the game theory is happening at the individual level. And the analysis is happening at the collective level, and so they don't meet.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:34:18

Right, right, another differential meet right. Interesting. All right. Well, cool. Brett, thank you so much for having me on. I really appreciate it.

**Bret** 1:34:27

Well, I really appreciate you coming on. I do want to ask you to straight out Sure. Will you join us unity 2020. Yeah, and you indicated that you liked the plan. But frankly, the problem is, many people don't know what to make of it. And for Matt ttv to say that he sees what it is understand its importance and supports it would, I think go a long way to convincing people that this is this is not performance art, this is actually an attempt to to The right art course and preserve the Republic. And, you know, the most serious of people take it seriously.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:35:07

No, I love the idea I signed the the vision on the on the way this morning are so great. Yeah, yeah.

**Bret** 1:35:16

Well, thank you so much. We really appreciate that. And, you know, I'm already looking forward to our next conversation. So let me

**Matt Taibbi** 1:35:24

know anytime enemies come on our show sometimes.

**Bret** 1:35:26

I would love to, before we sign off completely, people can find you on Twitter at your

**Matt Taibbi** 1:35:35

MTB. That's ta idbi my site is t v dot substack calm and then on that rollingstone.com as well.

**Bret** 1:35:44

All right. Now I would personally add that I have signed up for your site. And I've been blown away by the quality of your writing and the clarity of your thinking. And, you know, there are a limited number of dollars that you can throw at signing up for stuff, but this is highly worth it. I would put it at the top of my list.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:36:03

Outstanding. Well, I appreciate that I normally I wouldn't be mentioning that, but in this climate actually do need subscriber support. So thanks very much.

**Bret** 1:36:17

Well, let's let's not be embarrassed about that. This is something I've learned a bit from my brother, which is Look, if you want this kind of stuff to happen in an environment where institutions are toppling at the rate they are, then you got to support it. And the fact is, you know, you have rickets, am I right? Yep, that's right. Yes, you've got a family you have to support them. They have to come first and yet you're courageously exploring this stuff as you have been for decades. So you know, we can all feel good about supporting you can I certainly do. And I know that that my viewers will as well.

**Matt Taibbi** 1:36:52

Outstanding. Thanks so much for that. I appreciate it. And once again, sir.

**Bret** 1:36:56

Yeah, thanks, man. All right. Be well