



# ★ FORTRESS ON A HILL

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### **SPEAKERS**

Rebecca Gordon, Danny Sjursen, Chris 'Henri' Henrikson, Keagan Miller

### **Danny Sjursen**

All right listeners. Well, as you've noticed, we've had just an array of great guests. I mean, the pods really picking up. We've been so lucky to have Chris Hedges and then Bob Scheer. And today, we're lucky enough to have Rebecca Gordon. She is also a Tom dispatch alumni. So I've been writing there since I guess 2017, when, you know, Tom just took one of my rambling screens and agreed to publish it when nobody else would. So I don't know if Rebecca has a similar story. She's probably a little more polished. But you know, it's an interesting place to write. I've been following her work there, and really just all the regulars for a while, actually, since, you know, I've been reading Tom dispatch since I was in Afghanistan. So there's a lot of cool people at Tom dispatch, I think that we could probably for our sins populate like a rather different sort of its executive shadow administration, although I'm not sure how it would work out but I think Less children, we're debt bombs. As for Rebecca, she received her bachelor's from Reed College, and her master's in divinity and PhD in ethics and social theory from the graduate theological union. She teaches philosophy or in the philosophy department at the University of San Francisco, mostly, of course, digitally now. And for the university's Leo team McCarthy Center for Public Service and the common good. You may know something for previous publications, letters from Nicaragua, cruel and unusual how welfare reform punishes poor people, very relevant now, mainstreaming torture ethical approaches in the post 911 United States and then her lady she does

have a forthcoming is American, Nuremberg, the officials who should stand trial for post 911 war crimes prior to her academic career. You know, she was working in a variety of national and international movements for peace and justice. Which is just so cool. I think first and foremost, she maybe she's not me saying this was an activist, you know, involved in the fight outside of academia, although the two are linked. And these include went movements for women's liberation, LGBT rights, solidarity with poor peoples in Central America, I'm definitely gonna ask her about the anti apartheid movement in the United States and South Africa, because that's kind of just one of my dorky interests. And then, of course, opposing the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. So, Rebecca, thank you so much. Thank you for listening to the long flattering intro. And I'm just so glad you're here.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

It's a real pleasure to be with you and your co hosts, and I'm honored to be invited. So let's talk.

### **Danny Sjursen**

Well, so people who are only vaguely familiar with your work, might think, you know, oh, that's the torture lady, right, given some of your more recent work, and, and I think you're obviously so much more than that. Fortress On A Hill, you know, not just saying that we are longtime fans, the guys jumped at it when I said, hey, maybe I can get back at Gordon Come on. So I know that we know that you right think about so much more. And we are going to broaden the interview accordingly. That said, I mean, I think for starters, I for one did initially find you and learn just a ton from your work on this issue. First, what brought you I guess, in a personal sense to the topic, and given that huge portions of Americans don't think that the US really tortures and even more don't care much about foreign policy in general. Can you explain why you think the subject is just so foundational for you know, the republic or what's left of it?

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Absolutely. So I think that my interest probably begin with the time that I spent wandering around in the war zones of Nicaragua in 1984. And I was there with an organization called witness for peace axiom. My auntie Christiana polar paths. And our goal at that time was to demonstrate that the United States was actually violating the law at the time, which said that it was illegal for the US to be assisting in any way the counter revolutionary forces in Nicaragua who were known as the Contra and there was an amendment in effect called the Boland amendment. This is going back a long time. But in the course of that work, I met people who had been tortured by contra who had been trained in Honduras by the United States. And they described the training to me. And in later years, I discovered that in fact, the CIA had an entire manual for this training, most recently republished by them or re issued in 1983, so a year before I was there, so I met people who were survivors of torture that was used not as a tactic, but in a strategic sense, as an intentional way of defeating the will of ordinary civilians to resist the Cold War. And so it was the strategy of the control war was primarily not to attack the military of Nicaragua, but to attack civilian institutions. So anything from phone lines to health care centers, to schools, to the people who staff those things were the primary targets. And so after September 11, it was very clear to me that whatever else the US response was going to involve that somebody somewhere was probably going to be tortured. And I began looking just in the ordinary press, and this is the thing about torture in the United States is it's not really a secret. It's actually hidden in plain sight. So the First thing I saw was

in November, like early November in Newsweek, a liberal historian named Jonathan Alter, wrote a piece called Time to Think Dot Dot Dot about torture. And he was talking about how the FBI had these people in their hands, who were refusing to reveal anything about September 11. And because they were refusing to reveal anything, he suggested that we should either torture them ourselves. And he said, there were some limits on what we could do. Or we could send them off to a country that didn't have the same niceties that we do. He proposed Saudi Arabia land of beheadings. So who were these people he was talking about. They were not yet detainees who had been arrested in Afghanistan or in any of the other places around the world where the US later began picking people up. These were actually people living inside the United States who were Muslims, some of whom had green cards, some of whom were here on tourist visas. There were about 600 of them. And they were held incommunicado, in city jails in Brooklyn, New York, literally within sight of the Statue of Liberty. For months, nobody knew where they were, if this had happened in Latin America, we would have said they were disappeared. And while they were there, they were tortured. They were beaten with electrical cords, at least one of them was raped with the police flashlight. They were exposed to the freezing cold in February, were wearing nothing but a hospital gown. They were handcuffed to very hot radiators. They were tortured. And of course, they knew absolutely nothing about September 11. And this points to one of the major problems with torture which is that the pretext is about getting information. But that's not its real purpose. So that's a long way of saying that. It's a subject that I first became really aware of during my work with Central America. But it was an interest that that researched when it became clear just from reading between the lines in the New York Times and The Washington Post, that the US was engaged in torture as part of its response to 9/11.

### **Danny Sjurson**

Yeah, it's so interesting that you brought up the Contras and the Boland amendment and the early 80s, really all through the mid 80s. Because I've been thinking sometimes about this proxy war that was waged, and all the crimes that were involved in it, and in some ways it does seem and it's a little bit off topic, but tell me what you think that in the post, pull out of at least the main brigades from Iraq and the drawdown in Afghanistan than that, particularly under Obama and leading up until today, it does appear that in some ways, you know, the American way of war that everyone always searches for, has shifted, at least in part back to that proxy support, including for proxies that in Afghanistan, for sure. torture. Right. Have you have you seen some degree of that?

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Yes, I would, I would say that what you're saying is exactly right. That, you know, they used to call it low intensity warfare during the 80s. And of course, it wasn't low intensity for the people who are experiencing it. But the idea was that the US invests investment of, especially of actual human beings, was very low intensity. And that yes, I think we are seeing exactly that. And I think, for example of the US involvement in Yemen, where we're at, you know, quite a large distance from that war and yet we are assisting Saudi Arabia, which is assisting one side in a civil war in a country that has been absolutely devastated. And I think that especially under Trump, you know, he's got this sort of contradictory desire to both spend as much money as possible on the military, and yet not to actually become involved in any kind of military adventure overseas, which is an instinct that on an in an odd sort of way find myself applauding. Um, so yes, I think that that that there has been since the middle of

Obama's presidency, probably a desire to often offload the actual military suffering onto proxies and, and not on to our own armed forces. on that, yeah.

### **Danny Sjursen**

And it it seems like it's a perfect way. I mean, it puts so much distance. There's already this that's based on just reporting blackouts and apathy, because the all volunteer force, but then of course, if you put an Afghan or you put a Somali or a Yemeni or Saudi in between that there's just even more space. I'm interested in what we talked about in our scheduling messages for this podcast. You mentioned that your next project is forthcoming. Maybe give us some details on that you called it the the house that torture Bill mentioned that it's about the sensuality of, you know, torture to the construction of major US institutions like the economy. So if you wouldn't mind expanding on that, those are connections that I doubt many people would naturally link and so I'm really interested.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah, I'm happy to this is a Haymarket book and Tom Engelhardt, from Tom dispatches, actually the editor, so he's been after me for a while to write a book and so here we go.

### **Danny Sjursen**

I know you're in trouble. If Tom's editing you're gonna be where you're gonna be working your butt off sorry.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

I offered him a lesbian comedy of manners, but that's not what he markets publishes apparently. So, here we go. Um, okay, so the argument of the house that torture built is, as you said that torture has been central to the construction of major US institutions. And to just take the example of the economy. It begins with the really before the United States itself existed in the colonial period. And it begins with the enslavement of people from Africa. And one of the things that farmers, for example, in Virginia discovered was that there was a difference between the willingness of people who were brought from England who were indentured servants, they were called, some of them came voluntarily. Some of them came less voluntarily. But all of them were offered the deal that if they worked for a period of between seven to 10 years, at the end of that period, they would be given a A piece of land and the opportunity to become farmers and indeed to make use of the labor of other people. And so there was an incentive for them to work. When they brought people from Africa as slaves, there was no such incentive because there was no promise. They weren't going to be working for seven years and then get a piece of land, they and their children and their children's children, were going to be enslaved, working to construct at that point in economy built largely on tobacco for forever, right. And so what farmers discovered was the only way that they could force these people to work was through physical pain and the threat of physical pain. And I'm talking about the profound physical pain that results from the kind of beatings that use leather to tear the skin off of a person's body and this is something that that went on in a very regular, ritualized way from the very beginning of the presence of Africans in this country. And as one of the arguments that I make in mainstreaming torture is that you don't have to torture everybody in order for torture to have its effect, the effect. And the purpose really is to frighten people into being afraid of resisting. And you can do that simply by letting people know that torture is

happening. And so a big part of the ritual of, of punishment on these Virginia farms and then later in a much more industrialized way on the cotton farms on the cotton plantations is that it was done at a particular time during the day and everybody was forced to watch and it was, it was a way of instituting and maintaining the power of the economic regime and so Edward Bakshi Baptist has written a book called the half has never been told, which is a story of the way that the cotton business was developed when it moved out of the the seacoast colonies, and moved a little bit West and a little bit south into what's now Mississippi and Alabama, and Louisiana, and even Tennessee. And in those places, the first thing that had to happen is that the native people who were already living there had to be moved, and they were removed and many of them ended up in Oklahoma or what is now Oklahoma. And then they instituted a gang labor labor system, which, by the organized steady use of torture allowed people to develop you know, it's almost like a physical physical technology of the body so that in something like four decades, they were able to multiply by eight times the amount of cotton That an average individual could pick in a day. Now some of that was a result of having more productive cotton plants and different varieties. But a lot of it was simply the result of changing the way the the work was organized and making it possible for one person to see through Long, long lines of workers exactly what was happening through the entire plantation. And so cotton cotton itself then became the harness the engine rather that was harnessed to build the US economy in the new United States, not only in the southern states, but also in the northern states. And also crucially, in Europe and in the great cotton mills of England, cotton and the enslaved people who picked and planted and picked the cotton were also used as backing for security. So the banking system came to depend on actual enslaved people as the collateral for for bonds that were issued in the south. Remember, this is a time before there was a generalized US currency like the dollar today. And so there were many different systems of currency. And one of the things of value that was exchanged was pieces of paper that basically represented the securitization of human beings in a way that's very similar to how back in 2008, one of the things that happened that brought that was really revealed in the financial collapse is that mortgage lenders had sold off mortgages to great big houses that held you know, like Goldman Sachs that held many, many thousands millions of mortgages and divided them up into little tiny pieces, and issued bonds that were backed by a sliver of this mortgage in a sliver of that mortgage, which supposedly spread the risk. Now, if all the mortgages were bad as many of them were, it didn't, it didn't solve the problem. But the same thing was done two centuries before. In the southern states, the banking system, essentially, and especially the European banking system came to rely on the securitization of enslaved people as collateral. Now, the US also used those collateral debts as a way of securing hard currency in the form of actual money bullion from Europe, Europe would exchange actual card currency for this paper. And so that's one of the ways that the foundation of the US economy was built on torture was built on labor that was extracted through physical profound physical pain. After the Civil War, you might think okay, 40 acres and a mule and maybe sharecropping, and you know a little bit about that, but a lot of the work that continued to be done, that built what was called the New South, was also built through torture in the use of people who had been convicted of sometimes very, very minor crimes, who were then leased out as if they were photocopiers leased out either back to the same plantations where they had been slaves sometimes before the Civil War before emancipation, or were leased as workers on the railroads, the roads, the coal mines and the iron mines. And it was the use of this convict labor once again in forced with the every every workplace had an individual whose job whose job title was whipping boss, whose job was to enforce labor discipline through the use of physical pain. And this is

what built the steel industry. This is what built Birmingham steel. This is what built the whole infrastructure of industry in the southern United States in the period after reconstruction, up until really the 1920s. After that, convict labor continued to be used to continue building the highway system in the southern United States. But by that point, they were no longer being being rented out by counties to private enterprise. Instead the state to a crowd control of them directly and rented out these human beings, again, still controlled with physical pain. So that's one example. We can go further and look at the role of torture in you know, jumping ahead for a while in the construction or the reconstruction of the US economy. After World War Two, when the US benefited from one having being the one country of the allies that emerged unscathed, because the war was not fought on US territory, and secondly, from a vastly and quickly expanding Empire, throughout Latin America and really around the world, and I don't have to tell you about that. But what one of the things that this empire provided was very cheap raw materials for a resurgent US economy in the post World War Two period. And it was through the use of torture among other methods, that the regimes that the US propped up in these places were able to maintain their power. And so we see this for example, with the tin mills in Bolivia. We see it with copper and other important materials in Chile. We see it all over us suppliers. For regimes from Greece to Indonesia, and the Philippines, and all of these, all of these places, provided raw materials. And we could argue that this is continuing to happen even today, you look at what's going on in the DRC. And the use, you know, which the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is the locus of some of the most important rare minerals that are needed for our current technology, boom. And I'm, the US, of course, has a long history in the Congo. And so, all of which is to say that, ultimately, the extraction of labor through the enforcement of physical pain in a very direct and ritualized and state supported way was sent Central to building the US economy in its earliest years and really, to some extent, even today. Does that help?

### **Danny Sjurson**

Oh, yeah, that's great. You know, what I really liked about your answer and about the project, which I'm going to 100% read is the way that you show that whether it's slavery or slave labor or prison labor, these aren't stagnant issues. I mean, they develop and they and they change and as a final note, before I go against my instincts and shut up so the other guys can jump in. I actually assigned Baptists book when I was allowed to design an advanced US history course that was great. Which it was great and the students really responded well to it. Not everyone when they figured out what I was doing was completely pleased. But I got away with that they couldn't they couldn't argue with the scholarship. So that was the advantage.

### **Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

Hii, it's Henri, I'm gonna jump in here. I have a question a little more central to post 911 policies. So I heard you mentioned in an interview on American Nuremberg, that you believe it would be a good step for the US government to write its own federal law against torture. And I'm curious as to why you think a law written that way would make the difference. You've mentioned in a different time dispatch piece, the idea that the results of Nuremberg could be simply seen as victors justice, and little more. And couldn't the powers that be simply wave this new law for their interrogators, so many other laws already get waived or given exceptions for military and intelligence operations?

## Rebecca Gordon

That is really good question. And, of course, the US actually has a law against torture. It's on paragraph 234 of the US criminal code, and it makes torture illegal anywhere outside the United States. And the reason for this is because when the US so the US signed the UN Convention Against Torture, but when the US signed it part of what the convention required was every country that signs it has to also create legal structures to implement the convention in their own country. And what the US argued was, we already have laws against assault, and laws against kidnapping and laws against battery in the United States. So we don't need any new laws for things that might happen inside the United States. So what we'll do is we'll pass a law saying it's illegal for anybody who's a US person to commit these acts outside of US territory. So One of the things I think I was probably talking about in that interview about American Nuremberg, was that we need an actual law against torture that takes place inside the us with an understanding that torture is different from simple battery from the things that one individual might do to another individual, but that it's an institutionalized practice that is embedded in the larger society. Do I think that having the laws will prevent people from torturing or will guarantee that people who do engage in it won't be exempted from any kind of, of justice? No, I don't. But I do think we can't. We are much worse off without the law. I think what I argue in American Nuremberg, is that although many people did claim that it was victor's justice and I think there's there's something To that, certainly to the extent that some of the people who organize the Nuremberg Trials really thought that almost immediately afterwards, there would also be trials of the Allies for things like the firebombing of Dresden or the fire bombing, that we don't hear about nearly as much of over 60 Japanese cities that completely destroyed those cities and incinerated millions of people, and that there would be an ongoing court whose purpose would be to hear these kinds of cases. And in fact, it took another 50 years for that court to exist. And it's the International Criminal Court, which the US Of course, withdrew from in 2002. After after the 911 attacks and after the start of the so called war on terror. I think that what Nuremberg did achieve, even if that achievement may not have held is the idea That international law is real law, and that violating international law can have real consequences. And as a person who believes that, you know, we're all sort of on this globe together, I think that the the hope of the species is in some ways, um, tied up with the possibility of having international structures and organizations that are effective. And even if laws are not always obeyed, that to me doesn't mean that we shouldn't have laws. But what it does mean is that's not where you stop. That's where you start. Then it takes agitation and political effort, and activism and the work of good lawyers and the work of people in the streets to actually see that the laws are enforced. I mean, another example would be going Back to 1954 when the Supreme Court decided in Brown versus Board of Education, that segregation of kindergarten through 12th grade schools was, was unconstitutional. That doesn't mean that segregation ended, you know, the next day. And in fact, the first actual desegregation of schools in the south didn't start until 1957, when nine students entered black students entered a white school in Little Rock, Arkansas. And in the end, the government had to actually call out the National Guard to protect them. So the federal government had to intervene to make it possible to desegregate schools. And there's a long history that is not the subject of this interview of what happened after that and how segregation was able how communities were able to resegregate their schools. But the point is that law by itself isn't enough. It also takes the action of citizens and other people living in a country to actually put that law into effect. Is that convincing?

**Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

I think so. I it's it's, it's hard for me to wrap my mind around because I asked myself about the the morality of other people that have been in the military. You know, here's, here's a good example of Tulsi Gabbard Tulsi. You know, when all this stuff came out about whether she supports torture or not, and that's that's not really the point, but that she clearly didn't understand that part of her oath made it clear that if she was protecting prisoners or detainees for any reason, that their health and welfare is in her hands, no different than a soldier under her command.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Right.

**Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

We're told to to ignore that and I think that's the problem is, you know, like you said is that we can we can make as many laws as we want, who's actually going to see that they're enforced? And I do agree with you the law should exist just because we haven't got it together to find a way to stop. It doesn't mean we shouldn't continue. Sorry, I lost my train of thought. But yeah.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah, no...exactly what you're saying that just because we have doubts about whether the law would be enforced adequately, doesn't mean we shouldn't have the law in the first place.

**Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

Right.

**Rebecca Gordon**

I think, you know, the point about about the oaths that soldiers take is a very important one, because I think, you know, you've heard the...I'm sure you know more about it than I do. The term moral injury. But one of the things that, you know, is clear to me even from talking to the veterans who've been in my classes, is how very difficult it is when one Orders conflict with the oath, right? When when soldiers are put in a position of either violating orders or violating oaths, and we know that they are not supposed to obey illegal orders. And that's a really easy thing for me to say sitting in my room in San Francisco, it's a very different thing to say, when the person who is giving you the orders is standing there with a gun, and in a position to, you know, to cause any kind of harm to you. And so I think, I think that even and tell me what you think. It seems to me that there's also a real disconnect between the military leadership of the in the US government and the civilian leadership at say the Pentagon who haven't taken those oats and haven't got the same commitment, say to Geneva or to the others. You know, the other laws of war, that, that that seems like a wedge point or a possible wedge point where you, you might be able to get some traction, but I don't know.

**Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

Post 911 or we've seen our generals, rubber stamp everything, you know, we sometimes on Twitter or other places people will talk about, you know, Martin Dempsey, he's a real good general he will he'll stand up and there have been a couple points that I've seen where generals have come up in defense

of Trump, but they're probably democratic leaning generals going after Trump. They're not doing it for any kind of morality play. And so it's it's all about what the orders are it's clearly that that's that's how it's always been anything else that we say are the rules is lip service, especially when no one who cares about them is looking. Yeah.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah. I I cannot imagine how difficult that is. I have friends who are about to talk about it. And yeah, it's, it's really hard. I was lucky that the time I spent wandering around in somebody else's war. I did it as an unarmed civilian. And you know, though, that I learned the origin of the expression "scared shitless" and there were definitely times I really thought that that was, you know that that was gonna be the end of my life within the next few minutes. But I was never put in a position of having to violate my own conscience. And I feel very grateful for that.

### **Keagan Miller**

It's interesting, you you bring up the point about working in with military and civilian leadership. I know, I worked. I was in the Navy, but I worked at NSA. So one of the NSA compounds in Georgia working with different UN agencies and different Special Forces groups doing activities in Yemen and Somalia and Libya and Syria. So a lot of the places that you were talking about, yeah. It I like I like what you said about all the legal thing. And the thing that bothers me the most about the law when it comes to what the government wants to have happen is that, and we talked about this a little bit when we were kind of talking about the torture report movie. We discussed how like the lawyers were sitting down in a room talking about Okay, well, what does, like we so mean, what does this mean? And it's like, that's the shift that they do is, uh, bring it down and say like, well, we're not breaking the law. we're defining this as Yes. Yep. For me as someone who works in different operations when you say something as an imminent threat, and you're working with, you know, an agency that that doesn't really um, Those two words don't actually fit the definition of what we're doing right is, it was fucking mind boggling and also really frustrating for me, like being the analyst being the person who, you know, I thought my job was to sit there and tell the truth and like, be objective. And here's the data. No, but it's, it's not about that. It's about like, if your data doesn't, doesn't coincide with the narrative or what the like, the operation generally is going, then, you know, oh, we're just kind of pushing it to the side. And it's really, it's really frustrating for me. So, I love that I love what you were talking about. My big question is about us since we're discussing. The idea is like, we want to be able to talk about this stuff. because things are classified. We can't always talk about them. And it's really frustrating for me having worked in the community because there's so much stuff that is over classified, like crazily and it's, it's, um, I listen to I read a bunch of stuff by the guy who is the classifications are under the first administration. And I just love everything he has to say because he is so dead on about how people will over classify things because they feel, you know, it'll make them look better. Like personally, they can say, Oh, look, I'm the origin. I'm the originating authority for this. So look at all the stuff that I classify. And some people won't even read stuff unless it's at a certain level of classification, which so some people will put things into a different level, specifically because they want people to read it...and

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Wow...wow

**Keagan Miller**

that really messes up the ability to like ask any real questions in detail because you can't because you can't say anything. And it was so frustrating to me just the stuff that I would read every day and like I had Yo, why is this classified the way it is? And why is this even classified? I can find this out on the internet.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Right? Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And, and so much of classification is used to protect people's butts.

**Keagan Miller**

Yes.

**Rebecca Gordon**

And but I had never heard before that the idea that you would use a higher classification to give an extra sheen to your own material. That is, that is just perverse, but it makes sense. And of course, you know, it makes it impossible for people who don't have security. Well, this is the thing though, it's not impossible. Like everything that I wrote in *Mainstreaming Torture* and *American Nuremberg*, it was all in the public domain. You know, Dana Priest at the at the Washington Post, wrote about stress and duress at Bagram Air Force Base in early 2002. You know, it wasn't a secret and yet it's classified So it's uh, it really does a number on your head and it must have been really hard for you.

**Keagan Miller**

Yeah, I mean, it's it's just frustrating when you want to ask questions and something that Danny talks about a lot, uh, we kind of, we talked about it in the pod is just the idea of the military cares, like they're focusing more on tactics than strategy. Everything is about short term gain and short term like resolution. And then we pat ourselves on the back and say, Look at how many things we did. And to say that like, by the act of doing something, we are creating progress, or we're not actually measuring progress.

**Rebecca Gordon**

And this is...this is this whole benchmarking and measuring is actually a way of evaluating work that doesn't even come from the military in the first place. It comes out of this the economic system we live in, in which the horizon That that even large corporations care about has been shortened to like the quarterly report, right? Anything that is longer a longer time than what the what the stock price is going to be at the end of the quarter becomes irrelevant. And the way that we measure work is exactly as you say, by checking off activities done, which have been identified in order to satisfy some goal that you've set for a very short time horizon. But nobody is asking, for example, as we're entering into a century in which the People's Republic of China is poised to become the most powerful nation in the world. What, what is the strategy if any, of the United States of America in relationship to that what's our strategy in relationship to Europe The European Union continent of Africa we we don't have strategies, your eye Yeah.

**Danny Sjursen**

You know, all of this is it's, it's fascinating and it's, it's disturbing. And I sometimes wonder, when we do these interviews...when I write my articles, you know, are we getting through to anybody, you know? It's like there's these camps. There's the camp that's, you know, fact and knowledge base and, and and believes that we can find some sort of truth whatever that is. And then, and then there's the then there's the political divide and there's the fake news and all of this descriptor and how you feel about China, which is like you mentioned this extraordinarily complex strategic geostrategic question often comes down to "Well, how do you feel about Trump?"

**Rebecca Gordon**

Right.

**Danny Sjursen**

And that kind of leads me to the next thing I want to ask you. So it's, it's a pivot Without a very good transition away from some of the torture talk, but we'd like to keep it fast and loose. There were there were two recent articles that you wrote. I think they were both for Tom but I, I stole the title from The Nation because I thought it was interesting for the question. So both of them interested me and it might not be obvious to most folks, but I at least you could correct me thought they were connected or they can be connected. The first was strange attractors,

**Rebecca Gordon**

Uhuh

**Danny Sjursen**

title this on being addicted to Trump in his press conferences. Of course, we're going to talk about that. And then the second one, which I think was right before was it was retitled by The Nation is how much cruelty can Trump get away with? Ask Obama. So you know, my thought has always been okay, it's clear Trump is unique, right? And he is no doubt obscene in a number of ways. That's got to be said. But he's also become like a media and public fixation obsession. If Trump is for it, half of America's against the you know, if Trump said Mussolini was an awful guy Mmm. See would do a biopic you know? That, you know, but then again, the Donald, the Donald came from somewhere besides Queens. And, you know, so my question is are you know, what do you think? And that's a big question for any guest, but what do you think is singular about Trump and his policies? And then what aspects of his first term do you think we're, we're more or most informed by the failures of the, you know, his predecessors or his forebears including Saint Obama, if any.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Okay, what do I think is unique about Trump? I think his particular constellation of failings is unique. He is probably the least prepared individual, at least certainly in my lifetime who has ever occupied the Oval Office. his lack of an attention span the the shallowness of his knowledge base. I mean, we had another example just last week when he suggested she maybe we should try drinking bleach as a solution to the corona virus. I mean, just the fact that just the fact that there is so little knowledge about anything in that head and his his unwillingness to add to his knowledge, and his, you know, purse, his

constellation of narcissism and all of that, all of that is unique and unpleasant and horrible. What is not unique is the ways that the republican party has been able to use his presidency to implement the kinds of policies that they have wanted to implement for decades, ever since they lost The White House after Ronald Reagan. I mean, things they weren't able to get done during either of the bush administration's. They have been able to do these gigantic tax cuts in 2017 that have so deeply exacerbated the inequality in this country. The attacks on organized labor, which of course begin with Ronald Reagan, but continue up to this day, the arm, the pudding, the placement of supreme court justices, the the incredible disarticulation the taking apart of a whole regime of regulations that protect the environment that are designed to make an attempt to reduce the emissions of carbon dioxide and methane and other greenhouse gases. That withdrawal from the, from the I'm not sure the entire republican party wanted the us out of the Iran treaty, but they certainly wanted the us out of the Paris accord on climate change. So all of these And sort of the general transfer of money from poor people to the pockets of rich people has accelerated under the Trump presidency. And these are things that that are part of the plain old regular republican agenda. So, so that is not a surprise in the realm of foreign policy. And I would say that, as I said before, you know, Trump is, um, is a very strange combination of isolationism and wanting a military that what he wants is trappings. He's very excited, for example, that the Blue Angels are going to be doing air shows around the country in order to pick up our spirits now. I personally hate it when the Blue Angels fly over my city because I don't want them to crash on my house. And also because I still have a sort of weird...the only airplanes that went over Nicaragua during the time I was there were, for the most part not a good thing. So in any case, um he so he loves the trappings. He wanted to have that big military parade but in terms of actual U.S. action. Here's a place where I think he has really violated the postwar foreign policy consensus between the Republicans and the Democrats, and where there is some daylight between him and the Republican establishment because whatever he may say about America First, the actual steps that he has taken have significantly reduced the power of the United States on the international scene and that's not just because of his disease. desire to draw down the military. And I'm not sure how much he's actually drawn it down, to be honest. But because of his refusal to participate in the international arenas where the US is used to leading. What I wrote about in that that piece from The Nation that you were mentioning, is that it was that came out right after the Senate voted to acquit him after his impeachment. And what I said there was that the the idea of impunity for elected officials or appointed officials, the idea of acute impunity was not something that begins with the Trump administration, and that we can look back to, for example, the Obama administration's response to the reality. I mean, Obama ran on a platform that he was going to close Guantanamo, and he was going to end torture, in addition to a number of other things, and as we know Guantanamo is still open, and when he began to address the question of torture, which he did almost he really did before after he was elected before he even took office. And certainly, the day after he took office, he issued Executive orders, forbidding so called enhanced interrogation and closing down the CIA's black sites. But as he constantly said, we have to look forward and not backwards. And what that meant was nobody was ever held accountable by the US itself, for any of the torture or other violations of the laws and customs of war that the US committed during the entire Bush administration during the tire, so called war on terror. I mean, the only people who really ever were convicted, were a few of the reservists who were let loose in Abu Ghraib in Iraq and in order to get the admiration of the CIA and the contractors upstairs, did what we know, because we have the pictures happened at Abu Ghraib. And they were really the only people who are

almost the only people who suffered any kind of any kind of consequences. So a lack of accountability in one administration sets the table for a lack of accountability in a new administration. And that is exactly what we've seen here.

### **Danny Sjursen**

Absolutely, it was extraordinarily disturbing for me to watch some of Obama's moves specifically around the issues of accountability. I was one of those folks who kind of fell for the I think, because I just gotten back from Iraq. did a little bit of secret work in southern Indiana, which we will Right for the first time since like 64, it was probably it was probably me getting yelled out on people's front steps. That did it. I take credit. But But you know, I was a real believer just got back from Iraq. Okay, this guy's going to end it and and and then of course a broader thing and and yet like you mentioned Guantanamo is open and that's not all of his fault but I mean they're putting people on hospice care there. Yeah. And I'm left with, you know, which means that that's the government admitting these people will die there, some number of them. There's no plan to really prosecute most of them or we can't. And I am often left wondering on this tangent, how do we meet make the American people feel empathy for quote, terrorists, right for 100 odd guys that are still down in Guantanamo? I don't know. I don't know what you think about that. But it seems like maybe that's almost an impossibility in these moments.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

I think right now, it's very hard to get the American people to feel empathy for anything but their immediate family just because of the coronavirus I mean, you know, I'm used to reading the news every day. And I also listen to the BBC for what we call the Imperial news. Which is, you know, it's it is the Imperial news, but at least they have a wider view of the world than, say, NBC or CBS. So you get, you get a slightly different take on things. But most people in this country, even when they're not facing a pandemic, and losing their income and terrified about how they're going to pay the rent, are not really eager to think about places outside the United States. And so getting people to have sympathy for for, you know, 40 odd guys or 100, however many there are down there in Guantanamo i think is not going to happen. And this is where I think that the work that's going to be done is going to be done by lawyers who, you know some of these jag lawyers are really my heroes, these people who have, you know, who are the defense and who have been insisting on actually defending their clients. I honestly think that the people who are going to be in hospice care are going to die in Guantanamo. I think Abu Zubaydah is going to die in Guantanamo. And it's just a horrendous travesty in the midst of, of a period of unprecedented horror, and I mean, will not unprecedented I would say World War Two was pretty awful. But when I think about the number of human disasters that are happening around the world, and how they have disappeared, I mean, the Locust invasion in East Africa would have been one of the biggest stories of this time period, except that it's fallen completely off the front page because of the corona virus. And the problem of getting people in this country to care about anything outside this country is one that I've been working on since I was about 13. And first oppose the Vietnam War. So, if you have a solution, let me know, I do it reach, sort of on a retail level teaching college, you know, it's not, it's really one by one. And it's not, um, it's not politics in the same way. It's not movement building. But I have derailed more than one business students career, so I feel good about that.

### **Danny Sjursen**

Well, I will tell you right there if you got one less person to go to Goldman Sachs, the world is a better place. So no, that's that's great. And yeah, Keagan, why don't you broaden this out to the national security state a little bit.

### **Keagan Miller**

Um, yeah. So it's interesting talking just about what Obama did versus bush and everything I was I saw I was in the community from 2009 to 2013 when I was in the Navy, so I was part of that whole transition from Yeah. You know, people like on the ground to us basically doing everything via drones and special fortnight's community. And it was really frustrating for me, because I also liked Danny I was very like, hell yeah. And 2008 I remember like, I was from Illinois, so he was my senator when I first met him. And I was like, holy shit, this guy has something, you know, so I got swept up in it too. And it was just really frustrating for me though, working in the community and like, working, uh, you know, basically creating foreign policy with what we were doing. And it was really frustrating that like, you know, we there the question of stopping never came up. The question of is this working? Like in the real sense of like, are we accomplishing what we set out to do? That wasn't a real question. And, you know, we were just supposed to be happy with what we were doing. And so like, I think for me, the biggest thing that I found that helps helps people see perspective is to bring it to them, you know, where you say, like, hey, if you got kidnapped from your house, because somebody told you, Oh, you were a part of this thing, and you had no idea or maybe tangentially like, you knew somebody that did? You know, oh, you would, you would not be okay with that. That's how I tried to get people to think about the war in Yemen and think about the operations that I was a part of, particularly because they weren't getting a lot of attention at the time. But, um, it's, I know that that works. Anecdotally, sometimes. And it also works sometimes on a smaller level. Like what you were saying But I wondering, what are some of the big in your mind? What are some of the big policy reforms that we can make to really shift our perspective?

### **Rebecca Gordon**

I think this is going to seem sort of like a tangential answer. But I have felt for the last 20 years that what I am doing and what the activists that I know are doing, is attempting to bring if we think about the US Empire, as an airliner that is in desperate trouble and is perhaps, you know, ran into a wind shear or something and is now plummeting towards the Earth. I've sort of felt like what I'm trying to we're trying to do is bring it in for a soft landing, causing as little damage underneath us as possible. In other words, I think that I'm the There are forces that are even larger than the US Empire at work that are in fact going to constrain the US not in the immediate term, not in the next five years, maybe not in the next 10 years. But that there are in fact, forces that are going to change the balance of power at, you know, the International strategic level, and that a dying Empire is a very, very dangerous thing, and that as it thrashes around to mix my metaphors, it's kicking a whole lot of people in the process. And so I not sure that the that the sort of the pivot that the wedge that we have to, or the way that we can accelerate this process is necessarily with policy proposals. I mean, for example, all during the Bush administration and indeed the the Obama administration. There was an organization called move the money. And the objective was to take money from the military budget and to move it into human needs inside the United States. And you would think that this would be something that would naturally appeal to many, many people. And in fact, for back during the Vietnam War, they used to do this, this project at state fairs, where you'd set up a table and you'd have give everybody 100 pennies and ask them to

divide their pennies into the things they wanted to see the federal budget spend money on. And it would always end up that the things people actually wanted. The money spent on were things like education and health care, and, you know, a building roads or whatever, and very little of it was actually on the military. But in fact, because there's so much money tied up in In the military, and in production for the military, those those changes that people would like to see are not ever reflected. So I wish that I could say that projects like move the money that focus on on building a, an a budget for human needs as opposed to human destruction. What I will say is that this particular moment is the first time in at least 20 years, when something external, the corona virus, something that has had an effect that nothing you know, else has had of shutting down most of the US economy for a prolonged period of time. Does maybe give us a moment when we can talk about reorganizing our own society, along the lines of providing for what I think of as real national security, the security of the people who live in this country, and meaning their health, their ability to take care of themselves and their family, the possibility of having meaningful work, all of the things that make for a good life. Let's think about reorganizing our economy in that direction. And you know, given that we have an election coming up in November, we do in a way have an opportunity that we haven't had in a long time to propose policies that actually would benefit human beings as opposed to a very few very wealthy human beings. So all of which is to say that, that this is a moment we shouldn't lose. This is a moment we need to take advantage of because we're not going to get another chance like this for a long time.

### **Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

So, building on the systemic issues that Keagan and Danny mentioned, one of the things that we talked about a lot in the pod is the ways that empires eventually tend to come home. Mm hmm. And I'm thinking right now of troops that are used to abusing detainees or using unnecessary force, easily transition over to being police officers or prison guards, who end up doing the same thing. Certainly not everybody but a sizable portion. Can you discuss some of the nexus between torture policies by a US foreign under US foreign policy, and the law enforcement and prison industry?

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Oh, yeah, the connection is extremely direct. And you're exactly right. It's the same personnel and interestingly, in some cases, it actually starts with people who are already corrections officers who are brought into the military so for example, it was people who were reservists but were largely prison guards in real life, who helped to design the the camp at Guantanamo camp X ray and the the first, the first installations at Guantanamo. And in fact, one of the most notorious Chicago policemen was one of the people who actually consulted with the military on the design of Guantanamo. And he was notorious for essentially torturing confessions out of people who were arrested in Chicago. Similarly, the reservists who were at Abu Ghraib were most of them corrections officers and civilian life. So they already came with a set of a set of ideas about how prisoners ought to be treated. So those things go in both directions. But yes, we are seeing as you say that Many people, especially enlisted soldiers, who come back to the US find that their army experience doesn't necessarily make them the most attractive employees for a lot of employers, and a lot of them do end up using that experience in prisons, jails, and on police forces. And the prisons of the US have long been a locus of torture another place where torture was a common. And in fact, Harry Blackmun, who was a Justice of the Supreme Court back in the 90s wrote about how torture was actually common in US prisons. And there are a number of

different kinds of torture, one of which is the routine systemic use of rape in both men's and women's prisons, and as well as exposure to heat and cold, physical punishment, all of the things that we say See deployed in in interrogations, we also see and of course, isolation, sleep deprivation, those. Another place where we're seeing a direct connection between the military and police forces is in the, the, the gift of material, the gift of military hardware to police forces, so that for example, in East Oakland, which is right across the bay from where I am in San Francisco, I have friends who are used to seeing m reps, per you know, parading patrolling the streets of East Oakland, it's similarly they get night goggles, they get assault weapons, they get all kinds of weaponry that really are more suited to deployment in some kind of Battlefield than they are to policing a neighborhood. were kids and grownups and you know, people are just going about their lives. So the connection is very, very direct and, and Henry, as you say, if somebody has learned in the military, that he or she has the right to abuse someone in their power, then that person is going to carry that belief into a civilian job, especially if it's a job which gives that person legal power over the lives of other people. And it's, it's a very, it's a very real problem.

### **Danny Sjursen**

Well, yes, and, you know, East Oakland has some MRAP's. I was doing some work on an empire comes home piece, and it's really, I guess, small towns in you know, Indiana and Wisconsin. Also need em MRAP's. You know, people, I found one town in southern Indiana that hadn't had a murder, so It's like the Kennedy administration. But but they have like MRAP's. I mean, and it's it's some it's actually funny it's so absurd but at the same time you know you mentioned it comes into the prisons but it also comes out onto the streets. You know, my academic work is actually on a totally different subject: race in New York City and you look at how we get used to being an occupying power right we get used to being this force and so then the people if you're a police officer later that you're supposed to be serving become the enemy I mean, just my natural binary and it's really dangerous. So you know, again, very rapidly transitioning from there I you know, I was reading about your life through through some my pre pod you know, mild cyber stalking. I'm usually on the receiving end of that because I am single, and I I have a disturbing amount of public you know, info there about me, which is usually problematic But you know, but but something that did stand out and about your writing and teaching is, you know, like I said, dare I say, first and foremost, you started you seem to remain an activist, a social justice warrior. You know, we always shy from those things, but there's, it's the it really is the work that needs to be happening. So you've probably, if you have more time on your hands than you should, may have seen that in some of my recent verbose scrolling. As a history, dork, I've been just on like an Africa spiral. We Southern Africa, this is what happens to me, I get into these manic phases and quarantines not helping. But, you know, I saw that you had done work in South Africa, in Pretoria, I believe. And I was wondering if you could, you know, do two things and that is, you know, tell listeners a little bit about that work, what it was like to be in that moment in South Africa. You know, I think it's largely been forgotten the extent to which we supported apartheid. directly and indirectly and then. And then a lot of these connections about policing and race are of course happening here. And then yeah, so if you could tell us some some relevance if you see any, from that international opposition movement to pay the fight today, right? Mm hmm.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Well, I have to say. So my partner Jan and I, and third person spent three months in South Africa, actually, mostly in Cape Town. And I spent a little bit of time in Joburg as well. And Jan spent some time in a rural town called oats firm out on the Eastern Cape, but, um, but it was an amazing moment to be there because it was in 1990. And we were there from June, July and August. And so are actually April May and June is what it was. And in February Nelson Mandela was released from prison and the ANC See was unbanned. But during the time that we were there, all of the legal structures of apartheid were still in place. So it was this very strange Limbo moment when everyone in the country was waiting to see what the New South Africa was going to be. So it was a very, very strange and fascinating moment, an incredible privilege to be there. What we were doing was working. We were doing desktop publishing training for an anti apartheid newspaper in Cape Town. And they were working on these little Mac, the old macintoshes that had the little nine inch screen, and they wanted to move to using that to do page layout for for their tabloid sized newspaper. And so we were we were helping with that and the technical stuff of it was part of it was sort of interesting. But yeah, it was so..we actually were incredibly lucky with the things that we got to do. I got we got to go to the first open meeting of the ANC in Cape Town in since 1953, since the ANC had been banned. And we saw Joe slovo speak. And we we were out on a plane outside of, of Cape Town with 40,000 other people and it was just extraordinary. We had a chance to, I was in Soweto for for June 12. For the Youth Day, the the memorial to the sharp town massacres. And I was in a the ANC had been slow on the uptake and so another party had managed to get to rent the biggest stadium I'm in Soweto, so we had one that was half that size. And there were 70,000 people easily in a stadium that was built for 35,000. And at one point, when I was trying to get into the stadium, there were so many people walking that I was lifted up off the ground, my feet were no longer touching the ground it was, and I was one of like, three or four white people, and I got to hear Miriam Makeba sing and I got to, I mean, it was, it was an extraordinary moment. And it was a moment when people in the ANC discovered that Jen that Jen and I, and especially that I had worked in, in Nicaragua, and again, this is 1990. So this was the year that the Sandinistas lost the election and the the opposition uno got in and and the Sandinistas after kind of loot looting the place they did actually hand over power to the other arm to the other country and we could do a whole other part on what I think about what's happening in Nicaragua now. But anyway, they wanted to know what were the mistakes that the FSL n the Sandinistas had made that the ANC should avoid. And of course, we're just, you know, a couple of weird white lesbians from from the United States. But, you know, we talked about one of the one of the real weaknesses, actually, of the, of the Sandinistas that led to a real division between the Atlantic and the Pacific coast of the country was their own racism, and especially their racism towards indigenous people and the people of African descent who live in the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. But sort of one of the emblematic moments for me when I was during during this this time was, we were asked to design a flyer, and I was for the first meeting. In a particular neighborhood of Capetown, of the ANC, and they said, I'm the woman who asked me said, you know, here's the text, come elect your leaders. Here's the date, here's the place, you know, meet your, you know, come to the to this first NC meeting. And so I did the flyer, you know, come elect your leaders, blah, blah, blah. She came back to me a day later. And she was really embarrassed that she had to ask me to make a change in the flyer. And the change was, instead of come electoral leaders, it said, Come meet your leaders. And the ANC was facing this very real problem of how to move from having been an illegal clandestine organization, where everybody had to be of the very highest confidence in order to be participants in the movement to suddenly becoming a mass movement, that end of mass party that

could that would still maintain its commitment to the freedom charter to the values that had, you know, that had animate the ANC all those years. And I think one of the things that the ANC has discovered is that, you know, is Mr. Trotsky said all those years ago, it's really hard to create socialism in one country. And that they were, you know, that a free South Africa was still very much implicated and tied up in a larger international capital system. And, frankly, there were some people who stole stuff which unfortunately happens a lot in, in regimes all over the world, including the US. Um, I'm actually a Sarah Chase front fan, or at least I don't know if I'm a fan of her, but I think her her book themes of nations is actually really really good about the role that currently plays in destroying democracy. So, um, another moment that I had, that I will never forget is that Jan and I were invited to a meeting of the organization of lesbian and gay activists in Cape Town, which and it was held in a tiny little house, in a neighborhood in Cape Town. And the reason we were invited was that Alby Sacks, who later became the supreme justice of, of, or the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, in, in South Africa, was visiting various sectors of the country to try to discover what kind of language they would like to see, that concern their own sector in a new constitution for South Africa. And so in Cape Town, he was meeting with the LGBT community. And, you know, this was a community that had had a role in the democratic movement against apartheid. But it was a very conflicted role. And not everybody was thrilled to have queer people in their movement. But he came. And we were invited, and I got to shake his left hand because his right hand had been blown off by the South African defense forces with the letter bomb and had a chance to, you know, listen to him talking with gay people, not just from Cape Town, but also from the townships outside of Cape Town. And it was an extraordinary moment in history, in which, you know, and in fact, the South African constitution enshrines all kinds of rights for gay people that are not present directly in the US Constitution. So it was the but the the answer to the question you started out with, you know, relationship to the United States, Jen and I very quickly quickly said to each other, this country is the place that is most like the United States of anywhere we have ever been. And this is why, if you were white in South Africa at that time, it was entirely possible to live your life literally without knowing the reality of the lives of the majority of people in your own country, that that being the people of African descent, and also the people of South Asian descent, but you could live as a white person and have no idea what the life of the woman who came to clean your house or take care of your children was like when she got on that overpack bus and went back to to Soweto or wherever she was on Google a to or whatever township she was living in, you did not have to know and this was to me so so caught, comparable to the lives of white people in this country who unless they choose to No, do not have to know. Because it's not going to come and hit them in the face about the lives of people of color, and especially of African Americans in this country, you can live a white solid life, and never really be disturbed by the reality of racism in this country. And the same thing was true under apartheid in South Africa. You know, there were all kinds of books that were banned in South Africa, but you could go to the local mall and buy them if you wanted them. It's just nobody wanted them. And that was, you know, every country constructs race in a different way. So the way race works in South Africa is a little bit different from the way it works in the United States. And the hierarchy is a little bit differently constructed than it is here in the US, but the fact that this There's a hierarchy and the fact that it affects people's lives is, is absolutely true in both countries. To the extent that when I was working in 1995, and 96, with an organization called Californians for justice, and we were opposing a ballot initiative that eliminated affirmative action in the in California at all levels of state government, we actually hosted a delegation of us of civic organizations from South Africa, who are now living in a post apartheid South

Africa, who wanted to learn about what are the things that can be done to root out the structures of racism once the legal support for racism is gone, and yet, the institutional structures are obviously still in place. And so they were very interested in affirmative action. By the way in Britain is called positive discrimination as as one of these possible approaches. So post apartheid South Africa, I think has is entering into the kind of period that the United States has been in since the end of reconstruction, and continues to be in today in which the legal underpinnings of segregation for example, are gone. And yet segregation as an institutional structure continues in Resident residents in education in employment. So that's a very long winded answer.

**Danny Sjursen**

Well, I love it. I'm a long winded person by nature. I really liked how you connect to the United States. I was listening to either a podcast or someone's interview where they were, it was a South African and they were saying You know, what was it like during apartheid? How did the the rest of the world respond? And the very interesting answer was that this gentleman gave was actually that, you know, folks in the United States and in places like Australia, in some ways, saw themselves in the South African situation better than a lot of Europeans or other folks. And so I really like that, of course, I stole the the word for my ongoing dissertation, which I call apartheid New York, which I think I think I only did that just to really upset people. Because it is really fun for me to alienate my family in Whitestone Island. But, you know, go ahead.

**Rebecca Gordon**

The teacher in me is totally fascinated to learn more about your dissertation.

**Danny Sjursen**

Oh, well, I will tell you what, I'll be very happy to send you an intro to read and then you could tell me if you want more. It's It's It's an interesting thing. And I do think there are so many connections and of course, you know, I'll dare go there. Because I just have to when Tom first started publishing my stuff, and with regularity, he gave me very little advice. But there were two things he mentioned. And they weren't really strictures so much as just Hey, this is just something to think about. He said, Well, number one, don't read the comments when people.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah.

**Danny Sjursen**

But of course, in the beginning, you're just so excited to be published. And that's like telling someone not to look down. Right. So from height, so I read all the comments. And then he said, just be careful about writing about Israel. He didn't say, don't do it. He is strong on that. But he said, You're a new writer. Just be careful everything you say, you're going to be an anti Semite. And of course, yeah, then I took the opposite advice and decided to write a ton about so look that and that's that's a touchy subject and authors have played with it an activist, but I have no expectation of your answer. I'm interested. What do you think you know, Israel, occupation, torture, dare I say apartheid. Is there a connection? And what value does it have, if any?

## **Rebecca Gordon**

So, my father grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Norfolk, Virginia. And his father was the president of the Norfolk Zionist club in the 1930s. And my father and I had a tacit, unspoken agreement that we would never ever discuss that part of the world, because we both knew that we would say unforgivable things to each other. If we did, and I'm, I've never been to Israel. I've been to Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, in 2006. And I was actually in Lebanon. If we had done our trip in the opposite order that we had planned it and done Lebanon last, we would have actually been there when Israel invaded Lebanon once again, So, yeah, let's let's talk about it. Because, you know, I grew up believing that. Here's the story right? After World War Two, the whole world felt so sorry for what had happened to the Jews, my people, that they all got together and gave them their own country. And it's called Israel. And that was more or less the story that I grew up with. And as you know, I got older and kind of matured a little bit and began thinking about these things. Some friends of mine in the early 80s began asking questions about if your interest as an American Jew is in your security and your safety in the world as a Jew. It could be argued that the existence and the actions of the State of Israel do not actually make you safer, but they actually put you in greater danger. Because if Israel insists on identifying itself as a Jewish state, and then performs actions, including among other things, training the Contra performs actions that are unconscionable, then people are going to associate those actions with Jews. And I continue to think that the survival of my people is not, I'm made more likely by the actions of the State of Israel. So here's the thing. I honestly think that there is a contradiction between the idea that a state is Jewish that is exists for a particular ethnic group, and that a state is democratic. These two things do not actually pulled together, which is why you know the UN General Assembly years ago said that Zionism is racism, which, you know, when you first hear it sounds like anti semitism. But if by Zionism You mean, the belief that there should be a nation which exists solely for the benefit of members of one ethnic group, then? Yeah, that is racism. I don't think there's any question that Israel even among Jews in Israel, that there's profound racism so that those Jews who came from Yemen or who came even the the bot Israel from who were discovered in Ethiopia, who apparently had been so sequestered from the rest of the world that they didn't even know that the Second Temple had fallen in 70 ad, and were rescued by Israel during the during the famine in in Ethiopia and brought to Israel. Those people have Not exactly been treated like first class citizens by white or European descent Israelis. But absolutely the the process of annexation of the West Bank. And now, you know, with Bibi's Benjamin Netanyahu, his latest announcements about his intention to to legally annex most of the settlements in the West Bank. There's absolutely no question that this leads to the creation of an apartheid state where the where the separation is even greater, in some ways than it was in South Africa and South Africa. White people had black people working in their homes. And certainly in Israel, there are Palestinians working in construction and working inside Israel and some of them even live in Israel. Israeli Arabs, but there is a literal, physical, separate wall, you know, the model for the wall on the Mexican border I imagine that separates and creates an apartness between these two groups of people. So yeah, I can go there. And, and to me it's really really painful as a nice Jewish girl who goes to an Episcopal Church to see the the perversion of a tradition of justice and concern for the widow and the orphan and the the belief in a divine who works towards justice in history to see it perverted in this way is very, very painful.

## **Danny Sjursen**

Yeah, I...I'm, I think that's a great answer and I can't imagine the just, you know, the the turmoil that some must feel about this because there is such a rich tradition. You know, I studied civil rights and the connection between American Jews I mean, getting murdered, right, like teaching and then active, you know, it's an amazing tradition, right. It's not perfect, but it's an amazing tradition. And I think that one thing that you brought up that's interesting is, you know, is how, in some ways, the separateness in the occupied territories and in Israel is even greater than South Africa. And one of the things that strikes me is, you know, us sort of an anti apartheid activist in the States. And and then over in South Africa, one of the things that strikes me is that, you know, whether it's the anti BDS legislation or any of the other just kind of public policy, there has almost been more of a blackout against even personal activism or personal boycotts against the occupation, then there ever were, during what turned out to be a pretty rich, anti apartheid, you know, private activism in the United States and worldwide. There's been like a squelching of it in the United States. I mean, So whereas you have, you know, Rosa Parks was, you know, picketing the South African embassy long after people forgot about the bus incident or only remember the bus inside. And you just don't see quite as much of that whether it's a media blackout or Congress almost I think only 16 people voted against it. The anti BDS legislation is really profound.

### **Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah, no, it is. It's very profound and it's very self serving. And, um, you know, that the US is strategic use of Israel, in the Middle East as a bastion against, you know, as, as a place to defend us oil interests, even though you know, Israel doesn't have oil, but but our use of that place for our own strategic purposes, has been, you know, very deforming to what could have been in Israel and To um, you know, it's it's interesting for many years, I the sort of the little formula that people I knew like to use was a democratic secular Israel as sort of the solution that it would be one country that would be secular that would and would be genuinely democratic. And then for many years after Oslo the The goal was a two state solution, which to me always looked like kind of a bad deal, honestly. And it got to be a worse and worse deal, the more of the West Bank, the Israel began, you know, took over. And now I think we're back to the only hope for Israel is as a democratic secular country. And yeah, I forget how I got there from the question you asked me, forgive me now my train of thought is just has left the station.

### **Danny Sjursen**

Well, we've kept you on so long. That's that's probably Part of it. You know, it's, it's it's so important. And the blackout of that issue has really bothered me. I mean, I just I just watched my 11 year old has the, the ill experience probably of having homeschooling from a manic history. He said he's reading, you know, he's reading a book about the Crusades right now of course. Oh, wow. And, and then we watched like a movie Kingdom of Heaven, which is flawed, but decent cinema. And then I told him, I said, Well, you know, they're still fighting over Jerusalem and, and all these things. And, you know, he was blown away by just some minor or at least he pretended to be to keep me happy by some photos I showed him from today. And you know, it's, he's 11 but, you know, the a lot of this isn't talked about, so I think it's, we do. Yeah. And all right, Keagan, why don't you take us out, buddy?

### **Keagan Miller**

Okay, so we've done our best not to talk about coronavirus. But I just wanted to ask you, is there anything that you feel like we should be paying attention to particularly right now?

**Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah, absolutely. I think we should be paying it. And I sort of foreshadowed that a little while ago, I think we should be paying attention to what kinds of policies we want to put in places we're coming out of this. And, you know, specifically I think this is really a tipping point for climate change. And if we can come out of coronavirus with an understanding that, that we actually like having clean skies and clean water and that the world really can be damaged by things that happen and the human species can genuinely be threatened and Therefore, let us come together as we thought the coronavirus to also take a look at um, at a climate change. The other thing I would say is what what the coronavirus in this country has done is absolutely pulled back all the curtains on inequality in this country on racial inequality, economic inequality, health care. If nothing else, we should at the very least be able to get universal health care for people in this country as a result of Coronavirus. I think that it has absolutely clarified especially to people who thought they were okay because they had healthcare through their employer. Just how vulnerable we all really are. So, yeah, those are my hopes.

**Keagan Miller**

I also am in that same mode where I'm feeling like that. Yeah, those people who are uncomfortable in a way that they really haven't been, particularly white people. And just understanding that like, oh shit like we are. We are vulnerable, that we didn't think that we weren't. So how do we correct that, not by freaking out and trying to reopen really quickly and go back to normal, but by coming up with new ways and new thoughts of of, of just ways of doing things. I mean, like I think about the price of oil right now. The storage is are filling up and so the price has been dropping. And Henry and I live here in the Portland area. Uh huh. I was going to get gas the other day. And I was like, Oh, 224 I haven't seen gas that cheap but a long time.

**Rebecca Gordon**

I'll buy a lot.

**Keagan Miller**

Yeah, and my wife is from she's from the Bay Area from Concord. And so she's like, I've never seen gas that she ever...yeah, and I know it's a But it's only like temporary. But the idea is like we can do fine, we can still thrive with less...we can still thrive in a way that everybody has their needs met, or at least, you know, generally. And we don't have to like go after these crazy profit schemes. We

**Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah.

**Keagan Miller**

we can just do fine with less. And yes, I know it sucks because certain size parts of the economy are really going to hurt from this. Retail restaurants. I know that they're going to that like, we're not going to be able to go back to that for a while.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Your night here, the hospitality union 98% of their members have lost their jobs. And yeah, the most powerful unions in the country.

**Keagan Miller**

We're seeing an Oregon like the restaurants are like a 81% layoff. And I know that every state is probably doing the same. So like we can't just leave these people in the lurch. We have to figure something else out. And I think that there is a real like, like you said, there's a real opportunity for us to actually get some of these policies pushed.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Yeah, I agree.

**Chris 'Henri' Henrikson**

Very, very glad that Bernie, although his campaign didn't do as well as, as we all hoped, elevated the issue of Medicare for all, and combining that with the virus, there may be conditions where something like that would be much more plausible.

**Rebecca Gordon**

Henry, I think you're exactly right. And Bernie, whether or not he gets he got the nomination, he has absolutely pushed the democratic party to the left in ways that I haven't seen in a long time. And I also want to give a shout out to my, my gal, Elizabeth Warren, because I think she also helped, but yeah, I think you're right about Medicare for All. I hope so. Anyway, Me too. Me too.

**Danny Sjursen**

I'm glad you brought up. Liz Warren, one of my dorky interests. I don't know how I stay single. Is that a fun thing for me at night? A guilty pleasure as watching YouTube videos but bliss Warren grill Wall Street folks. So I kind of hope that she doesn't become vice president. Because I'm someone asked to do it and what am I gonna watch when I feel better? About the university? senate? So yeah, this has been great, Rebecca, and thank you so much for Thank you, Dan. It I think you proved that we can cover an enormous range of topics if we have the right people who have just the breadth of experience that you do. And I agree that the the, the mccobb gift gift of Corona is its exposure of the system of the flaws, and hey, whether it's in the classroom or your activism, you're doing something and I have to tell myself that every night so that I can sleep but assure you that you are and I've been reading you for a while. While and let's do that let's do that Nicaragua episode. So I'll be in touch about that.

**Rebecca Gordon**

I'd love to. Yeah, yeah,

**Danny Sjursen**

We're super interested.

**Rebecca Gordon**

And so just so you know, this is a mutual admiration society because I've been reading your stuff too. And I think it's phenomenal. So...

**Danny Sjursen**

well, thank you so much. And we'll do this again. And hey, just just tell us Haymarket books is is your next work. Is there a tentative date?

**Rebecca Gordon**

In theory, it's spring of 2021. But Tom keeps moving the deadline back so I don't know.

**Danny Sjursen**

All right, that's great. Well, I hope people will check it out. And thanks again, Rebecca. And let's do this again soon. I'll be in touch for sure.

**Rebecca Gordon**

All right. Take care. Bye bye.

**Danny Sjursen**

Great. Bye.