FREE FORUM with TERRENCE McNALLY - A WORLD THAT JUST MIGHT WORK

ANNIE LEONARD & ANDRE CAROTHERS, PROTEST: Respect it. Defend it. Use it.

Transcript – Conversation recorded 05-27-2026

Hello, I'm Terrence McNally. Welcome to Free Forum: A World That Just Might Work. And I'm going to be speaking today with Annie Leonard and Andre Carothers - both longtime activists and previous guests on Free Forum - about the new book they've written together, PROTEST: *Respect It, Defend It, Use It*. And you can learn more at theprotestbook, all one word, theprotestbook.com.

On Free Forum, we explore the lives that work the ideas of individuals that I suspect have pieces of the puzzle of a world that health culture, all the fact that I believe we can do better and I want to find out how.

The show plays weekly on the Progressive Voices Network on tunein.com and podcasts are available anytime, anywhere on Apple Podcasts, YouTube, and at my site, terrencemcnelly.net.

I've recorded, as I said, previous conversations with both of today's guests Annie and Andre. Andre joined me in 2004 to talk about Rockwood Leadership, a training organization for activists, which I remember one of the key features was that it included the recognition that self-care was an important component of activism so that people wouldn't burn out.

And then Annie Leonard and I did one in 2007 on her viral video, The Story of Stuff. And I mentioned to her a quirky thing, which is that if you go to her Wikipedia page, the first reference is a reference to that interview that she and I did in 2007 when I wrote it up as an article on alternet.org.

So first of all, let me say, I'm thankful we're all still alive and kicking and doing the work of civil society.

My first protest was probably 1965 or ‘66, my first couple of years in college, against the war in Vietnam. My guests are 10 to 15 years younger than I, but both have been at it for 40 plus years. And as soon as I saw that they collaborated on this new book, I reached out to schedule this conversation.

Of protest, Andre writes, "When nonviolent, organized, and uncompromising, it has proven itself to be the force that bends - albeit sometimes circuitously - the arc of the moral universe toward justice." He credits Henry David Thoreau, the subject of a recent three-part documentary under the Ken Burns leadership on PBS, which although it has played, is available to stream, and I highly recommend it.

He credits Henry David Thoreau with the insight that “…even small numbers practicing systematic non-cooperation could paralyze unjust power structures. And in the last

two centuries, this has been refined by its practitioners into an approach that has toppled governments, liberated populations oppressed by laws and legislation, and freed people immobilized by prisons and prejudices.” Those are Andre's words.

Annie reminds us, “The right to protes, enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, is central to America's origin story and national sense of identity. The 18th century colonists who 250 years ago - this is that birthday - declared we ‘hold these truths to be self-evident’, had themselves engaged in acts of protest against a distant monarchy's attempts to control them.

Protest works. Protest is necessary - and now I say as much as at any moment in my lifetime, including those crazy '60s and '70s. And as we celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary, the right to protest is under attack, and we will talk about that.

The new book offers history and how-to, challenge and inspiration, and the website offers resources and links to help you to act on the subtitle - to respect, defend, and use protest. There's much I hope we'll talk about today.

How did this project come together? How did they choose their approach? What did they learn in the process? How is protest under threat? And how can listeners make the most of their initiative? And so much more.

ANNIE LEONARD is a lifelong activist who has protested globally. She's probably best known as the creator and narrator of the 2007 animated documentary about the lifecycle of material goods, The Story of Stuff. It began as a talk, then a video, then a book. And she followed that up with The Story of Cap & Trade, The Story of Bottled Water, The Story of Cosmetics, the story of electronics, the story of Citizens United versus FEC, the story of broke, The Story of Change, and The Story of Solutions, and here we have a larger take on the story of protest. And she also served as the executive director of Greenpeace US from 2014 to 2023, and co-launched with Jane Fonda, the Jane Fonda Climate Pac.

ANDRE CAROTHERS, activist, writer, organizer, has been involved in campaigns and protests, as I said, for over four decades. He worked for Greenpeace US for 13 years, including serving on the Board of Directors. He's the co-founder of Rockwood Institute. And he works as an organizational development consultant/coach for leaders in the social change sector. He’s served as an advisor and board member for numerous organizations, including The Center for Investigative Reporting, the folks who put out *Mother Jones*, the Center for Environmental Health, and Rainforest Action Network.

Together they have created and written the new book, PROTEST: *Respect It, Defendant, Use It*.

Welcome Annie Leonard and Andre Caruthers to Free Forum: A World That Just Might Work.

Leonard:

Thank you.

Carothers:

Thanks for having us.

McNally:

Let me tell listeners we're recording this conversation Wednesday, May 27th.

I like listeners to get a feel for the people behind the work and the ideas that we talk about. So I want you each to tell me - I gave some of the headlines, the resume stuff - but how you each see your path to the work you do today and feel free to go way back. Childhood inspirations, mentors, turning points, that kind of thing, so that we know who we're talking to here. Let me start with Andre.

Carothers:

Well, it happens that we are in Washington DC right now. My hometown born and raised. The epicenter of so many things that have happened in the world around protest and fighting the man. And so Washington DC is my - what would you call it? - the fertile ground from which I grew.

I grew up next to American University, which is not far from here. I remember when I was about, I want to say 10 years old, the students from around the city and around the United States decided they were going to shut down Washington DC in a demonstration called the Moratorium. 1970. And so I think I had a little bicycle then. I bicycled down to the corner to watch because -

McNally:

And let me remind people, this is as a 10-year-old.

Carothers:

Yeah, I was a 10-year-old, and I was already supportive of the end of the Vietnam War in some part of my brain. And I watched the students block the intersection because this was Shut Down the Entire City demonstration. I watched people who were trying to commute get upset and a car went up on the curb. And then I watched what was then called the Civil Defense Unit come marching down Nebraska Avenue with their truncheons, and then kneel down and fire tear gas in the air. And it was so clear to me who the good guys were and who weren't at the time in a very simplistic way.

And I smelled the teargas and I ran home, and it was a very formative experience for me because already I was arguing with my father about this thing called the Vietnam

War, and already I was feeling like there was some injustice in the air that I couldn't quite get a grip on.

And then fortunately, lucky enough, what, 20, 15 years later to get a job at Greenpeace. So I came back to Washington and 42 years ago started working at Greenpeace, which was again, so much part of my life ever since. I mean, there is a saying, "Once a Greenpeacer, always a Greenpeacer." And then 1987, I met Annie Leonard and we've been shoulder to shoulder ever since.

McNally:

Wow. One thing, by the way, Greenpeace - among the environmental organizations - is the one sort of most known for protest. Am I correct?

Carothers:
Indeed.

McNally:
…Seems to me.

Leonard:

Yeah. Greenpeace was actually born in an act of protest back in 1971 when a group of Quakers and anti-war activists up in Canada rented an old boat and sailed it into a zone where the US was going to test a bomb, and thinking they could stop it. So that was actually the founding moment of Greenpeace. And some journalist asked all these activists… It was originally called the Don't Make a Wave Committee because they thought this bomb test was going to create this huge wave. Some journalists asked them, “You want peace, right?" And someone said, "Yes, and make it a green peace." Greenpeace was actually born in an act of non-violence…

McNally:
In protest.

Leonard:
…and the willingness to and the commitment to take non-violent action is a really core and differentiating characteristic of the organization that neither Andre and I are with anymore, but we were both with for many, many years.

McNally:

Right. No, it's interesting. I mean, there's some who use the law and some who work on Capitol Hill and so on, but Greenpeace is the one that at its core…

And I'm going to interrupt before I go to you continue, because something that I came across as I was preparing for this just fits so much with what you just said. And this - for anyone who thinks that protest doesn't always matter - Paul Loeb tells this story in

his book, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, which you probably both know. In the early 1960s, a woman took two of her kids to a Washington DC vigil in front of the White House protesting nuclear testing. The demonstration was small, a hundred women at most. Rain poured down. The women felt frustrated and powerless, but a few years later the movement against testing had grown dramatically and that same woman attended a major march.

Benjamin Spock, the famous pediatrician, spoke, and he described how he'd come to take a stand, which because of his stature, had already influenced thousands and would reach far more when he challenged the Vietnam War. He talked briefly about the issues. Then he mentioned being in DC a few years before, seeing a small group of women huddled with their kids in the rain, and it was that woman's group, and he said, "I thought that if those women were out there, their cause must be really important." And I just wanted to throw that for anybody who's going “meh”, this is what it means.

Andre, we know your youthful inspiration, your youthful challenge and then -

Carothers:

Joining Greenpeace was a very catalytic event in my life. I loved being sort of the translator of the work they did because I edited their magazine and I was very involved in the communications function, but literally eight months after I got there, the French military secret agents blew up the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland harbor, New Zealand. And this was such an outrageous act of sort of government perfidy that at first no one believed that it could have been a government action. And it was only when the New Zealand police caught the perpetrators, the secret agents that put a mine on the side of the Rainbow Warrior and killed a photographer named Fernando Perera in the process, that I realized just how serious a game this was.

The Rainbow Warrior was heading into the French nuclear test site in Mururoa in the Pacific because they were blowing up atmospheric nuclear tests, irradiating the region, and, of course, powering the effort by multiple nations to get nuclear weapons.

This was seen by the French government as a direct threat. This nonviolent protest was seen by the world as a very powerful statement against French testing, and the French government felt compelled to actually secretly kill a Greenpeace activist and blow up the boat. So this, as you can imagine, was an experience that -

McNally:

…Oh my God…

Carothers:

... both unnerved me and solidified my commitment to the work we were doing.

McNally:

You've carved out a certain territory… Why Rockwood, for instance?

Carothers:

After 13 years working for Greenpeace, I got very interested in how we all work together. What are the techniques whereby each of the transactions that we go through as activists - whether it's to align with a person who has a different issue that they're focused on, or managing the organization that we are part of, or negotiating with people who might not agree with us, I became very interested in what the skillset is that associated with that.

With the help of a couple of excellent trainers, started an organization called the Rockwood Leadership Program, where we did three day, six day, and year-long trainings that involved bringing people together for six days at a time over the course of a year to really hone those skills, because as you all well know, we are a very powerful movement trying to make the world a better place, but there's a lot of ways in which we get in each other's way, and we can sometimes damage a relationship accidentally without being clear, and we can also get tired and burned out without taking care of ourselves.

Rockwood, which has been around since 2000 and still going in 2026, is a multi-day training program with a dozen expert trainers. And since, in the ensuing quarter century, we must have trained at least 10 or 15,000 people, all of whom have gone on to be in positions of some authority, whether it's a union or a nonprofit. We even have a few graduates in Congress. And what we are hoping to accomplish through this is to really be able to train people to get past whatever block that they're feeling, whatever lack of skill that they're experiencing, and collaborate and manage their organization, and produce outsized results based on the effort they put in.

McNally:

And was I correct when I said that one of the components that I remember recognizing at the time as valuable, was the notion of taking care of yourself so that you wouldn't become burned out and wasted by your work.

Carothers:

Well, that's right. And if you actually think about it, the idea of sort of self-care is infused into skill, because often the thing that is most wearying or most aggravating or most upsetting is some conflict with someone you are supposed to be allied with or someone you work with. And the fraying of the nerves that occurs around conflict among people who are allied is as exhausting as anything.

And what I'm noticing as I get better and better at this, and we train more and more people, is that your ability to navigate relationships and navigate negotiations and navigate collaboration is in itself rejuvenating. So not only do we have a section of the training always devoted to how to take care of yourself literally by staying calm

and getting exercise and nutrition and meditation, but the whole act of becoming skillful is in itself a way of avoiding burnout.

McNally:

Excellent, excellent. And as you were saying that, I was thinking it's what we now do with athletes. And so it makes all the sense in the world that this serious work of keeping our society whole demands that same kind of holistic approach.

Carothers:

Yeah, I think it does.

McNally:

Yeah. And then you also have done a lot of consulting over the years, and I won't make you into this in depth, but how do you sort of describe to people what it is you do and what you find makes that work worthwhile?

Carothers:

Well, I'm going to use the word transaction again because I've tried to reduce my ability to help people into the simplest form possible. And so, what an executive director or a leader does, and I assume Annie can support me in this, is that it's one transaction after another. A conversation, a direction, an encouragement, a delegation, and each of those transactions produces a result.

And so if you look at sort of a graph up and to the right, each transaction will either keep the relationship steady, it will cause the relationship to decline in effectiveness and value, or it will go up. It will go up in effectiveness, it'll go up in relationship building, it'll go up in value to the enterprise. So what I encourage people to do is think about each of their days as a series of transactions that they need to wrap in skill.

And if they do that effectively, then this sort of wheel of growth starts to rotate, and all of a sudden you are empowering people around you in a whole new way. You are creating a system that works better. And if you apply the personal and organizational skillset and have a really robust toolbox at your side for every one of these transactions, chances are you're going to both increase the effectiveness of what you're doing, your organization is doing, and also, like I said, you're going to be a little bit more relaxed doing it.

McNally:

And it's interesting, for some reason, the metaphor to sports is in my mind here, but the best athletes, when they talk about what works, it's one play at a time, the next play, the next inning, the next this… which is exactly how you were breaking down the work of these organizations.

Carothers:

That's correct. It's a good analogy.

McNally:

Yeah. Very, very good. Okay. Annie, your path?

Leonard:

Yes. Listening to Andre, it’s so interesting because our early years were so different and yet here we are at the same spot. I grew up in the other Washington, in Washington State, in a family and I went to a school that did a lot of camping and I spent a lot of time in the absolutely beautiful forests of the Pacific Northwest. And I started wanting to protect the forests. I was a forest activist. I loved - or I wanted to be, I was just a kid, but I wanted to be a forest activist. I thought that would be a great way to spend my life.

Once you love something, you want to fight to protect it. And I grew up in a context that allowed me to fall deeply in love with the forests. So when I was applying to college, I remember in my college applications, I wrote that I was going to be the Secretary of the Interior, and I was going to protect forests.

I ended up going to college in New York City, which is a very funny place for someone who wants to protect forests, but I also was young and infatuated with big cities, and it actually turned out really fortuitous because that's where my perspective started to expand. When I was in New York, my dorm was on 110th Street and my college was on 116th Street on Broadway, and every morning I would walk up those six blocks and then return every evening, and I was mesmerized by how every evening there was a pile of garbage as high as my eyeballs. Every single evening. And then every morning it would be gone. And I just started wondering, “What is in all this stuff and where is it going?”

McNally:
Oh my gosh.

Leonard:
It was flabbergasting. I grew up in Seattle - we’re one of the first cities to have curbside recycling - and in a family that we recycled, we composted, we took care of our stuff. We didn't waste, not because we knew about ecological limits, but because I was just raised to think that losers waste, it's just not what you do if you're a responsible person.

I was so curious what's in all these bags of garbage. And I remember opening them up and being absolutely shocked at how much paper and cardboard was in them. And I said, "Oh my God, this is where my beloved forests are going - to this garbage." I'd seen clear-cuts in the Pacific Northwest when I'd been camping, and clear cuts look like a war zone. And so I thought, “Wait, it's going into these bags...” And I said,

"Where's it going every night?" So I did something that I recommend everyone in the US do. I signed up to go tour the local landfill. I wish this was required for people before they get their first credit card.

McNally:

Oh, that would be a good linkage, yeah.

Leonard:

… to see what comes out the backend of our consumer society.

So I went as a young college student to the landfill on Staten Island. It is actually called the Fresh Kills Landfill, and that is where New York City's garbage went for decades. I stood there, and I looked out. If you can imagine, as far as you can see in every direction, are furniture and books and food and clothes and stuffed animals and packaging. And it just hit me like a bolt of lightning, that our system of how we make and use and throw away stuff is out of control.

I remember the things that hit me are, first of all, that this is unsustainable. You can't have this level of materials throughput, of how much stuff we're extracting, using and throwing away. But the second thing that hit me is, how did I not know about this until I was a sophomore in college? How is this so hidden from us?

And so I started studying waste and where waste is going, because that's the other end of the line from the beloved forests, and that's where I learned that it's going to communities that are perceived as lacking the social capital, the financial resources, the educational resources, the racial identities to fight it. That in our country, waste is disproportionately impacting communities of color, low-income communities. And then I was like, “Wait a minute, so it's not just about forests, it's about the entire system. And it's not just about stuff, it's about environmental justice, social justice, people, health.”

So I went from thinking I was going to work just on saving trees…

McNally:
…right…

Leonard:
…to caring about this whole system, and then, as I spent decades trying to promote environmental, racial, social justice in order to save my trees, because that's what it's going to take, I used democratic avenues that are being shrunk, that are being taken away from us. And I realized, if we do not have democratic rights, democratic space, democratic levers to pull, we aren't going to be able to advance any of this. So I started with trees in Washington state, and here I am now in Washington DC today working to defend our democracy.

McNally:

Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you.

A couple of things I want to say. One, that it was clear that your experience - as you pointed out at the end of that - was a connecting-the-dots experience of “nothing is actually in isolation, is it?” Justice overlaps with this, overlaps with inequality, overlaps with forestry, all of those things.

But two other things. One is, I remember when *Limits to Growth* came out, I think that's 1972, Donella Meadows and the rest of that team at MIT. And what really clicked for me that I hadn't thought of before was that they didn't just say we were running out of resources, they said that they saw both sides. It wasn't just what we were using, it's what we were disposing, and that linkage - that it's not just what we take and use, it's what we do with it afterwards - and that we have limits on both ends of that. That was one thing.

And the other was, that you were seeing all of this garbage and making this documentary and all of this on *The Story of Stuff* before the Amazon era, where now we have sort of double the packaging on everything. It has the packaging that if you bought it in the store, it would have, and then it has the packaging that's put on it so it can be shipped to you so you don't have to leave your house.

Leonard:

Right. Amazon has created so many problems in terms of resource consumption and waste disposed. But I think its biggest harmful impact is training an entire country to think we can have anything we want within hours or maybe overnight. But this concept of instant gratification, I think, has been enormously detrimental to the way that we relate to materials.

But I want to say one other thing on what you just said, talking about there are limits to how much we take out of the earth and there are limits to how much we put back as waste.

The grand example of that is climate change. Climate change is happening because we are treating the atmosphere as a gigantic rubbish bin and just pouring so much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. I remember in early environmental science classes I took in college, one of the things that we were told is, “dilution is not the solution to pollution.” That, prior to my era, people were told, “If you dump it in the ocean, if you dump it in the atmosphere, it'll dilute and go away.” And there is a limit that we have long since passed on that, and climate change is sort of the mother of lessons on that.

McNally:

No, it's interesting, because there's a dot that I didn't see until you started saying it, and it goes actually to the whole endangerment finding, doesn't it? As to whether

climate change is… whether the carbon emissions are pollution or not. And, of course, on a grand macro scale, they are. And it's ridiculous to assert they're not.

Okay. How did this book happen? How did you decide to work together on it and how did Patagonia get involved? Who wants to take it first?

Carothers:

To you, Anne Leonard.

Leonard:

Andre and I had both, as you've mentioned, been activists who had used our democratic right to free speech and peaceful assembly many, many, many times for decades. And we firsthand saw the value that these democratic rights bring to different campaigns for environmental and social change. And we watched over the last decade, how these rights are under attack. There are lots of different ways which we can talk about, how the right to protest and speak out and dissent is being curtailed in this country. And we were alarmed. We really believe that if we lose the right to protest, we are going to lose so much more that we love and that we have worked so hard for in this country.

And so, as we started digging into this, we saw this really fascinating data about how people in the United States relate to peaceful protest. And the data, public opinion polling showed that a majority of people in the United States value the right to free speech, value the right to peaceful assembly, consider it truly American and constitutional, are proud that we have it.

We were reading this as we were looking out at the response in the mainstream media and with elected officials against the Black Lives Matter protestors. And even though the vast majority of those Black Lives Matter protests were totally peaceful, the protestors were being vilified as criminals, thugs, terrorists, enemies of the state, and we realized there was some disconnect.

And so what we decided to do was, sort of launch a PR campaign for protest. We decided to write a book that would remind readers of the role that peaceful protests played in advancing so many things that we value - from weekends to labor laws to same sex marriage to rivers that don't catch on fire, and so much more. Remind people of the role protests played in this history, warn people that the right to engage in peaceful protest is under threat, and inspire them to engage in protests themselves.

I pitched the idea to Patagonia. I chose them because Patagonia Books is a wonderful publishing house. Patagonia themselves is an activist company that engages in and supports in all kinds of protests, so I felt very aligned - and they love photographs. And we wanted this book chock full of photographs to really humanize protestors and

bring the protests to life. Patagonia books loved the idea, helped us develop the idea further.

I recruited Andre partly because he lives just down the street from me and is such a brilliant writer that I asked him to go on many dog-walks with me as we sort of thought through what the book would be, how to capture different parts, and then finally just said, "Andre, you need to be a co-author of this," which, to my great delight, he agreed.

McNally:

Yeah. So let me just put this together. In other words, you got the impulse… If you're getting this impulse while the Black Lives Matter protests are taking place, that's six years ago. There's an enormous amount of material in the book.…Let me tell people a little bit about the book..

Each of my guests has an opening essay, but then they cite 42 different protests starting in the 1700s and going to the current day - and they have a two-or-three-page story with photographs about each of those.

I knew this book had to take a long time. When I first looked at it, I assumed that you were just the editors and that someone else was doing the was writing… No, no, you guys wrote all of this. And as someone who's done some writing myself, I think, "Well, you've got to research every one of the protests you're going to write about." That little two-to-three-page essay is going to be what you found out about how it happened, why it worked, what we can learn from it. And you had to do that, I'm guessing, with maybe 60 of them to decide on the 42 you would end up including. And I just commend you on the amount of work that took.

But what I hear is, so you get the impulse, you go to Patagonia, you've got the okay, and it's only then that you approach Andre and you approach him just for feedback, kind of just to flesh things out, and then decide you're going to write together.

Leonard:

Well, it was more than feedback. It was really thought partnership, and I'm lucky because Andre is not just my neighbor, but my dear friend. We have been in a 40-year ongoing strategic conversation literally about all the work that we do. It often happens over dog walks or over dinner or walking to the market together. And so Andre was really my thought partner in grappling with, what are we going to do about threats to protests that we've been discussing increasingly over the last decade. Maybe there should be a book. He was really right there as my thought partner in every aspect of this.

McNally:

I'll let Andre pick up the ball here. How did you choose your approach? And by that I mean, it's that opening essay that each of you kind of takes a point of view, a

perspective on the whole issue. Then it's the 42 separate essays or stories on each of the protests, and it also includes essays from a number of folks - Jane Fonda, Robert Reich, folks like that. How did that come together?

Carothers:

Well, the framework - and Annie gets a lot of credit for this, because one of her many geniuses is that she knows how to translate something that might feel arcane or insidery to those of us who've been in the business for a long time to a popular audience. And so the framework, which is, “Guess what. There's a history here of noble patriotic protests that has brought us things that we sort of take for granted today, and that that public square that we're used to living in, where it has petitioners and demonstrators and people collecting money for causes, is clearly under threat. And then finally, let's showcase 42 examples that sort of span the universe of engagement and genius and effectiveness.

Once that framework is in place, then everything sort of fell into place, and the ability to invite people to contribute, of course, to help us reach a larger audience was just the final icing on the cake, in a sense.

What's wonderful for me - as a journalist and sort of a writer and slightly and perhaps overly bookish - what I loved doing was looking under the hood of some of these protests that we thought we sort of knew. We thought we knew the story. We were presented with a story in grade school or in college or by the media, and discovered there's a lot more there there than we originally thought. And so, in some ways the book, once we discovered what was under the hood of many of these protests, some threads emerged that have sort of informed how we present the book now to people around the country.

McNally:

It's so funny, Andre, as I was glancing down to my next two questions, you've moved right into them. One was, how would you describe the book to folks as you were working on it and would you describe it differently today? And the other was, what most surprised you in working on it? And you began to answer both those questions in your last answer?

Carothers:

Well, I don't want to rush us, and I want to share this with Annie, but I'll give you one story that illuminates something that I think we all thought we knew. The Boston Tea Party, right? The iconic moment, nation building moment, cited by people around the world as their inspiration, from Poland to the Philippines to Serbia to almost every fight against a dictator around the world, refers to the Boston Tea Party as this inspiring iconic moment. What we discovered quickly, and I guess we should have known this in advance, is that the Boston Tea Party was a targeted act of property destruction that destroyed some $2 million worth of someone else's stuff, performed by men, disguised men, at night.

McNally:
Yes.

Carothers:

When you actually think about that and imagine trying to do something similar today, it would be frowned upon to say the least.

McNally:
Mm-hmm…

Carothers:
The other interesting thing about the Boston Tea Party is that both Benjamin Franklin and George Washington disapproved of it.

McNally:
I love it.

Carothers:
Benjamin Franklin offered to pay back the East India Company for the tea destroyed and George Washington wrote that he was concerned that the Boston Tea Party would alienate his more moderate supporters.

McNally:

Where does that sound familiar from?

Carothers:

Exactly. That sounds very familiar, right?

And the other interesting thing about the Boston Tea Party, it actually wasn't rebranded the Tea Party for 50 years, because as Washington, Jefferson and their heirs were sort of consolidating, I guess, the management of this nascent country, they weren't that enthusiastic about having everyone cite a targeted act of property destruction performed by men disguised at night as the founding impulse of the country. So they kind of put it under wraps for 50 years, and only in 1830 did the word Boston Tea Party emerge as the rebrand, and only in a way that sort of made it seem slightly warm and cuddly compared to what actually happened.

McNally:

Right. No, I mean, even the phrase “Boston Tea Party”. It doesn't sound like what it was.

Carothers:

These revelations occur throughout the book. There's a little bit more to the story than we originally thought.

McNally:

That's excellent, excellent.

One thing that occurred to me looking through this. There have always been protests, but what we think of as protest, and what this book focuses on, it almost couldn't exist as much until there was democracy. Does that ring true to the two of you?

That it was something about that citizens have a right to deal with their representatives and things… unlike with a monarchy or unlike with emperors - that there was this sense that there was some sort of a negotiating relationship between the people and the rulers and that's where protest really blossoms.

Leonard:

That's a big question. I think I have a slightly different take.

I think that there are different types of protest and different contexts are conducive to different types of protests, and different types of protests are effective in different contexts. So in a democratic context, which is what we have all grown up in, in this country - an imperfect, often grossly unfair but relatively stable democratic context. In a democratic context, protest and persuasions can work very effectively.

We saw that when President Biden launched his presidential campaign, he was very, very weak on climate, and then people protested, people lobbied, people did civil disobedience, all kinds of protest and persuasion, and he shifted. He shifted and by the end, he really championed the insufficient - but still biggest - climate bill ever passed in the United States.

In a democratic context, the kind of protests that we're used to can work. In a non-democratic context, we still absolutely must protest, and there are so many cases. We were just on the airplane yesterday discussing Serbia's Outpour Movement, which was a student-led protest movement that ousted a vicious, vicious authoritarian ruler, Slobodan Milosevic.

The student-led peaceful nonviolent protest movement, that ousted Milosevic after years of just a terror-ridden reign. So absolutely in non-democratic context, there are still protests, but it's a different kind of protest.

And that's what we're now facing in the United States as our democracy is sliding more towards an authoritarian regime. The typical kinds of protest and persuasion, the tools that protesters have honed over decades in this country are less effective, and we need to learn from our friends who have protested in non-democratic contexts.

The biggest change is switching from a protest-and-persuasion model to a non-cooperation model. When you have a government that is not responsive to protest and persuasion, you have to look at ways to withdraw cooperation, which is still another form of protest - strikes, labor strikes. I mean, the Montgomery bus boycott actually was an example in the book of non-cooperation. (00:47:27) Port workers refusing to work. So labor strikes is one form of non-cooperation.

Another one is withdrawing your dollars.

McNally:
Boycotts.

Leonard:
The Tesla Take Down, the Target boycott. A super effective one we just saw was the Disney-Kimmel boycott. Disney decided to kowtow to Trump's demands, censor Jimmy Kimmel. Within days, millions of people canceled their Disney subscription. Disney changed their mind, put Kimmel back on the air.

We can protest no matter what the kind of regime is, but different kinds of protests are more effective in a democratic versus a non-democratic regime.

McNally:

Let's use this moment to dig deeper into some of what you brought up there, which we've referenced throughout our time together, but it's the current threat and your assessment of ... Let me backpedal one. Your assessment of the current protests in the country, which is I guess the NoKings and what took place in Minnesota, which expanded much beyond NoKings, but so the current status - and then the threat and the necessary response?

Carothers:

Well, let's talk for a minute about what's going on right now in the United States, which Is absolutely inspiring in so many ways. As the traditional tools, as Annie mentioned, get less effective or less available because the law is no longer being equally applied to people up and down the stack of power, and the predictability of a particular activity is no longer there. We don't actually know what will happen if we transgress a law. We used to assume that we had some measure of understanding of, “when we do this, that will happen.” That's starting to disappear. And so what we're seeing in places like New Orleans and Los Angeles and Minneapolis is, people starting to apply much more effective means in the face of this regime.

I did a quick scan of what happened in Minneapolis a couple of months ago because I wanted to see all the different creative ways that people were applying themselves and it ranged from a lawyer friend of mine driving around in his car and doing legal work in the backseat of his car in front of people's houses who were scared to leave

them in order to help solidify whatever legal claim they had on their status.

We had tow truck drivers pulling cars that had to have been abandoned out of the way so they wouldn't be towed away forever. We had people ferrying children to school and back, people bringing food to people who were scared to leave their houses. We had people meeting people who were coming out of detention with blankets and warm food and a place to go.

These are all by our definition, acts of protest. And what happened in Minneapolis, and will no doubt be duplicated around the country, is people are starting to understand what it takes to be in solidarity with each other. People understand what this word that emerged at a Minneapolis called “neighborism” is. And we are going to see people really thinking through how to support each other in a concentrated way, in a way that can only neutralize the impact of what the Trump administration is trying to do.

McNally:

Excellent, excellent. Yes. That's the first time we've said the word solidarity, but it seems to me it is a key both contributor and result of people's engagement in that broad range of protest. Annie, any more about what the current situation? How are we doing, do we think, in terms of protesting this administration at this moment?

Leonard:

I think we are off to a good start and we need a lot more. Protests like NoKings provide a very, very important role. They make the discontent visible. They provide social proof for every one of those eight million people marching. There were unknown scores more watching and feeling concerned.

It's been really interesting on this book tour, how many people come up to us and sort of whisper and say, "I've never protested before, but I'm starting to feel like I need to. " And large protests like NoKings, that are peaceful, that are irreverent, that are joyful, that are creative - those provide a real invitation for more to get involved.

But while that may be the most visible, that is certainly not the entirety of the protest that is happening. There are people organizing in the military to get recruiters and sympathizers in the military.

There are people organizing in the entertainment industry. Jane Fonda recently relaunched the McCarthy era committee that her father had been part of, called the Committee for the First Amendment, to organize cultural workers and the entertainment industry to not capitulate and to use their platforms and profiles to model resistance.

There' are people organizing in the faith community. In academia, to get the universities to stand up to Trump. There are people organizing immigrant ICE watch,

immigrant support. There's a massive grassroots national effort to organize - all leading towards increasing our understanding of the authoritarian playbook and increasing our understanding of non-cooperation.

There's a particular resource I'd love to point your listeners to called the Freedom Trainers. Check out the Freedom Trainers online. They are a group of people that have spent decades studying authoritarian governments to understand the tools and strategies that authoritarians use and the specific kinds of civil society resistance that's most effective.

They have a whole non-cooperation library with great resources and most importantly, they are doing trainings. They have trained over a million people, and this kind of local community grassroots training is absolutely essential for communities to get together and be ready should there be an ICE surge like there was in Minneapolis.

It's not a coincidence that the people in Minneapolis were so well organized and so committed to nonviolence. They had been trained. So is your community going to get an ICE surge? Or is your community prepared for potential hijacking of the midterm elections?

So you can go on the Freedom Trainers website, and there's a request-a-training. You can sign up and request a training and get a Freedom Trainers trainer in your community. What we're doing on our book tour is, instead of just a regular “Come hear about the book”, we are doing book events in each city - and they're all located at theprotestbook.com - and then in most cities - not all, because some already have very strong training - but in most cities we are organizing a Freedom Trainers workshop. And we are inviting people who we have reached through the outreach from Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's is helping us with outreach too, and then through our own environmental networks.

We're recruiting people to come to these community resistance trainings, which have been absolutely sort of groundbreaking in getting even longtime activists like ourselves to realize, the tools we used for campaigns for decades are not enough to meet this moment, and we simply must learn about the authoritarian playbook and what kind of resistance tactics are most effective in this new context we find ourself in.

McNally:

Okay, so one thing that you alluded to there that I've mentioned, but I want to emphasize again is that, the website for theprotestbook.com is not just about the book. It's about the mission, it's about the movement, and it has resources, it has other books, it has access to things like the Freedom Trainers, and so on. So take advantage of that website and the websites that it leads you to.

Let's talk just a little bit for people who kind of get that authoritarian ... I mean, if they're listening to this conversation, they probably know that authoritarianism is running amuck, but some of the threats specifically to protest. And one thing I will say is, one of the latest iterations, it seems to me, is bills in state legislatures to outlaw protests against the fossil fuel industry. These are called the “critical infrastructure bills.”

What does it really mean? It means you can't fight for the climate. You can't fight for your children or grandchildren. So some of the ways that the current repression and assault is taking place so people really get clear on that?

Leonard:

Sure. I'm happy to talk about that. And repression and assault on protestors are not new. Especially our Black, Brown and indigenous brothers and sisters are very, very familiar with being the target of this, but it has reached a new level in terms of how pervasive it is, how out-in-the-open it is, and how unfortunately it coincides with a time when we need protest more than ever, because of the climate threats and because of our threats to democracy.

One thing to know about the threats to protest is they follow the energy in a movement. So when the Black Lives Matter protests were really exploding, there were new laws that outlawed the specific kind of tactics that the Black Lives Matter groups were using, like marching down the street. When the Gaza protests were exploding, there were new laws that outlawed the specific kind of protests the Gaza protestors were using, especially around free speech and assembly on campuses. And when the Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipeline protests exploded and were very successful in many ways, the kinds of laws you talked about increased, which were laws specifically outlawing protests that targeted fossil fuels.

All of these have been going on for a while, but under the current federal administration, they have been supercharged, because a key part of the authoritarian playbook is shutting down dissent. And so I'll run through a couple of the ways that they're attacking protests that are all on supercharge. The first one is vilification of protestors. And again, Andre just talked about how the participants in the Boston Tea Party were vilified. Martin Luther King was vilified at the time. Rosa Parks was vilified. This is nothing new, but it's on super drive. I mean, you now have the President of the United States saying that protestors are terrorists, musing about shooting them in the legs, posting an AI-generated video of him literally dumping excrement on the heads of peaceful protestors exercising their constitutional rights.

So vilification of protestors is key, and that's so important to authoritarians because they want to do that to discredit the substance of the protestors demands. If they can vilify people demanding climate action, people demanding an end to racialized police killing, if they can vilify the people themselves, it wipes the demands off the table,

and that's why we wanted to go with Patagonia books and have so many photographs and quotes to humanize the protestors.

McNally:

One thing I was going to say is that, specifically the notion that protestors are domestic terrorists, and Antifa is a terrorist organization, and that there is such a notion as domestic terrorists. All of this… They're trying to put this into law, and you look at it, and it is clearly a law against free speech.

Leonard:

Clearly it's against our constitutional right. So they have vilification.

They have regulatory retaliation or administrative harassment. Things like, if you're a nonprofit 501C-3 organization and you speak out or do a campaign that the administration doesn't like, you risk losing your charitable status. If you're an international student and you speak out on something the administration doesn't like, you lose your visa. So these kinds of administrative harassment or regulatory retaliation.

There's the anti-protest laws you already mentioned. There's a great protest law tracker. If your listeners just Google protest law tracker, you will see a map of the entire United States, and in each state, it shows you the laws that are pending, rejected, or – horribly - enacted. And these anti-protest laws either criminalize constitutionally protected activity such as holding a workshop to teach people how to fight new fossil fuel development or they turn misdemeanors into a felony.

McNally:
Right.

Leonard:
So that's really bad. If you block a street, if you trespass, that's a misdemeanor. Protestors have been blocking streets for -

McNally:

That's right. This is what Andre was referring to when he said, "We had expectations." You did a protest. You're willing to get arrested. Okay. But it was always a misdemeanor. Now suddenly that arrest can ... or the threat of that arrest as a felony can really chill people's willingness to get arrested.

Leonard:

Yeah. And lives have been upended because of these new laws. Then it's not just the state. There are also corporations getting in on this with SLAPP suits. A SLAPP suit is a particular kind of lawsuit. SLAPP stands for "strategic lawsuit against public participation". And SLAPP suits are generally meritless. They're not based in reality or fact. Usually they're not designed to ever make it to court or to win in court. They are

designed to terrify, chill, silence, bankrupt, intimidate dissent. And they're often very successful.

If you are a farmer and you've learned that a new fossil fuel pipeline might go through your farm, and you start asking questions about that or organizing, and you get a hundred-million-dollar SLAPP suit… Most farmers don't have money to hire big, powerful lawyers and fight this. So it's a very effective way to silence dissent.

You have vilification, regulatory retaliation, anti-protest laws, SLAPP suits. And, as we tragically saw in Minnesota, outright violence. In Minnesota, we had US government officials shoot peaceful protestors that were not doing anything illegal and not be held accountable for that. So that is really sending a message.

The good news is that people are not cowering. After Alex Pretti was horribly shot in the street, 200,000 people signed up for training in ICE Watch. People are standing up, having each other's back, and saying, "We will not allow our communities, our neighbors, our planet, or our democracy to be dismantled as the Trump administration is wanting to do." So I remain very hopeful, looking at what Minneapolis did, and knowing that really we can do that in every community. We can stand together. We can center justice and democracy. We can use our rights.

The best way to protect these rights is to use them. One of the quotes in the book I love is from Timothy Snyder, who said, "If you protest now, you will be able to protest later." Our democracy and our right to fight for everything we care about is on the line. And I have faith in my fellow Americans to stand up and protect it.

McNally:
Very good.

Carothers:

I can tell you a story about that faith because it's become clear that there are so many Americans that have a conscience, and it's being revealed through these things called the grand juries. Now the grand jury is enshrined in the Fifth Amendment of the Constitution. It's designed to prevent authorities from doing prosecutions that are vindictive and unclear, by providing transparency. Grand jury is 16 to 23 people gathered together to hear a prosecutor make a case to see if they should bring the case to court. Historically, this played out as very favorable to the prosecutors. The study in 2010 and 2016 showed that literally zero times - and I'm actually not literally - but six out of some 250,000 cases brought did a grand jury refuse to bring the indictment.

McNally:

Right. Isn't the famous quote, "A grand jury will indict a ham sandwich"?

Carothers:
Sole Wachtler, the New York State judge, famously said, "You can indict a ham sandwich." A lot of people know the story about the Washington DC young man who threw a sandwich at the police last fall, I think it was. And not only did the grand jury refuse to bring an indictment multiple times when the prosecutor, under that woman who used to work for Fox News, Jeanine Pirro, tried to bring. But when it actually went to trial finally, the regular jury refused to convict.

The number of times that grand juries and regular juries have refused to convict based on a government prosecution is orders-of-magnitude more than it's ever been in American history. So there is a conscience out there and it's being demonstrated by American people who refuse to cooperate with these prosecutions.

McNally:

Okay. We've got to bring this to a close.

One thing I feel we have to touch on before we do - and then I'll give you each kind of a closing statement - is the 3.5%. The work of Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth has found, looking at protests…many, many protests, a lot of research, that when 3.5% of the population becomes actively engaged in protest, regimes fall.

And the key word that I didn't put in there is nonviolent. If 3.5% get engaged in nonviolent, peaceful protest. Nonviolent protest, they point out, has never reached 3.5% support, which is interesting. So just speak to that a little bit and then both of you give me sort of your closing note to listeners. I think what we've given them is resources and marching orders and all of that, but I'll let you take it from here.

Carothers:

I love the 3.5% statistic because it does open up people to the possibility that this regime change is available, and it's available through so many different ways to protest. And it's available because we've redefined for our - at least in the case of the book - to protest, to do all the things we've talked about, whether it's helping people like they did in Minneapolis through to marching.

The specific claim is that no government has withstood a challenge of 3.5% of their population mobilized against it during a peak event. It's a backward facing statistic. It's based on a sample of historical movements. It's not predictive. It doesn't predict that if you get 3.5% of the people, you're going to succeed. It's sort of a rule of thumb, I guess, no better way to put it. And it really depends on the fact that there is going to be already existing momentum, already existing organization, leadership, and sustained, prolonged protest.

So it's a wonderful heuristic to think about, and it involves everyone rallying to understand that it involves sustained, organized, led protest that at a peak moment

has more often than not, in fact, almost never failed to unseat an autocrat. Did I get that right, Annie?

Leonard:

Yeah. But the key part here is that it's descriptive, not prescriptive. They crunched the numbers of actual efforts to oust regimes.

McNally:
It's a finding.

Leonard:
Yeah. It's a finding more than a rule.

And the US is obviously very different than smaller, more homogenous countries. It's harder to organize mass movements in this country. Also, the current authoritarian... Well, actually, the current authoritarian probably doesn't read, but people around him, I am sure, have read the same studies and are adjusting accordingly.

The point is we don't know how many people, what percentage of people we need in the US to be actively, consistently escalating, non-violently engaged. Is it 3%? Is it 3.5? Is it 5%? But we do know it's not 51%. We do not need to get a majority of people to be involved. We need to get a minority of people involved, but in a nonviolent and consistent manner.

I find that very hopeful. And it's not just coming out to NoKings. It is withdrawing your money from supporting businesses that are enabling the authoritarian. It's not going to sports events or entertainment events or universities that are kowtowing to the administration. It's looking for every possible lever that we have to withdraw our support from the authoritarian project - and it is also protesting and civil disobedience and all that as well.

McNally:

I just want to remind people that Indivisible itself, one of the lead organizers of No Kings, they're very clear about this. I just want people to know that it isn't that they say, "Come to our protest every three months and when we hit 3.5, we win." They are very clear about non-compliance, non-cooperation, sustained, integrated efforts for which those days of protest are, as you said, sort of social proof. And as I say, I believe courage encourages courage. And that people saying, “Wow, I could do that,” it builds on itself. And as one of you said, quoting Timothy Snyder, "Protest today so you can protest tomorrow."

Leonard:

That's right.

McNally:

Yeah…Any last word? Anything you figure listeners are going to kind of remember as they turn off their podcast, they're going to go, "Yeah…"

Carothers:

Well, I'm going to give Annie the last word, but the one thing I want to impress on people is that protests are never honored when they're doing it. Martin Luther King's approval rating never went above 50%. He did not stop and say, "I'm going to wait for my approval rating to go up before I continue to fight for justice." When he was assassinated after he'd won the Nobel Peace Prize, 62% of the American people disapproved of what he was doing. Now, of course, Martin Luther King is this honored figure. The top three people who have bridges, monuments, schools, and memorials named after them are George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr.

So what I want to encourage people to think about as they listen to this is, next time you see a protestor out there, and you have this idea in your head that was either inculcated by the press or impressed upon you by someone whose drive to work was inconvenienced…These protestors are doing God's work for you and it's entirely possible that there will be memorials and statues to them 20, 30 years from now. We would like to compress that time. We would like to move as quickly as possible from criminal to a school book curriculum now, so that we don't have to wait for this change that we need so desperately need to happen right now.

McNally:

Great. Great. Thank you. And Annie?

Leonard:

I'd like to just sort of acknowledge that it's a hard time in this country, and a lot of people are really grappling with fear and grief and sadness about the promise of democracy. We never had a full democracy, but we were hopefully on the road towards the multiracial inclusive participatory democracy that we all believed in. It seems in jeopardy right now.

I would like to acknowledge that in people, and say that one of the best ways to deal with that grief and sadness is to get involved with others in making change. It's not just me saying this. There's actually lots of social science that shows that the things that most provide meaning and happiness in life are not things at all. They're not a new iPad or a new…

McNally:

They’re not stuff.

Leonard:

Yeah. They're not stuff. It's not a new pair of boots or a new car, even if it's an electric one. None of that stuff that consistently - once your physical needs are actually met… If you have a roof and food and… Consistently the things that most provide happiness in life is having a sense of purpose or meaning beyond yourself. It's the act of working with others towards shared goals, and it's also having a community and strong social fabric.

So isn't it fortunate that the very things we need to do to protect our earth to be livable, to protect our neighbors from being ripped apart and deported, and to protect the democracy that we need to continue advancing social good, isn't it fortunate the very things we need to do for all of that are also the things that make us happy. I want to say come on in, contact a local Indivisible group, look at some of the contacts on our website. There are so many organizations across the United States. Come on in. We will save the planet. We will save our democracy. We will protect our multiracial communities, and we're going to have a damn good time doing it.

McNally:

Yes. Getting involved in protest makes you feel less alone and more alive.

Leonard:

Right. And it works. You're absolutely right.

McNally:

Okay. It has been fabulous spending this time with you. The new book is PROTEST: *Respect It. Defend It. Use It.* - and you can learn more at theprotestbook.com. And as I've said a couple of times, that is not just a book website, that is a mission website, a movement website, a resource for you, your friends, and family to become deeply involved in being a citizen. Thank you, Annie Leonard and Andre Carothers and keep up your good work.

Leonard:

Thank you. What a pleasure to connect with you again after all these years.

Carothers:

Really delightful.

McNally:

Great, great.

For this conversation and many other interviews, articles, to join me in pursuit of a world that just might work, go to terrencemcnally.net or aworldthatjustmightwork.com. They're the same website. If you want to get a weekly

announcement telling you who's going to be on what we're going to talk about, and links to probably 10 or 15 articles to flesh out the conversation, email me at temcnally@mac.com and you can subscribe and listen to Free Forum podcast at Apple Podcasts, YouTube, Spotify, most podcast sites and at my site. Thanks to Kiyana Williams in production and to George Vasilopoulos at Progressive Voices, and most of all, to you, my listeners. Please share this podcast widely.