Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

DAVID TALBOT

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2016

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In this oral history, writer, media entrepreneur and social activist David Talbot shares a life of political commitment and historical engagement. Born in Los Angeles in 1951, David first came to San Francisco as a teenager when his father, a famous Hollywood actor, was performing in theater productions in the city. David recalls falling madly in love with San Francisco at that time. He later attended college at U.C. Santa Cruz, after which he began his journalism career at *Mother Jones*. Though living in San Francisco, David recounts spending much time in Mill Valley in the 1980s and attests to a "soul connection" existing between Mill Valley and San Francisco. He discusses his career as an author beginning with his cultural history of 1960s San Francisco *Season of the Witch* ("how we liberated our city") to a pair of books on the Kennedy presidency and assassination ("how we lost our country"). David narrates his pioneering work in web publishing with Salon.com, which he started in 1995, and discusses his ongoing support of investigative journalism. This oral history is very clearly situated in the 2016 presidential campaign, and it concludes with David describing his return to political activism and expressing his desire to see the social ethics of the 1960s—especially compassion and solidarity—become dominant values in the national culture.

Oral History of David Talbot

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Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by David Talbot, who made minor corrections and clarifications.

0:00:01 Debra Schwartz: Today is July 30th. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm sitting here with author, publisher, media entrepreneur and social activist David Talbot. David, thank you so much for taking the time to sit down with me, your oral historian, on behalf of the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society.

0:00:22 David Talbot: Thank you. My pleasure, Debra.

0:00:25 Debra Schwartz: First of all, I wanted to say thanks so much for your presentation, a couple of weeks ago at the library. I know that it was a full house for sure. How was it for you?

0:00:39 David Talbot: It was exciting. Particularly, I think because of everything the country's been going through lately, and the world. So, to see that kind of large crowd fired up, enthusiastic, full of feeling, and wanting to try and figure out where we've been and where we're going and what they can do, I think, to help the world be a better place. It was a great spirit that night, I thought.

0:01:06 Debra Schwartz: Yeah. I thought so, too. It was a great night. So, thanks.

0:01:09 David Talbot: Yeah.

0:01:10 Debra Schwartz: And now that most people around here have read your book, *Season of the Witch,* about San Francisco history, and Marin, and people around us, and the world. We'll get into that book later. But as we begin this interview let's just get a little background information about you and your family. Can you tell me a little bit about—let's start with your grandparents.

0:01:37 David Talbot: My grandparents on my father's side were in show business. They were in vaudeville in the Midwest, in Nebraska. My grandfather was named Ed Henderson. And Anna was his wife, his second wife. Because actually, my father's mother died shortly after she gave birth to him, sadly. And he was kidnapped, basically, after that by his grandmother, his maternal grandmother, who never forgave my grandfather for taking her young daughter off in his vaudeville circuit. And she ended up getting, I think it was scarlet fever, and dying while they were in Pittsburgh. My father was kidnapped as an infant by his Irish grandmother and raised in a hotel that she ran near Omaha, Nebraska. She was a force of nature, apparently, the grandmother, very Irish and very strong willed. So that's who raised my father. But then he decided to go back to his father, and he grew up with his dad from, I think, about 14 on. So, he got the show

business bug from his father. Their vaudeville act by the way entailed him throwing knives at his wife on stage. [chuckles]

0:02:56 Debra Schwartz: Oh my gosh.

0:02:57 David Talbot: My dad start having big rocks put on his chest, and then people smashing them with a sledgehammer. And somehow he survived that as a young boy. He was a good looking guy, black Irish—dark hair, blue eyes—and became kind of a handsome leading man in this traveling theatrical group that he was part of all around the Midwest, all through the Southwest. And he was in Dallas with his own theater group as a young man—The Talbot Players it was called—when he was discovered by Darryl Zanuck of Warner Brothers, right as the talkies came in in Hollywood. They needed the actors now who could actually speak, and my dad, obviously, coming out of theater could speak, was a handsome guy. And so he was signed by Warner Brothers in the early '30s.

So, I came from a Hollywood family. My mother was born in Hackensack, New Jersey. Her name is Margaret, but she took the stage named Paula, for some reason. And her parents were educators. Her dad was a college professor, and her mother had been one of the first woman in her family to go to college and had become a school teacher. But my mom also had the show business bug, despite growing up in this family of educators. She became a showgirl as a teenager. During World War II, she toured army bases and sang for the troops. And she was in a boarding house in Hollywood, trying to break in as a young actress, right after the war, and was a cast in a play that was going across the country, a touring play with my dad. She had seen my dad at Radio City Music Hall as a little girl on the big screen in the movies.

0:04:53 Debra Schwartz: What are some of his movies?

0:04:56 David Talbot: He did movies like *Three on a Match*, which is a classic. That was with a young Humphrey Bogart, and Joan Blondell and Bette Davis. A great, sort of, really gritty pre-Code film.[1] When the Code came in, things got much more tame in Hollywood. But pre-Code, they were dealing with adultery and sex and homosexuality and drugs and it was all pretty much in this one film, *Three on a Match*, and *20,000 years in Sing Sing*, which was another hard-boiled Warner Brothers movie. Warner Brothers was known at that period for doing this really, socially, intense, gritty films, gangster films, and so on. So *20,000 Years In Sing Sing* was another hard-boiled prison movie. My dad played a convict with Spencer Tracy. *Go West, Young Man*, which was a famous movie—Mae West coined her famous phrase in that movie, "Come up and see me sometime." And my dad was one of the handsome guys, she said that too. So he was a leading man in B-movies, and a character actor more in A-movies, as they were called, but he did hundreds of films. He really churned them out. And then when I was growing up, he was a TV actor. He made the transition and he was a regular on *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Burns and Allen*, and the *Bob Cummings Show*, and a lot of shows from the '50s and '60s that were popular. My brother also became a sitcom actor and he was on the show

[1] David refers to the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, also known as the "Hays Code," which censored movie content.—Editor.

Leave It To Beaver as a boy. So our family was like a sitcom family. [laughs]

0:06:41 Debra Schwartz: So, I interrupted you about how your mother had seen him in a movie and now, she's traveling with him.

0:06:47 David Talbot: Exactly. So she, like a lot of us today, had fallen for the screen image of a movie star who happened to be my father. And when she came out to Hollywood, she was delighted when she was cast in this play, that was going across country, and she kind of vowed to herself that by the end of the tour that she would be with him. [chuckles] She recalled that he had a different girlfriend in every city, literally, where they stopped along the way and so, he was quite occupied. But, by the end, they were indeed together. There was a big age gap. I think she was 18 at the time, he was probably in his early 40s. I think he was probably thinking this was going to be another one of his short-lived marriages, he'd had a number of them. I think this was number five or six. They produced no other children, but he was married to socialites, and he was married to actresses, and he was married to a very bohemian Berkeley woman, who later married Henry Miller after their divorce.

And so, my dad got around. In fact, when I was doing research once for something else, for a book, I happened to come across an article in an old *New York Times* while I was scrolling through the microfilm and it was about my dad. He was being divorced by his second or third wife at the time, who was a New York socialite. And apparently what had happened was that while she was out of town, he threw a wild party at their Beverly Hills house, and it burned to the ground as a result of this party. [chuckles] And the first article shows the socialite, very kind of concerned, at his bedside in the hospital. He'd been overcome by smoke, as he dragged one of the guests to safety. It looked like she was very concerned about him and all that, and a couple days later she sued him for divorce, as she found out, I think, the real truth. And she alleged that he was, I think, something like a "lounge room Romeo," something like that. [chuckles]

0:09:02 Debra Schwartz: "A lounge room Romeo." You just don't hear descriptions like that nowadays.

0:09:07 David Talbot: And I guess he pretty much was "a lounge room Romeo." But my mother was a force of nature and they did end up marrying. I think they got married in Tijuana, 'cause I think my dad, as a movie star, was a little embarrassed marrying this young showgirl, who was less than half his age. But, lo and behold, that was the marriage that stuck and they stayed together for the rest of her life. Ironically, she ended up dying before him, when she was only 60, and my dad went on, but that was, I think, the love of both their lives. And it was quite a marriage. It was a very fun marriage for both of them. I would remember coming down to breakfast into the kitchen and they'd be, like, kissing, in the morning, and it was erotic. They kind of eroticized the whole household. They were really into each other. [chuckles] They stayed that way for a long time, I think.

0:10:07 Debra Schwartz: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

0:10:09 David Talbot: I have an older brother, Steve, who, as I said as a kid was a child actor and then later became a documentary filmmaker. He worked with PBS on *Frontline* for many years. And I have two sisters. My oldest sister is a doctor in Portland, Oregon. Cindy. And my younger sister, Margaret Talbot, is a terrific journalist, herself, who is on the staff at *New Yorker* magazine. Margaret Talbot.

0:10:40 Debra Schwartz: So, it's funny, because you come from actors, but you're very much the writers in your family.

0:10:48 David Talbot: Yeah, we went into media except my sister Cindy, who consciously made a decision. We went to college together at UC Santa Cruz and I remember her saying, "You know what? I'm not going to compete with you guys. I'm going to become a doctor." And we said, "Really?" As if that was some kind of terrible decision she had made. [chuckles] It was a disgrace, somehow, to the family, but she became a very good family doctor and a terrific person, who just came back from Africa recently, working with people who desperately need medical attention there. She took her two daughters with her. So, she always had a strong social conscience.[2] She's great.

0:11:25 Debra Schwartz: So, you grew up, there was a time in Hollywood, where it was just so golden, with the fruit trees, and the beautiful cars, and space, not so crowded, during those movie days. So that's where you grew up?

0:11:43 David Talbot: Yeah, and my dad was a great storyteller. He was Irish, so he really knew how to tell a colorful story. And he would drive around, you know actors often have downtime between their shows and so on, where they would go get their unemployment checks, which is a big thing in Hollywood. You'd stand in line, you'd see like Adolphe Menjou, or other actors like Ralph Bellamy—my dad, who was close with him. They'd all bump into each other at the unemployment office. And he would tell these great stories about old Hollywood. He'd see an old apartment building where he'd lived, or a studio that we drove by. And those stories actually were kind of collected by my sister, Margaret, who's the writer at the *New Yorker*, and she wrote a terrific book about those glory days, the golden days of Hollywood and my dad's career, called *The Entertainer* that came out a couple of years ago. It's a great book.

0:12:38 Debra Schwartz: Interesting. But you live in San Francisco now.

0:12:41 David Talbot: We do. Because he loved San Francisco, my dad, and the whole family came up with him when he was acting in plays at the Curran Theater. He did a film up here with Bette Davis called *Fog Over Frisco*, which was I think in the early '30s at Warner. So he came up here for that film and for a couple of other films that they went on location for. My dad, for obvious reasons, thought that San Francisco was enchanting, and he became friends with a number of people, including a woman whose name I'm forgetting now, but people can look it up.[3] She was a well-known Chinese doctor, one of the first women doctors in the Chinese community in San Francisco. And she became a

[2] She and I were student radicals together at U.C. Santa Cruz in the 1970s.—David Talbot.
[3] David is referring to Margaret Chung.—Editor.

big fundraiser for the Chinese cause when Japan invaded China during the ’30s, and she helped fund the Flying Tigers, which were this volunteer group of pilots who were aiding the Chinese cause against Japan. And so my dad would go to these parties that she threw in Chinatown to raise money—Hollywood people and so on. And my dad really got into the whole life of San Francisco. He was also a friend with Marion Davies, who was William Randolph Hearst’s mistress, and she of course would invite up her Hollywood gang to the castle, Hearst Castle in San Simeon. And so my dad had great stories about going up there and how the old man, Hearst, would try to hide the booze.

0:14:09 Debra Schwartz: William. Yes. [chuckles]

0:14:12 David Talbot: Yes, Citizen Kane. He tried to hide the booze because Marion liked her drinking and she was Irish herself. And Charlie Chaplin, my dad and others would sort of have the bottles stashed away somewhere. He really loved Northern California and he loved the scene up here. So he would do plays when we were kids, up at the Curran and the Geary Theater. There were a lot of Neil Simon plays, *The Odd Couple* and *Barefoot in the Park*, and others. And when he was on a long run here, for like more than a couple of weeks, sometimes a month or so, we would come up here often, the family, and stay at the different hotels—The Fairmont and The Saint Francis Hotel—and so it was a great way living downtown in San Francisco. This is the ’60s —’64, ’65, ’66, ’67—and to soak up all this exciting energy that was happening in San Francisco and to be a teenager like I was. And my sister and my brother, and my kid sister who was even younger, we would just explore the city and take the ferry out to Sausalito and walk around out here. It was a magical time.

And so I think that it put the seed in my mind that I always wanted to live here. LA to me was this smoggy, sunny suburb. It didn’t have the Hollywood magic that it had for my father when he came out there in the ’30s. It was always in your car, on the freeway. It was so spread out and the energy just wasn’t concentrated the way it was in San Francisco, that urban energy that I really love about the city. And certainly it didn’t have these breathtaking vistas when your cable car got to the top of the hill and you just look out on the shining waters of the bay, and the beautiful panoramas. I pretty much fell madly in love with San Francisco during those trips to the city when my dad was acting in plays here.

0:16:30 Debra Schwartz: So, you mentioned to me before we were talking that you’d spent time here in Mill Valley. Tell me a little bit about when that was and how that played out.

0:16:40 David Talbot: Well, I always wanted to be a journalist. As a kid, I would cut out pictures from magazines and paste them on pieces of paper and then make up my own stories about them. My dad also loved magazines. He loved journalism and he had all the original *Esquire* magazines when it first came out, when people like Hemingway and Fitzgerald were writing for it. He bound them in this beautiful sort of leather binding. And so, as a kid, I would look through these old magazines and really fell in love with that. So, I went to school at Santa Cruz and I graduated and I always wanted to work for

Rolling Stone, or *Ramparts* was my other sort of dream job. Warren Hinckle was a great colorful San Francisco journalist who started *Ramparts* in the '60s. And of course there was *Mother Jones*. Jann Wenner who also was another Marin County kid started *Rolling Stone*. And then *Mother Jones*, which I thought had some of that same spirit but also added more political sophistication and investigative journalism gene.

So I ended up working at *Mother Jones* and Mark Dowie, who was one of my colleagues there—this was in the early '80s —lived in Mill Valley then. And he had picked up somebody hitchhiking into the city one morning, and that was a woman named Ruth Henrich, who worked at the time, I think, as an accountant at Macy's, or somewhere like that. *Mother Jones* needed an accountant and Mark happened to mention that. So she applied for the job, and she became an accountant at *Mother Jones* and later became an editor there, and a really great literary editor. She discovered a lot of the terrific writers that we were bringing in, including Louise Erdrich and others. And so, when I went to work at *Mother Jones*, I fell for Ruth and she and I became involved. And she lived in Mill Valley at the time. So I was, if not living out here, virtually living out with her, on the weekends. She lived right up from the Book Depot, and I remember many lovely mornings, on Saturday morning, strolling down to have late breakfast at the cafe and all that.

0:19:07 Debra Schwartz: And this is the early '80s?

0:19:08 David Talbot: This was the early '80s, yeah.

0:19:11 Debra Schwartz: Not so, so different than the way it is now.

0:19:17 David Talbot: Pretty similar.

0:19:18 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, there was a little bit more of the hometown feeling then. We had the hardware stores and—

0:19:27 David Talbot: Yeah, but I remember Marty Balin walking around and Bonnie Raitt. Bonnie's dad, John Raitt, was a good friend of my father's. They performed together in plays. They did *Camelot* together, kind of a roadshow of *Camelot*. So I knew Bonnie a little bit, and remembered her dad, and he was a great guy. So, it felt cozy to me and it felt like the kind of place where you could bump into people that were almost extended family.

0:20:05 Debra Schwartz: But then you eventually headed back to San Francisco.

0:20:09 David Talbot: So yeah, I pretty much have lived in San Francisco since, let's see, since 1980 I guess. And so, a long time now, most of my life at this point.

0:20:26 Debra Schwartz: And when you think about the association between Marin County and San Francisco—your book, *Season of the Witch*, talks about a lot of Marin people, Mill Valley people as well.

0:20:35 David Talbot: Yeah, Huey Lewis.

0:20:37 Debra Schwartz: Yes. Did you know him here at that time?

0:20:39 David Talbot: I did not know Huey before, but I interviewed him for the book, and he was a great guy, great storyteller, great interview. And of course, he told some great stories about growing up here, and fishing in the bay as a kid. I think he's very much a product of this area, the laid back '50s period that he grew up in. It seemed the way he described Mill Valley in those days to me was like this all-American little town, with the big shining Oz shimmering across the water, San Francisco—this little, idyllic small American town, with one or two extra elements added, as Huey put it, which was that there was a lot of beat and bohemian and artistic influences over here, too, obviously in Sausalito, but even in Mill Valley, and so on. There were writers and poets and musicians in those days, too. Pre-hippie. People who later, of course, embraced the culture of revolution in the '60s. And the parents of these kids, even though it was sort of this, as I say, all-American town, in a way Mill Valley seemed to be ready for the cultural revolution in lots of ways and became part of it. So Huey talked about how some of those parents were among the first people going to the shows at the Fillmore and so on—including his mom, I think. As I recall, I think his mom painted some of the walls at the Fillmore for Bill Graham, and so on. Anyway, I think there is this really interesting soul connection between Mill Valley, and Marin, and San Francisco.

0:22:28 Debra Schwartz: Let's go through some of the names of the people that are in your book who actually we know. Larry the Hat is there.

0:22:39 David Talbot: Larry Lautzker, Larry the Hat. Larry was part of the Good Earth Family Commune, which was a very important commune in the Haight. They were not your typical, flowers in your hair hippies. They were tougher. They were a tougher breed; they were like Larry. He was from New York. He was a little more street savvy than some of the kids who were wandering around the Haight in those years. But there were ex-cons. In fact, it was started by a couple of ex-cons, and Vietnam veterans, and street kids who were kind of hardened street kids.

And so, these were men and women, young people, who decided they were going to take a stand in the Haight even if it meant pushing the hard drug dealers out of the neighborhood—people who were starting to deal heroin—and fight corrupt cops, bad cops. The Haight was a battleground by then. It was very gritty by the late '60s, early '70s. Some of the houses were derelict houses, they were falling apart. They weren't being kept up, so the commune moved into some of these abandoned houses and started to fix them up. They had skills. Some of these guys they were working-class kids who had carpentry skills and plumbing skills.

And they started alternative businesses and a house painting company and a clothing store. They were very self-reliant and very resilient and everyone had to work. You couldn't just hang around smoking dope all day. But they had a band and they had fun,

too. So they took over a number of houses and they were a major presence in the Haight and the police raided them many times, 'cause they did make some of their revenue, as Larry and others told me, dealing marijuana. But they fought back legally. They got a good lawyer, Tony Serra—who's still with us and was a legendary hippie lawyer, looks like a Native American. This great guy whose brother of course, is the famous sculptor, Richard Serra. Tony's a great character unto himself. So yeah, Larry the Hat was part of that Good Earth Commune.

They basically saved The Haight because the city was redeveloping that whole area. They had successfully, or unsuccessfully, redeveloped the black neighborhoods in San Francisco—the Western Edition, the Fillmore—they had leveled it; they bulldozed it. They wanted to basically put a freeway through there down the Panhandle. And people resisted—Sue Hester, Calvin Welch and others, and then later, the Good Earth Commune. They felt at the time that the mayor, Joe Alioto at the time, wanted to let the Haight just continue to deteriorate so then they could, with no opposition, just level it and build condos, and perhaps a freeway and so on. But they stood their ground and so, unlike the Fillmore, the Haight was saved. The Haight was protected by the people who fought to keep it from being bulldozed. Larry was part of that, so he's a hero. [chuckles]

0:26:05 Debra Schwartz: Now, it's been some years since the '60s. And when this went on and those of us that live here, or those that visit, they go to the Haight and they take it for granted that of course that was a treasure. Look at those beautiful Victorians. There would be no thought that these things could be just raised and removed and then replaced with '60s and '70s architecture, think about that. Yet, you walk around town and there's a lot of individuals that don't talk about their history. They don't talk about what they did or who they were, yet were surrounded by these people where we live today.

0:26:42 David Talbot: Absolutely. And they're getting older now and some of them aren't with us. So that's why I wanted to do my book *Season of the Witch* when I did do it because there were enough people around who could tell these stories and get the stories straight from their mouth—Mickey Hart, and Paul Kantner, who is no longer with us now. Paul died after I interviewed him for the book. Paul Kantner from Jefferson Airplane, Mickey Hart from Grateful Dead. These are great storytellers who lived these very full lives. And the music was such an essential part of the soul of the city and the Bay Area, and particularly for young people then. It was our religion; it was our guiding light. These were the heroes, the icons, our cultural leaders really. It was more than just songs that you hear on the radio. There was a message that we felt embedded in this music. A message about peace and love and the way we wanted to live together. Bands like The Youngbloods, Jesse Colin Young, who also I think was a Marin person for many years. I think he still lives here. "Come on people—"

0:27:55 Debra Schwartz: "Smile on your brother."

0:27:57 David Talbot: Exactly.

0:27:58 Debra Schwartz: "Everybody get together, gotta love one another right now."

0:27:58 David Talbot: "Everybody get together, gotta love one another right now." So that was an anthem. It was more than just a Top 40 song. It was telling us the truth. It was telling us how we wanted to live. And so, these people walked among us, they weren't these superstars like today that live in Beverly Hills or live in a penthouse somewhere in New York City. They were people who lived in the community, they lived in the Haight. You'd see Janis Joplin walking into the store to buy something or just score some drugs [chuckles] or she'd be singing in the park. People were approachable, you could go up to Jerry Garcia on the street. The Dead lived there, the Jefferson Airplane lived there in the neighborhood. Big Brother and The Holding Company and Janis Joplin. So it was a whole different, I think, gestalt. It was a different ecosystem then, where we were producing the culture together with these people, and even though they later became legends—and to me, when I look back at what they accomplished these people, it's pretty amazing.

Of course, they were being kept going by institutions in the community like the Free Clinic. Doctor David Smith, Doctor Dave as he's called, who's still with us. Another great hero, came from a very simple background, an Okie family in Bakersfield, came to school at Berkeley, got his medical degree at U.C. San Francisco and started against great odds, this Free Clinic to treat all these young people on the street including Janis Joplin when she had an overdose. He brought her back early on before she did finally die. He rescued many of these people. But more important even than that, he really was one of the early pioneers behind the whole idea that healthcare is a right, not a privilege, which has been partly, now, institutionalized within Obamacare.

We have a lot further to go, but that idea, which I think is an essential idea, it's part of what a decent society is, began here. So San Francisco, and I think all the surrounding environs because that ethic was not just taking hold in San Francisco, it's taking hold in Mill Valley, it was taking hold in Point Reyes, it's taking hold in Mendocino, in Santa Cruz, and this whole Northern California political ecosystem, social ecosystem, where these values were—we weren't about just aggrandizing ourselves, we weren't just about accumulating wealth at the expense of others. We weren't just about dominating the world through violence and imperialism. And we weren't about dominating the planet and just gouging whatever we can from the planet.

We were about building a new world, a new way of being, a new kind of consciousness. And this was not just for us: it was for our children and our children's children. And we were learning from eastern religion. We were learning from Native American ritual and teachings. We were learning from the great poets, and we were learning from the beats and we were learning from—our signals were going out everywhere. And we were bringing in this whole new consciousness, and this was the petri dish, the laboratory where all this came together. So it was enormously inspiring for people from all around the world. I was in Los Angeles as a kid, and I was picking up on the signals so when I came here, I knew this was ground zero. This was where you had to be if you were about changing the world. And I think what the Marin suburbs were, they were an escape hatch from the city, when the city got too rough frankly. Because the city did, as I wrote in

Season of the Witch, start to descend into violence and chaos at some point, as the ’60s dream began to crash, and we did have serial murders, we had terrorism, we had rapes, and political violence of all sorts.

People needed, I think, to heal. And so, I think the nature, the beautiful nature that we’re surrounded by here in Marin was a place where communes could go for shelter and haven, and start to re-think things a bit because things had become too intense in the city. Hard drugs were coming in, and violence is always attached to that. And so, I think Marin provided this very essential shelter for people to come to and re-think things. And I think that’s still the case, in a way. You need a city with that kind of unique and crazy energy because often beauty comes from that kind of chaos. But you also need a place of sanctuary, and I think Marin, to me has always meant sanctuary.

0:33:29 Debra Schwartz: Yes, because when you talk about The Grateful Dead and Big Brother and Janis Joplin, those are just the ones that we know about, but they all lived here.

0:33:39 David Talbot: Yeah.

0:33:39 Debra Schwartz: They lived in Mill Valley.

0:33:40 David Talbot: Mike Bloomfield.

0:33:41 Debra Schwartz: Mike Bloomfield. These people came to Mill Valley. I recall at that time, you could come to Mill Valley, which was really a retirement community, yet there was also this younger, hip generation that lived, co-existed with the old guard, which was an interesting, rather progressive old guard, relatively speaking. But what I think is really interesting about what you’re saying in your book is that the heroes walked among you back then.

0:34:15 David Talbot: That’s right.

0:34:15 Debra Schwartz: Not separated. The heroes, you lived it. Everybody around you was to that end. And your book is actually, I think, so well-received in many ways because this discussion of how you live in your world, how you live with yourself, what community is, it’s a poignant one at this point.

0:34:33 David Talbot: Yep.

0:34:34 Debra Schwartz: Maybe you could expand a little bit about that.

0:34:36 David Talbot: And Bill Graham, by the way, another person who was very much a San Francisco person, of course, and the leading rock and roll impresario of his time, also then ended up moving out here, right?

0:34:47 Debra Schwartz: Right on Camino Alto, right as you go across to Roxbury.

0:34:51 David Talbot: That's right. And Masada was the name of his home that he built, right?

0:34:58 Debra Schwartz: I don't know the name of it, but we can go look at, it's owned by somebody else now.

0:35:03 David Talbot: Well, he was very much aware of his Jewish heritage, I think, which is why he called it that. It was his sanctuary, his fortification against the world.

0:35:11 Debra Schwartz: It's interesting you talk about his childhood. I'm not sure everybody understands exactly what he went through.

0:35:15 David Talbot: Yeah, he was child of the Holocaust.

0:35:17 Debra Schwartz: As a child of the Holocaust, yes.

0:35:19 David Talbot: He literally walked away from the jaws of hell with his sister who, they were orphans, and they were fleeing from Nazi tyranny, and from the furnace of that war. And his sister did not make it, but he did. He made it, he was adopted by a family then in New York after an incredible journey across the Atlantic, and ended up of course moving to San Francisco then. But he had that kind of, I think, just enormous drive after what he'd survived, to make his mark on the world. And as one musician after the next described him, he was always the grown-up in the room. He always had to sort of be the provider and the tough guy and the guy who made things happen because the '60s was so full of chaos, right? Everyone was experimenting with drugs. And so, he was the center that everyone needed to hold it all together. But yeah, he obviously needed his sanctuary, too, which is why he came out here. Like a lot of the musicians, this was their haven from the sort of madness that as things got more and more intense, they needed to escape from.

0:36:41 Debra Schwartz: And there was Prune Music here down on Miller Avenue where the musicians would collect by the 2 AM Club. In my interviews, well the owner of Prune Music, he—

0:36:52 David Talbot: Right. And Moby Grape was I think one of the greatest unsung bands of the '60s. They worked on their first album at the Ark in Sausalito. That first album is a work of genius and people like The Buffalo Springfield, Steve Stills, David Crosby who moved out here of course were all hanging out here.

0:37:19 Debra Schwartz: Lived here, yes indeed.

0:37:20 David Talbot: David Crosby was coming hanging out just to listen to this amazing music that this band, which was kind of a super group, Moby Grape, was putting together. And they unfortunately, as I write about in the book, came flying apart. They had their own demons and drugs and so on and they should have been a much more

famous and I think successful band than they were. But that first album was incredible and they were working on it out here and they got busted on Mount Tam. When the album came out, there was a famous arrest. So yeah, the roots of Moby Grape were also very deep here as well.

0:38:00 Debra Schwartz: So in your book, maybe you'd like to just say a little bit about the book itself: why you wrote it, what your intention was, what the message is you've wanted to relay—

0:38:15 David Talbot: Sure. Well, I wanted to tell people this remarkable story of how a city was liberated basically in the 1960s and '70s after a very bloody and contested cultural revolution and became finally the city known for its quote "San Francisco Values." And those values are, of course, tolerance, diversity, innovation, enlightenment, social enlightenment, and the fundamental value which is a sense that we have to take care of each other, that we don't leave anyone behind. Those values are all antithetical to a lot of the American capitalist ethos. They're maybe more sort of European in some ways. And so San Francisco, which always had a liberal gene even before the beats and the hippies showed up—it was a working class town. It was a liberal labor union town that had great labor battles here in the 1930s.

So the labor battles were the first wave of liberation that hit the city. But by the '50s, in the Cold War period, San Francisco in many ways—although it still was a union town and elected Democrats and all that—socially had become pretty conservative. It was a Catholic town run by an old boys network of Irish and Italian Catholics. And so, in terms of its social values, it was pretty traditional. The culture war that really started taking place began with Allen Ginsberg's epic poem *Howl*, which was attacked by the authorities as being obscene. It was published in the late '50s by Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights and was put on trial for obscenity and Ginsberg himself laid low. He got out of town; went to North Africa.

0:40:20 Debra Schwartz: The writer.

0:40:20 David Talbot: Yeah, the poet. But the publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, at City Lights Books, stood his ground and fought and many of those cases, not just that trial, but other cases where charges of obscenity were brought against poems and against publishers were very important in sort of liberating the city and liberating it culturally. And so, those battles started in the '50s. They went into the '60s, obviously, and then they became even more intense over drugs, and The Grateful Dead was being arrested, their house was being raided. As they said at the time, "If some wealthy people in Pacific Heights were smoking marijuana, there'd be no police raids, but of course in the Haight, it was open season on hippies for the cops." And so, these were freedom struggles. They're our own freedom struggles. We think of the freedom struggles in the South of course with the great civil rights battles, but this was a cultural war that was happening in San Francisco, that later was defined as a culture war, but it started right here in San Francisco. And, of course, it went up through all the upheavals of the '70s, the Symbionese Liberation Army, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, the People's Temple in

Jonestown, the assassinations of supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone. These were all aspects of this war within the city.

A civil war over what kind of city we were going to be. And finally, San Francisco was put to the final test by the AIDS epidemic. And after the great battles around gay liberation and the assassination of gay Supervisor Harvey Milk, AIDS could have been the final nail in the coffin for San Francisco as a city of tolerance. There was great fear about this epidemic at the time. People didn't know how the virus was spread. People didn't know if you were a doctor or nurse whether you could be taking it home to your child at night. Or if you worked in a restaurant, or you were waited on by a sick waiter, if you could also become infected. And, of course nationally, we had terrible leadership at the time in the Reagan administration, which was dominated by the Christian right, and you had people who were openly saying this was God's revenge, like Pat Buchanan and other members of the Reagan coalition, this was God's revenge on gay men.

And so, there was no compassion or vision or leadership at the national level, but there was, thank God, in San Francisco. Mayor Dianne Feinstein, who was the daughter of a physician and had been married to a physician, knew about medical protocol, knew that an epidemic had to be treated with rational and compassionate response rather than fear and panic. The doctors and nurses and social workers and people on the front lines of the AIDS war at San Francisco General, people in the community, lesbians and gays who stood with their brothers and sisters, that sense of compassion that we're all in this together began to spread out from that group, that core group of incredibly brave and visionary people, who I give enormous credit to. And then finally, the whole city got on board. So San Francisco finally became the city that lived up to its name, the city of Saint Francis, the city that said, "We don't leave anyone behind." Other cities like Gainesville, Florida, which notoriously put a sick 24-year old man on an airplane and had him flown to San Francisco, the man was sick with AIDS, and had him dumped on the streets of San Francisco. We said, "We don't do that. We take care of our brothers and sisters when they're sick."

So that is the final chapter of my book *Season of the Witch*, and ultimately I think the moral that I wanted to impart, or the lesson, was that San Francisco does have values, and I think they should become the values of our entire country. But those values didn't come easy; we did have to fight for them. We're going to have to fight for them again right now. We're seeing this is the year 2016 with a very, I think, fateful presidential election underway between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and once again the country is wrestling with where it's heart and soul is. This is a defining moment for the country. And I think by looking at what San Francisco went through and how it came out the other end in a way that was empowering and inspiring. Really it's important for all of us to learn from the lessons of San Francisco.

0:45:32 Debra Schwartz: When you think about how you find yourself, who you want to be as a culture, as a city, as an individual, it's not an easy birthing process.

0:45:47 David Talbot: No, not at all.

0:45:51 Debra Schwartz: Yet, I think that your book does a wonderful job of describing how it's something that can never stop.

0:46:00 David Talbot: Exactly.

0:46:00 Debra Schwartz: You have to look around you. You have to pay attention. You have to see where things need to be attended to. And we've got a lot of changes going on in our area now.

0:46:14 David Talbot: Well, right, not just nationally, but our city in many ways and the whole region is again at war with itself over the issue of who can live here. Who can afford to live here? And many, many people, thousands of people are being displaced by the new wealth boom, the tech boom. It's been a very profitable and prosperous development for a number of people who are enjoying the fruits of that new tech boom, but for many people who've lived here for years, many families particularly in areas of the city like the Mission, which was a traditional Latino neighborhood where families lived for generations, they now find themselves evicted and put on the streets. Homelessness is exploding as an issue. And again, so what kind of city are we? What kind of society are we that allows that sort of human misery in our midst while people are going to restaurants and spending $1,000 a night on a meal and driving away in their Uber limousines or their Teslas while people are sleeping in filth on the streets.

Literally, they have to step over other human beings to get into these restaurants. So that's not the San Francisco that we fought for in the '60s and '70s. It's not the city of San Francisco's value of compassion. That's a city that's becoming hardened. Its soul's getting hard. And so once again, we're being challenged to see who we really are, and that's why I've become active again. I'm not just a writer anymore. I'm an activist for the group called San Francisco Vision. We're trying to get the right people elected to city hall to begin to make the changes we need. We're trying to educate the public and the voters through public forums and special reports that we're putting out. We're trying to bring together groups that don't understand each other and where there's great conflict between them like some of the longer-term residents of the Mission and the new tech residents. We need to figure this out again; and again our soul is being put to the test. So *Season of the Witch* part two. [chuckles]

0:48:28 Debra Schwartz: So we're recording this conversation in Mill Valley—comfortable, beautiful place, just 13 miles or so from San Francisco, really not that far away. But it's easy for those to live here to not have to face what's going on nearby. And so when you think about, we're talking here in Mill Valley, we're focusing on it. What do you say to the people living here about what's going on? I mean you can get complacent by the comfort and the lovely—these hills have all been fought for too by the way. We're looking at a window now and we're looking at where there could've been runaway development at various times in San Francisco's history. And what we do have is very different from what was originally here, 300 years ago. Sometimes when you're sitting in a place and it looks pretty good, you can lose your ability to see what's really going on.

What do you say to your readers, to the people that you're trying to reach about this?

0:49:38 David Talbot: Well, you can live in a bubble-world and you can maybe be lucky enough to live in that world comfortably for all your life. But bubbles do tend to burst. And there's only so long that you can have a wealth gap that gets bigger and bigger and bigger, where more and more wealth goes to 1% or a fraction of 1% at the top. And Bernie Sanders, of course, his campaign if it succeeded in doing one thing drove that point home for people. But as a society, a democracy cannot survive that kind of enormous disproportionate division between comfort and prosperity and misery. Sooner or later the have-nots will exert their misery on the rest of society. And if you want a violent revolution to break out, if you want rioting on the streets to break out, if you want more violence between police and activists and police and blacks and Latinos who are being more and more targeted by our police forces, then if you can live with that in your bubble-world, then I guess that's okay with you.

But if you have concerns that even from a practical point of view that you don't want to live in a society that is on the verge of that kind of—I think as James Baldwin called it "the fire next time" —that kind of destruction and chaos and fear and militarization of our society, then you have to do something, you have to step forward, you have to get involved, you have to get the right people elected, you have to basically begin to shift the wealth back. People freak out when you talk about redistributing the wealth in this country. You're a socialist, you're a revolutionary, but that's what, again, Bernie was teaching us, that we need to be revolutionary at this point. Society has become so out of balance and so unfair—basically unfair to the vast majority—that we need some kind of radical and revolutionary social program to begin to make things more balanced.

0:52:00 Debra Schwartz: So I'm going to say something sort of off the wall. I've never done this in an interview but let's just try it. Ready?

0:52:06 David Talbot: Sure.

0:52:08 Debra Schwartz: I'm Mill Valley, you're San Francisco. Tell me what you need, tell me what you want, San Francisco.

0:52:16 David Talbot: Look, there's a lot of people who live in Mill Valley and Marin who made a fortune from their genius, from their technical skills, from their entrepreneurial skills. We need your generosity, we need your charity basically, we need some of the money that you've made to be put in the right places now to help people. I'm talking about groups that are working with the homeless, I'm talking about groups that are progressive groups who are trying to get the right people elected. I'm talking about groups that are trying to solve the housing crisis in San Francisco and elsewhere. And they're dealing with police violence, and the growing tensions between minority communities and our police forces.

There's so many things now that have to be addressed in this country. And I think we need a new peace movement. That's something that I'm completely perplexed by. Why,

after 15 years of war—and again this is this question of other people's kids doing it or having to fight these wars, so we don't have to be involved. I'm sure there are not many people from Mill Valley or Marin who are sending their children off to Afghanistan or Iraq and other places to fight in these wars. We need to take responsibility for that as well. We need to start redistributing that military budget, that defense budget and putting it into rebuilding the country's schools and infrastructure and all the things that we desperately need in this country.

So in other words, we need leadership, we need money, we need vision, and we need some of the prosperity and some of the treasure that people have accumulated in the Bay Area to be redistributed in the right way so we can begin to change this country. That doesn't mean just helping to get people like Hillary Clinton elected. I know she'll probably get 99% of Mill Valley. Hillary Clinton is part of the solution but she's also part of the problem. And for years the Clintons have been part of the corporate side of the Democratic Party and been aligned with Wall Street and of course the military. So I just want my message to be: get involved. I am a writer. I am not inclined to leave my writing room and get out there in the streets myself but suddenly at my age, 64, I was marching in the streets again this year because of the police murders of young black and Latino men in my own neighborhood where there's shrines suddenly springing up everywhere to these dead young men.

Flowers and poems to these young men who were killed—unarmed, defenseless men who were killed because cops overreacted; and, again, that's what happens in a city that gets divided. Because the haves start getting worried about dark-skinned people, who they think want their money. Or are homeless and they don't want to, have to see them on the streets anymore so they unleash the cops on them and this is what happens in the city and then you have these fatalities and you have people, who are innocent people getting killed. I can't live with that on my conscience. We need to take control of our cities. We need to infuse our institutions with the compassion of the '60s and '70s that we all, as younger people, had as our dream. That was in our music, as we talked about earlier. That was the message we heard from our leaders, from Martin Luther King Jr., from Bobby Kennedy, from John Kennedy, these were the people who I and millions of others were inspired by and we need to bring that same sense of vision and courage and heart and soul back to our city and back to the country.

0:56:27 Debra Schwartz: You've written some other very interesting books. Maybe you want to just briefly—I mean I can say them or you could.

0:56:34 David Talbot: Well yeah, speaking of Bobby Kennedy, that was the other great trauma in my life. I was this 16-year old and I worked for Bobby's campaign for president in spring of 1968 when I was in Los Angeles. And I remember with even more a sense of trauma, the murder of Bobby Kennedy than I do his brother, John. I remember being up at Mulholland Drive, celebrating the primary victory of Bobby Kennedy in California that night in June and hearing on the car radio that he'd been shot at the Ambassador Hotel. So that to me was, I think like to a lot of people, the final straw. I felt that our country was being taken from us. That there were forces that were very dark and

violent forces in America that kept killing our leaders, that kept us at war permanently even though, obviously, the majority of the American people did not want a war, in that case Vietnam. But when you look back on it, America has been basically at war throughout all my life and so you begin to understand that there's something deeper going on here that's deeper than democracy. It's deeper than the people that we happen to elect and put in office. There are forces that are even more powerful than the people we elect.

And so, a number of scholars have looked at that and have called it the "deep state"—as Peter Dale Scott, former Berkeley professor and someone who studied power in America for many years, calls it—or the invisible government, or the shadow government. I became determined to use my skills as a journalist and a historian to look into this and so the first book where I did this was called *Brothers: The Hidden History of the Kennedy Years*, a book about the Kennedy Brothers. It was an alternative history of the Kennedy presidency. It looked at that presidency as sort of a break with the Cold War, and JFK as a leader, who was a visionary leader trying to lead the country out of this very terrifying Cold War dilemma where a nuclear war was a daily threat. And he was, I think, killed as a result of his courageous leadership. He stood up to these very powerful forces, national security forces, that were profiting from this constant state of terror, and I think he was assassinated as a result of that.

His brother suspected the same thing and so the great reveal in my book was that Bobby Kennedy—who was his brother's Attorney General and of course, someone who was very knowledgeable about power himself—he became convinced, through his own investigations, that his brother was killed by a conspiracy. It was a domestic conspiracy, and came out of the government because, basically, the Kennedy presidency had fractured, had broken in two over the Cold War. So he looked at the source of the assassination as the CIA and then of course he himself was murdered after telling people that if he was elected in '68, he would re-open the investigation into his brother's death. It's a remarkable story and of course it's in some ways too traumatic to be being taught in the classrooms. My book was optioned in Hollywood but for some reason none of the studios and networks have the courage to go through with making it and putting it on the screen.

I think they saw what happened with Oliver Stone and his film *JFK* and how controversial that was and how pilloried Oliver was for making that movie and no one would go there. But I followed it up more recently with a book because I wanted to, for my own sense of satisfaction, finally determine who I really thought was behind the plot to kill President Kennedy and his brother. This book, *The Devil's Chessboard*, focuses on Allen Dulles, who was the head of the CIA under Kennedy, a very, very powerful figure in American politics and corporate life. He was Dick Cheney on steroids, as I call him. Very powerful figure coming out of Wall Street and the Washington national security world. And he was fired by President Kennedy after the CIA's disastrous invasion of Cuba, the Bay of Pigs. And so, I knew there was a deep resentment between Dulles and Kennedy after that. So in my latest book, *The Devil's Chessboard*, I go deeply into this figure Allen Dulles.

I wanted to write a real life spy-thriller. Or really, an anti-spy thriller because I think so many spy thrillers are very militaristic and they're very biased in a certain direction. But I wanted to really show what happens beneath the surface when power operates in the shadows. Allen Dulles was a prime symbol of all that had gone wrong with America in my lifetime. So I do make a case that Allen Dulles was at the center of a plot to kill Kennedy among other things. The book tells a sweeping story from World War II when Dulles, as one of our top spies in Europe, was actually collaborating with the Nazi enemy. And after the war, helped many high-ranking Nazi officials escape justice at Nuremberg. This was a man who was all about power. And if he thought the Nazis or ex-Nazis could be of use to him in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, then that was all he cared about. He didn't care about morality. He didn't care about, really I think, even his own children or family, as I write about. He was a cold-blooded man who was an enormously talented practitioner of power. And his vision of America and his vision of American power was the vision that ultimately proved victorious over, I think, a more benevolent and enlightened vision put forward by Franklin Roosevelt, the Kennedy brothers, and so on. That's really the great tragedy of our lifetime, is how we lost America. So essentially, that's what I was trying to tell in these two books *Brothers* and *The Devil's Chessboard*. While my book *Season of the Witch* is a happier story, the tale of how we liberated the city, at least for a certain time. The other two books tell the story of how we lost our country.

1:03:13 Debra Schwartz: Interesting. The book *The Devil's Chessboard* is chilling I think, to say the least, Dulles is calculating, who really just operated as he wished to operate. Not much of a collaborator.

1:03:30 David Talbot: And above the law.

1:03:30 Debra Schwartz: Above the law. You reveal, really, two governments simultaneously acting.

1:03:36 David Talbot: That's right.

1:03:37 Debra Schwartz: I believe there's a point where de Gaulle is talking to John Kennedy saying, "Can I get assassinated?" And he says, "Not by me." But JFK couldn't be sure that the CIA wouldn't be doing that. He had lost the reins in many ways. And you think that's absolutely unsupportable in this country, that our democratic processes are going to insure that this won't happen, but your book very much describes exactly how it did happen.

1:04:10 David Talbot: That's right. There was a frightening moment early on in the Kennedy presidency, and it's really been forgotten. All but forgotten in history. It's not referred to in any of the books I've seen until mine in *The Devil's Chessboard*. But you're right, in April 1961, while Kennedy was wrestling with the Cuban crisis, the CIA's invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, there's suddenly these outraged messages coming from Paris where President de Gaulle, who wass an ally of ours, saying, "I'm the

target of a military coup, from my own military, right-wing elements within my military, and the CIA is supporting this coup." And so, he wants to know, from Kennedy, "Are you backing this coup against me?" And Kennedy says, "No, I absolutely am not, but I can't vouch for my own CIA." What an alarming thing that is. A President to say, "I don't know what the national security wing of my own administration is doing."

And so de Gaulle, through his great heroism, survives that coup attempt. He goes on national television in France. He tells the French people to pour into the streets to defend him as happened recently in Turkey. And they do. They go to the runways at the airports so the rebellious French troops can't land there. They surround French government buildings so the French military rebels can't occupy those buildings. Car factories where the workers are militants, seize control of the factories, so the military can't control the factories. It's a remarkable moment in French history. And again, it's been completely lost here in America. But I'm not sure even how many young French people know about it.

And again, the CIA was at the heart of it and in that sense Kennedy was not in control of his own spy agency. So that, unfortunately, became a theme of the Kennedy presidency as I studied it, that he was never fully in control of his own military or the CIA. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the famous historian who worked in the Kennedy White House told me that pointblank in my interview with him: "We never felt we controlled those aspects of the government." So, we have to really then ask ourselves some deep questions like who really is running our foreign policy at this point? Why is America permanently at war? Why do we go from one crisis to the next one? One boogeyman to the next? Now it's ISIS. Next its Putin. Who knows who it'll be next year or few years after. The Chinese? We always need a enemy because, I think of what President Eisenhower warned us about was the military-industrial-complex. I think that the military-industrial-complex has become even much more powerful these days.

These days most of the American society is militarized. There's so many economic forces that are now dependent on these permanent state of war, including Silicon Valley, which we like to think of as this enlightened place that is coming up with all sorts of cool gadgets and things that make our life better. But much of Silicon Valley is militarized. Much of that great ingenuity is focused on surveillance and focused on ways to make our military more lethal and effective. So, unfortunately that's where a lot of our genius goes. A lot of our resources go into making America more and more of a lethal state and more and more of Big Brother State that's capable of invading everyone's privacy and capable of exerting as much control over the world as possible.

1:08:11 Debra Schwartz: Have you ever personally been afraid? You're an investigative reporter. You poke around places that I suspect some people would rather you not go.

1:08:21 David Talbot: I was afraid for my family. I've never been afraid for myself, maybe that's a little reckless. I've been threatened. I was threatened when I was working on the Kennedy book by a Cuban figure in Miami who, I felt, knew a lot about the

Kennedy assassination. I don't think he was threatening me himself but he was telling me that there're others who might want to cause me harm. The Cubans, the right-wing Cubans, were used by the CIA in a lot of their plots against Castro and so on, and a lot of those guys were lethal and knew how to kill. So I took that threat fairly seriously. I was threatened when I ran Salon—another time when I got into the thick of the power vortex was when we stood up for President Clinton when he was under fire and he was about to be impeached for a consensual sex act. We felt that was ridiculous and we started to investigate Ken Starr, the independent prosecutor who was not so independent. He had his own sponsors which, Hillary was right about, when she called it a vast right-wing conspiracy.

There was lots of right-wing money going into that lynch mob investigation to oust Bill Clinton from the White House. We were attacked by Tom DeLay who was head of the Republican machine in Congress at that point. He called on the FBI to investigate us. We were getting death threats, bomb threats at our office. We were this little website here in San Francisco but we were suddenly having a huge impact because of our investigative reporting. So I was proud of that, but the one thing that really did alarm me in the midst of all that madness was when I got a caller who was threatening my children. So, obviously when it's your own life, you're willing to take risks sometimes but when it's lives of your loved ones, then it makes you actually have much deeper reservations about what you're doing for obvious reasons. So, I think that was the only time that I was really shaken enough to be deeply concerned.

1:10:38 Debra Schwartz: So, you have to kind of wrestle, I imagine. As a person who's revealing and uncovering information, following your hunches, looking down the rabbit holes. Do you ever go through the personal dilemma of really wishing you hadn't learned what you just learned? How do you live with this information? What do you withhold? What do you not? What's the process that you go through?

1:11:07 David Talbot: That's a good question. I think some people would be weighed down by that knowledge. I work differently, to me, it's liberating. Maybe it's an Irish thing. I feel so keenly a sense of injustice, how our country was robbed from us in our lifetime as we've been talking about. To me that is such an outrage. It infuriates me so much and so the thing that soothes my soul actually is a great palliative for me is knowledge. Because it gives me a sense of power and, particularly, if I can then share that knowledge with others. I've gotten letters. The ones that touch me the most about my books are when they say, "Thank you, I've suspected this but you've—it's this moment of great clarity that I've been seeking my whole life for what happened to our country from the Kennedy assassination on." And so, to me, that moment of clarification is liberating.

And not only liberating but it's uplifting. It gives me a sense that, because knowledge is power, if you know the problem, you can begin to address it. So, I think we're very far from the point when we can really begin to change the country at the national level. I think now, we have people screaming "No more war! No more war!" at the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia. But the voices were very feeble compared to the

overwhelming voices of, "USA! USA!" And I'm a patriot too. I get why people feel pride in their country. But those voices of, "USA! USA!", that chant was meant to drown out more sane voices. People are saying, "We need to re-evaluate our foreign policy, our military policies." Because after 15 years, we have more violence than ever, more destruction than ever, more blowback against us ever from the Middle East. So clearly, whatever we're doing in the Middle East is not working. So, if you can't get even to the point where you have an honest re-evaluation of your foreign policy, then we're doomed.

So to me, knowledge is the first step. We need to know more, not only about the Kennedy assassination, we need to know about 9/11, more about 9/11, why that happened, why our national security system failed that day. There's new information coming out about that now, about the connection between 9/11 and Saudi intelligence in the 28-pages of the 9/11 report that were just finally released years later. We now see that there were a number of Saudi intelligence figures at work in the US who clearly were in touch with the hijackers, some of the hijackers who involved in the 9/11 attacks. And those Saudi intelligence figures, I'm convinced the CIA had knowledge of what they were doing, too. We know that the CIA and Vice President Cheney's office blocked that information, the information about the Saudi connection to 9/11 from being investigated later. And that those Saudi figures were hustled out of the country quickly before they could be thoroughly interrogated by the FBI right after the terror attacks on 9/11.

So, there's a lot of suspicious stuff about that. And that changed the world, just the way the Kennedy assassination changed the world. I think power is quite capable of doing anything it needs to do to terrify the public, to get the power it wants over the public, to rob people of their rights, their democratic rights so they can exert their power even more strongly. And people who "poo-poo" this all as conspiracy theories are children, I think. They're naïve. They want to live in a fairy tale that doesn't exist. The biggest purveyors of conspiracy theories are often those in power. Whether it's something like the Gulf of Tonkin, so-called act of North Vietnamese aggression that allowed President Johnson to escalate the war in Vietnam—that turned out to be, of course, fabricated, make-believe—or Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, which was another fabrication of people in power, the Bush-Cheney administration. And look at the enormous tragedy that ensued because of that. So, a theory ceases to become a theory when there's enough evidence to support it. I think we're now seeing enough evidence. And of course, the American people, by and large who believed this all along, to know that President Kennedy was not assassinated by a lone nut, but that he was assassinated by a conspiracy, a conspiracy that grew out of these national security elements that we're talking about—I think that, ultimately, we'll find out that a lot of the things about 9/11 that will also shock us.

1:16:00 Debra Schwartz: May I ask you? You commented about Cheney. Do you think this is another situation like we had with Kennedy and the CIA? That it was Bush? Does your research suggest that Bush was complicit? Did he know what's going on?

1:16:16 David Talbot: I have just begun to do the research that I think all American citizens should be doing on this. And for me, it was the release of the 9/11—these 28

pages that had been suppressed for years from the 9/11 commission. Those pages are shocking. You should just read them. And there's some wonderful analysis that is now being done by some very well-informed people of these, because what they show is that the hijackers in San Diego, who were based in San Diego, that cell of hijackers involved in 9/11, were clearly in touch with Saudi intelligence in this country.[4] Prince Bandar in particular, who is the Saudi Ambassador to the US at the time, and a very powerful figure in Saudi royal circles. And a figure who is so close to the Bush family, that Barbara Bush, the matriarch of the family, called him Bandar Bush.

And so, there were deep connections, I think, through the Texas oil industry and the Bush family with the Saudis. I do not believe that the Saudis, the royal family, because of how dependent they are completely on US Military power for their existence, would've done something as a reckless and suicidal as to hatch the 9/11 plot all on their own against the United States. But I think there had to be some kind of foreknowledge or even complicity between the Saudi royal family and the elements of the Bush administration. So yeah, I think that's what ultimately we'll start to find out that there. I don't know enough about it to be conclusive, maybe it was a situation where the Saudis and US intelligence had some kind of deep espionage game going on that backfired, and they weren't completely aware that there was going to be these assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that day. Maybe it was, like I say, something that they thought they had under control that got out of their control, that went rogue. But, I certainly think that they were much more connected to it and to those actors in this country than we've been led to believe. And there was a reason why the Bush administration let so many key Saudi suspects who were involved in Saudi intelligence flee the country, people who were connected to the royal family. They got special flights out of this country.

1:19:01 Debra Schwartz: No one else was flying, right?

1:19:03 David Talbot: Exactly. But the Saudis were allowed to escape. There's a reason for that. So again, this is the kind of deep politics or shadow government research that desperately needs to be done. There's not that many good investigative journalists who have the resources to do it. I'm trying to do some of this through my book imprint. I have two good investigative reporters now working on a book for me along these lines. It's called *The Watchdog Didn't Bark*, and it's analyzing why there were these US national security failures. Were they failures or were they intentional? That's the key question.

1:19:41 Debra Schwartz: My head is spinning. My gosh. [laughs]

1:19:43 David Talbot: My head's spinning, too.

1:19:45 Debra Schwartz: So, you really have, in the most aggressively dedicated way, taken on this daunting task of trying to get to the truth of things. Remember when I introduced you the other night, and I said that if we could have a magical talking mirror

[4] These were Saudi intelligence handlers who were, in turn, in touch with some of the top Saudi government officials like Prince Bandar.—David Talbot.

that could reflect back with clarity and witty prose as you often have, but evocative words and ideas reflected back to us what is going on, wouldn't it be great to have that talking mirror? And really, you are that. You've really become this reflection, whether people want to see it or not, you know? And that's quite a responsibility.

1:20:37 David Talbot: And that is a good question. Do people want to see it or not? Do people want the truth? And when you look at the ratings for the Kardashians versus the ratings for, say, the documentary on Ed Snowden, *Citizenfour*, you begin to wonder whether people are too busy, they're too weighed down by life's burdens, they're too inculcated with American mythology and patriotism that they just don't want to go there. And certainly, when you see all the flag waving and the "USA, USA!" chants, even at the Democratic Convention this year, you wonder if people even want to see the truth about their country. So, it's a question I have all the time, but it's never a question that should be allowed to get in the way of doing what you do as an activist or as a journalist or whatever. I mean, that's what we do.

And I interviewed Chris Hedges about this—the great former *New York Times* journalist and author who's been a foreign correspondent for years and has seen the worst around the world and seen the worst here—and he says he never reads his e-mail even. He never reads responses to what he does. He saw—when he was covering the terrible events in the Balkans and the civil war that was breaking out there then—he saw the *New York Times* would do these polls of the readers to see if they're actually reading the stuff that he was putting his life on the line to cover. So here he is as a war correspondent risking his life every day to cover the terrible things in Sarajevo that one group is doing against another, and readers didn't want to read it.

There was some shockingly depressing number, like 10% of readers, 8%, were reading his stories, and he was risking his life every day to file these stories because someone had to document what was happening to the women and children and the people of Sarajevo. And so he said he just stopped reading at a certain point, the reaction and the responses, because he is the son of a minister and someone who I think has gone to theological school at Harvard, and he feels that he just has a spiritual duty to do what he's doing, which is to tell the truth, no matter if it has any impact or not.

1:22:54 Debra Schwartz: So, often at the end of interviews, I'll ask my interviewees what do you say to somebody, someone young, that's listening to this interview now? Maybe they're in high school, maybe they're in college, they're trying to determine, to take on this kind of work, to put yourself out there, to even put your life on the line takes a lot of guts. It takes a lot of commitment. What do you say to those people? What can you share about your own experiences that could help guide or inform?

1:23:28 David Talbot: You know, it's like there's something, a spark, that everyone has in them at some point in their life that tells them, that lights the way for them. And as I said earlier, for me it was maybe the Bobby Kennedy campaign in 1968, when he was killed, that just lit this fire in me that never went out. But at some point, if you're a sentient human being, if you are someone who is eager to find a path for yourself in life,

you have to listen to it or look for that spark. And when it starts to take flame—I don't think you know exactly when it'll happen. Some people happens as they say very early in life. For others, it'll happen later. But once you feel that spark, then you have to let it grow. And if you don't, then you've wasted your life.

And so, what I would say to people is be attentive, wait for that spark and then do whatever you can to keep encouraging it to grow and grow within you, and then follow that light. Because that's what I've done my whole life. People ask for tips on this or that, do's or don'ts when you're pursuing a career. What I've often found when I went out to raise money for Salon—when I went out to raise money for Hot Books, my new imprint, when I tried to get a book contract to write one of my books—was that if I felt it, if it was in my heart strong enough, I could make it happen. If it was something that I was trying to sort of do in a more calculating way, in a more commercial way, in a more cynical way, how can I get this investment or how can I do this just to get more money for its own sake, it never really worked because people see through that.

But if they feel that you're truly passionate about something, even people with money, even corporate people want to feel that they've done something with their lives, and so if you come to them with a vision that makes sense and that is ennobling and that is visionary, then they're often just as excited about it as you are. So I would say, watch for the spark and when it starts to grow, figure out how you're going to let it light your way, including your career, whether you go to college or not, whether you pursue one profession or another. But I think just about everyone at some point feels that spark and unfortunately, society tends to snuff those sparks out, because your parents or authorities will tell you that's not realistic. You'll never make a living from that. You have to be more practical. Life's full of risks and dangers and you don't want to go down that path. But I've always taken risks and when I really felt something strong enough, its always paid off. I've done everything I wanted to do in my life.

I was just telling this to my wife Camille the other day—who's also a journalist, Camille Peri, a very good journalist—even at our age now, it's still rocky. We sometimes don't know how we're going to pay the mortgage and we've got grown kids living in our house because they are also creative people. They're filmmakers and they're actors. They're doing interesting stuff and it's hard for them to live in San Francisco given the way things are. So we've got this big, sprawling commune of people and I'm trying to keep it afloat financially. And there's lots of pressures, and it's crazy. But I looked at her the other day, despite all this uncertainty, I said, "You know, I've had the life I wanted to have. This is exactly the life I wanted to lead. I'm with the people now, my family, my extended family, all these activists that I want to be with, and I've accomplished the things I've accomplished, and I'm proud of. And as hard as it's been for us as a family, I wouldn't have done anything differently."

1:27:31 Debra Schwartz: That says a lot.

1:27:34 David Talbot: It does. Saying it made me happy because you do get ground down. Even when you're someone who seems to be as accomplished as I am, you do get

ground down still. All through your life, there's obstacles every step of the way and so, you do have to step back and say sometimes in your life, "You know what? I won. I've won some things. We've won somethings. We've won some things as a movement. We've won some things together." And it's often you do this, by the way, it's not on your own, you do it with groups of people. Salon was a tribe. We were like-minded people who were like a band coming together to do a web publication when no one even knew the web could be a publishing medium. We were really like sort of pioneers and so I'll always remember those other people who left their jobs and took a risk with me at Salon.

They had kids to feed and they left good jobs to come with me to start something that had no assurance that it would succeed. Like I said, in 1995 no one even knew the web could be a publishing medium or that it could support itself. And it's still of course, an open question. But I'll always remember those people and the risks they took, too, to join me. So it has never been a solitary thing. But then again, if you do have that spark inside you, and you say, "You know what? The web could be this incredible, liberating medium where you go around corporate media and you tell the truth and you could do it in a cheaper way." That was what I felt with Salon. The inmates can take over the asylum. We don't have to answer to this big corporate bureaucracy. Other people thought that same way, too, other journalists. They said, "We'll come with you." They walked out of a Hearst newsroom with me one at a time. They went into *San Francisco Examiner* executive editor Phillip Bronstein's office one at a time and said, "We're leaving with David. We're going to go to this new thing." He got more and more furious. Phil lives in Mill Valley. There's a connection. [laughs] I cherry-picked that newsroom taking my favorite people, the most talented people and we just started Salon and we made history in our way. So again, risks. Risks can pay off if you feel strongly enough, if that spark burns brightly enough.

1:30:11 Debra Schwartz: As we're just about to close this, but you really remind me of a saying my sister use to say all the time in the '60s. You remind me of this one thought: that we are all brothers and sisters in the revolution of life.

1:30:25 David Talbot: Yep. Amen, sister. Right on. [laughs]

1:30:28 Debra Schwartz: Amen to that. Well, I think this concludes the interview. Thank you so much, David, for sharing your story, for taking us back in time, for reminding us to think about who we want to be and who we need to be, and for continuing. I know you continue to galvanize support to get out there and fight the fight that needs to be fought. Sometimes, you have to defend yourself, and you have to defend who you have to be all the time, even against yourself sometimes.

1:31:06 David Talbot: Oh yeah.

1:31:07 Debra Schwartz: So, thank you so much for all that you do. I look forward to finishing *The Devil's Chessboard*.

1:31:17 David Talbot: It's a big book.

1:31:18 Debra Schwartz: Yes, it is. But again, thanks so much, and I have a feeling I'll be seeing you again.

1:31:24 David Talbot: I'm sure you will. Thank you, Debra, and thanks for everything you do and with the local history project because we do need to keep this history alive. "There's nothing past about the past," as Faulkner said, right?

1:31:38 Debra Schwartz: "There's nothing past about the past?"

1:31:39 David Talbot: Yes.

1:31:40 Debra Schwartz: Okay. We'll close with that then.