



# Vermont Conversation: New Yorker journalist Jane Mayer on how dark money fuels right-wing extremism

By David Goodman

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***The Vermont Conversation with David Goodman** is a VTDigger podcast that features in-depth interviews on local and national issues with politicians, activists, artists, changemakers and citizens who are making a difference. Listen below, and subscribe on **Apple Podcasts**, **Google Podcasts** or **Spotify** to hear more.*

**Jane Mayer** has earned a reputation as one of the country’s top investigative reporters. As chief Washington correspondent for **The New Yorker**, Mayer has been relentless in exposing the hidden forces shaping American politics. Her bestselling book, “**Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right**,” documents the vast influence of the Koch brothers and was named one of the 10 best books of 2016 by the New York Times.

In the past year, **Mayer has exposed the right-wing funders behind former President Donald Trump’s Big Lie** of a stolen election. **She reported how Ginni Thomas secretly supported the Jan. 6 insurrection** as her husband, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, considered cases that involved her. And this month **she exposed the shadowy conservative organization** that smeared Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson in a failed attempt to derail her Supreme Court confirmation.

Mayer often provokes the ire of those she exposes. **The Koch Brothers hired investigators to smear her**, and the subject of her most recent exposé tweeted her personal contact information in an attempt to intimidate her.

Mayer worked at the Wall Street Journal before joining the New Yorker in 1995. She has won numerous awards for her reporting. Esquire called Mayer “quite simply one of the very few, utterly invaluable journalists this country has.”

*Disclosure: Jane Mayer serves on the board of the Vermont Journalism Trust, the parent organization of VTDigger.*

*This transcript has been edited for length and clarity.*

**David Goodman**

Readers know you for your national reporting, but they may not know that your journalism roots are in small town Vermont. Talk about how you got started.

**Jane Mayer**

Without Vermont, I don't know that I would have been a reporter. It gave me my first chance to try it at the smallest weekly newspaper in the state, which was the Weathersfield Weekly (Editor's note: The Weathersfield Weekly published from 1971 to 1986). My parents were living in Weathersfield, and I had nothing to do in the summer. I was a teenager, and my mom said, Oh, why don't you try to work on the weekly newspaper? It was run by the Hunter family in Weathersfield Center, and they gave me a chance to try being a reporter. It was so small. We also developed the photographs and we printed the paper, and because Armstrong Hunter had a local printing press, he printed it right there. We collated it, then we put it in the back of the car, and we personally delivered it to our readers. It was a fantastic experience.

That summer was an important summer for journalism. We listened all summer long to the Watergate hearings on the radio. We would hear these incredible hearings unfolding about corruption in Washington that had been exposed in the very beginning by two reporters, Woodward and Bernstein. They seemed so heroic and in the public service that I thought they seemed like an ideal of what you could do.

**David Goodman**

You also worked at the Rutland Herald before going to the Wall Street Journal.

**Jane Mayer**

There was another paper in Vermont, too. After we got out of college, my friends started the Black River Tribune in Ludlow, Vermont. And I was the so-called theater critic. I used to go to the Weston Playhouse and write about the place. I also did some illustrating for it. I actually wanted to be an illustrator and a cartoonist in the beginning. I tried to be a cartoonist for the Rutland Herald. But it would take me two days to do a really good cartoon, and I would drive it over to Rutland and get \$20 for it. And I thought God, I can never make a living doing this. I didn't know how anybody could. So I got stuck having to write instead. And I got hired as a local reporter covering first hospital news in Rutland, where I pick up the list of who died, who was born and who was admitted.

**David Goodman**

In 1984, you became the Wall Street Journal's first female White House correspondent. What was your experience breaking the gender barrier in the White House press room?

**Jane Mayer**

It was kind of fun. I was pretty young to have such an esteemed job. I think they probably picked me in large part for gender reasons. I'd been doing stories at the at the Wall Street Journal that caught the eye of the Washington bureau chief. I'd been in Beirut, and he liked the stories I was

writing. I like to think there was some talent involved, but I think they really wanted to have a woman and put a female at the White House at that point. So I started covering Reagan, It was right before his 1984 reelection campaign. I guess in some ways, I was a beneficiary of affirmative action. There was still a lot of sexism. And even in the Washington bureau of the Wall Street Journal, there was sort of a belief that women couldn't really do the math that's required to understand arms control. I would be covering the presidency, but when it came to his arms control summits, they would scrape me off and have me stay home and send the guys. So I didn't get to cover Reagan's historic summit at Reykjavik. I remember talking to my boss and saying, Well, what am I supposed to do? And he said, Why don't you stay home and do a piece about Nancy Reagan's favorite dress designer?

Reagan himself was somewhat patronizing. I interviewed him a number of times, but when he called on me in a press conference, he said, "You the little girl in red" [referring to] a red dress that I was wearing. I had just written a story about how he always called on women wearing red. I was a little girl in his view. The world at that point — it was so normal to us, I barely took offense or took notice. I basically just sort of thought, really, you think I need to stay home during an arms control summit and write about a dress designer? Let me show you. And I would try to write something that actually mattered and just do my best.

### **David Goodman**

You have been a dogged investigator and chronicler of the Koch brothers, who are the heart of the right wing funding ecosphere. Give us a primer: Who are the Koch brothers, and what do they want?

### **Jane Mayer**

When we talk about the Koch brothers, it used to mean Charles Koch and his brother, David Koch. David died in 2019. So we're really talking about one of the Koch brothers, Charles Koch. He is the principal owner of Koch Industries, which is sometimes ranked as the largest private company in America. He is a billionaire many, many times over. The business that he has is in fossil fuels, refining oil and oil pipelines, some coal, and gas and chemicals. It owns nylon — it basically makes all the nylon. It's just a gigantic, sprawling multinational conglomerate.

Charles Koch is a really interesting fellow. He is an extremist politically who is a zealot on the subject of hating government. He doesn't want it to interfere with his business. He doesn't believe there should be regulations. He's been hit with numerous lawsuits having to do with his company's pollution — air pollution, water pollution, climate pollution — and he's taken umbrage at that. He comes out of the John Birch Society wing of American politics. His father was one of the founders of the John Birch Society. Charles is now 86. He inherited a fortune and made it tremendously larger. And he poured it into becoming the primary sponsor of libertarianism in America. He's very secretive about his role in American politics. He started in earnest maybe 40 years ago, but his views at the time were regarded as so far out on the extreme right fringe that he was kind of a joke. Even fellow conservatives sort of made fun of him, like William F. Buckley, who called him an anarcho-totalitarian. But by being persistent and kind of visionary in his way, and so rich, he really made inroads into American politics to the point

where he mainstreamed many of his extreme ideas. They have now taken over much of the Republican Party. And the Republican Party, of course, has had huge impact on the direction of America. So this one man, Charles Koch, and his brother David, by dint of using their money strategically, really shaped a lot of American politics, and Charles still does.

### **David Goodman**

The Koch brothers had a public falling out with Trump. There seemed to be a brief divorce. Explain what happened between Koch and Trump.

### **Jane Mayer**

By 2016, we've got Trump running for president. Charles Koch had another idea. He'd created by then a sort of a consortium of other incredibly rich conservatives who were pooling their money in a jackpot. They wanted to pick who was going to be the Republican nominee. I think they had \$889 million between them ready to go. They thought this was the moment they were going to finally get the White House and get the person they wanted in it. They were foiled by Trump, who appealed more to voters than any of the other 16 Republican nominees for the presidency. All of the others were fine with Charles Koch. But Trump wasn't really playing Koch's game. Koch really likes to control the people he gives money to. Trump is weirdly uncontrollable. Trump's a strong man who wants to have power. And Charles Koch doesn't really believe in government and doesn't want the government to have much power. He wants business to rule. So you had this clash. Charles Koch said in 2016 that the choice between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was like the choice between cancer and a heart attack. These weren't his idea of perfect candidates.

You would have thought then that the Koch machine in politics was defeated. But there was a second chapter that was quite different. What happened was that by election night, when Trump was celebrating, none other than David Koch popped up and was right there with him. The next thing that happened was that these two amazingly transactional power-seeking figures in American politics had made kind of a deal. I don't know how explicit it was or if it was just a matter of practicality, but basically the people who Trump picked for all of the positions that matter to Koch Industries — which were the environmental positions and positions having to do with regulation, and the courts and taxes — these are the issues that matter to the billionaire Koch machine which wants to keep the taxes really low and keep polluting and do nothing about fossil fuels and climate change. All those positions in the Koch administration — excuse me, in the Trump administration, though it might as well have been the Koch administration — they were filled with people who were allies of the Kochs, and many of them had actually worked for the Kochs. In exchange, the Koch machine started to put money into Trump's policy initiatives, particularly the big tax cuts for the richest people in the country. The Kochs poured money behind that in advertisements and pushed hard for it. So they got a working relationship, not on every issue, but on the issues that really matter to Koch Industries.

### **David Goodman**

You've also reported on Democratic dark money groups. What's the difference between Republican and Democrat dark money influence?

### **Jane Mayer**

The Democrats have tried to catch up with the conservatives. They were behind but by 2020, according to some calculations, the Democrats even spent more. It's really hard to quantify.

Let's define what dark money is. It's money where you can't figure out where it's coming from. That makes it very hard to accurately quantify. Money is going into groups where they don't reveal the original sources. My view is that the conservative movement is much better organized when it comes to this. The Democrats tend to pour money behind candidates and into specific races. It does make a difference, but they don't really have the same infrastructure that the Kochs built up over all these years. It's an amazing machine. The Kochs have funded over 350 programs in colleges and universities. They're inculcating their way of thinking into the young people who come out of these schools. They've got an array of very far right ideological think tanks that turn out position papers and "alternative fact" papers that argue the opposite of what many mainstream experts would say. For instance, the Cato Institute in Washington is an institute that the Kochs began. I remember going over there and their experts were arguing that the polar bears had never been better off than they were in coping with global warming. No expert in polar bears believed this. But they can put out a paper that says that and they can pay a scientist or two to say that. Then you have two sides of an argument where truth and reality are on one side, (and on the other side) you create what Kellyanne Conway called alternative facts. So they've got factories for alternative facts in the think tanks and experts who love to go testify in front of Congress. And they have advocacy groups — Americans for Prosperity is the main one that belongs to the Kochs. They've got groups that argue cases in courts. It's a multipurpose, political machine and system that's been built up over the decades. The Democrats have some of that, just not as much.

### **David Goodman**

The questioning of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson during her Supreme Court confirmation hearings frequently included views that began on the fringe, even the QAnon fringe, and then became the talking points of Republican senators. Your **latest piece for The New Yorker** looks at the funding and organizations behind the attacks on Biden's nominees. Tell us about the American Accountability Foundation and how fringe ideas move into the mainstream.

### **Jane Mayer**

The American Accountability Foundation is an offshoot of another bigger group called the Conservative Partnership Institute. It's based in Washington. It's registered with the IRS as a charity as an educational group, and you can give to it and get a tax deduction. Yet both of those groups are deeply involved in partisan politics and they're staffed by people who came straight out of the Trump administration. (Trump chief of staff) Mark Meadows is there, Cleta Mitchell is there — she has been a primary lawyer for the conservative movement — and a number of other people who've been very closely aligned with Trump are running these groups, and they've got a

million dollars from Trump's political leadership pack. It's really a little Island of Elba for the Trump administration. They actually had someone there who was just digging up dirt on every single Biden nomination. This group has made its aim in life to stop every nominee of Biden's from getting confirmed. They do it by just throwing buckets of mud at people — a lot of it is made of a less polite substance. I've tried very carefully to analyze what their work was. And there's a lot of real disgusting smears that they were doing. They tried to go after Ketanji Brown Jackson and frame her as some kind of dangerous softy on child pornographers and pederasts. There was an effort by this slime machine, as the New Yorker called this group, to go after her. A handful of Republican senators then picked up the oppo research from the slime machine and threw it at Jackson, but it didn't hold up under scrutiny. It turned out if you put her record in context, she actually had a very average record on the way that she sentenced people for sexual offenses. It was no different than that of about a half dozen Trump judicial nominees who the same Republican senators had supported. So it kind of fell apart on close inspection.

The problem is that this group has gone after a number of much less well known nominees where there isn't that kind of scrutiny from the press and it's easier to really distort their records. A large proportion of the people they've gone after are women and people of color. The thing that this group has been doing a lot is trying to make a lot of arguments that are really racially loaded. It's a really ugly thing to see in American politics. And it's funded by supposedly tax exempt contributions.

### **David Goodman**

You have exposed this network of funding and influence on the right, including the role that Ginni Thomas, the wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, has played in supporting the Jan. 6 insurrection. What concerns you most as you shine a light in these dark money places?

### **Jane Mayer**

I feel like it's so obvious that it hardly needs to be said, but money is really corrupting American politics. That's the bottom line: Something's got to be done about this money. Everyone wonders, why can't Congress get things done? Why does it seem so dysfunctional? It's captured by private interests.

You want the government to work in the public interest. The government is us. We're self-governing in this country. But what we're trying to do keeps getting hijacked by secret private interests. Most people don't have the time to trace the money and see how this whole thing is getting distorted by these arguments and who's really behind them. I try to do that and put the information out there so that ordinary people who are too busy to do this can say, Oh, so that's who's making that argument. It's really the tobacco companies that are telling you to smoke and that it's not bad for you. You don't trust them when you realize who it is. There are people who are lining their pockets who are making self-interested arguments, but it's hard to keep up with it, even as a reporter. There's just so much money coming from so many places. It's overripe for reform.

### **David Goodman**

People who are jaded and skeptical just say, Well, politics has always been captured by big money. What's different about where we are today compared to where we were 20 years ago?

**Jane Mayer**

I am an eyewitness to say it hasn't always been like this. When I walked into political reporting at the White House in 1984, Ronald Reagan was running for reelection. As president, he did not hold a single fundraiser. He accepted public financing. And he had done that in 1980, as did Jimmy Carter. They didn't take private funds. We've managed to clean up the money system a number of times in American politics. Of course, the money is going to come flowing back. It's like water, you've got to keep plugging it and plugging it. But you can find it. You can fix it. We have reformed it. We're at a moment again where money is just plain washing everything else out with it. As I said, the time is ripe for reform.

**David Goodman**

Being in the business of revealing secrets of people who want to keep secrets has put you in the crosshairs. While you were researching your latest article about dark money, the head of the American Accountability Foundation tweeted out your email address and phone number and told you to go pound sand. And the Koch brothers hired a half-dozen investigators to dig up dirt that would embarrass or discredit you. What has been the personal fallout for you of doing this kind of reporting?

**Jane Mayer**

You have to make sure that you don't have some big skeletons in the closet. I don't. But the worrisome thing is that they can make things up. That's what we've seen. And people may be gullible and believe it. My mom was just visiting for the weekend. She said, Honey, don't take any cups of tea from strangers. Be a little careful.

**David Goodman**

Do you worry about your own safety?

**Jane Mayer**

No, I really don't. It's an incredible thing to be a reporter in this country. It's not like — knock on wood — being in Russia, thank God, where people who tell the truth are put in jail.

**David Goodman**

You covered the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union. We're now talking openly about the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. One could almost say that the Texas anti-abortion law that encourages vigilantes to turn in their neighbors who they suspect of getting abortions is reminiscent of what the Stasi used to do in East Germany. Do you feel like it's come full circle, where you're seeing some of the things you saw in Eastern Europe echoing in American politics?

**Jane Mayer**

I think it's a pretty dark time. It feels like a dangerous hiatus right now. The Trump years felt quite dangerous and being called an enemy of the people was awful. The things that were happening were frightening. The attempted coup at the end of his time is still shocking to me. Some of the things that I've covered in other parts of the world, I do see echoes of here. It's made me realize that we're not protected from human nature and the kind of awful history that's taken place elsewhere. It hasn't always been perfect in America, either. But the susceptibility to authoritarian strongman government — and just the hate and the idea that factionalism that you see in places like the Middle East, when I was in Beirut where it's almost barbaric what people do to each other — I hate to see any of it stirring here. It's certainly very different from Vermont. This idea of spying on your neighbors couldn't be more different from the idea of just live and let live, which is one of the many lovely, wonderful things about Vermont.

**David Goodman**

You mentioned at the beginning how you got into journalism partly inspired by the work of Woodward and Bernstein holding an earlier generation of corrupt politicians accountable. Do you think that journalism and the work that you do still has the power to be that watchdog of democracy?

**Jane Mayer**

I think it has much less power now than before the internet. There are still fantastic reporters and there was amazing reporting done during the Trump years. And there's amazing reporting being done at the local level in a lot of places, including by VTDigger. But the thing is that the internet is filled with junk. So we're competing now with outlets that just are not quality, and I think it's hard for readers to separate out which is real and which is not real. That's been a real problem.

**David Goodman**

You have exposed so much darkness. Where do you see the light?

**Jane Mayer**

I'm actually quite optimistic always. Because I have seen change and I've seen change for good. I think a lot of people have common sense. If they can get the information, people of different political persuasions can meet on common ground. Some of the things I've covered I felt like I really did see progress. I did a lot of coverage during the Bush years of the torture program that that was secretly being employed by the Bush administration on detainees in the war on terror. I watched as reporters and public spirited people in government and lawyers pushed back hard and they fixed a lot of it. It's disappointing to me that Guantanamo is still open. But it's really been amazing to see things like waterboarding exposed and ended. So I have seen change take place, and there's been a lot of forces for good as well as these dark things. Shining the light on them is the way to go.