

Episode 156-- Going Inside the Downfall of the NRA with Misf...

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SPEAKERS

Tim Mak, JJ Janflone, Kelly Sampson



JJ Janflone 00:08

This is the legal disclaimer where I tell you that the views thoughts and opinions shared on this podcast belong solely to our guests and hosts, and not necessarily Brady or Brady's affiliates. Please note, this podcast contains discussions of violence that some people may find disturbing. It's okay, we find it disturbing too. Hey, everybody. I'm JJ.



Kelly Sampson 00:40

And I'm Kelly.



JJ Janflone 00:41

And together, we are your cohosts here at Red, Blue, And Brady.



Kelly Sampson 00:43

Welcome. Welcome, everybody.



JJ Janflone 00:45



Kelly Sampson 00:55



JJ Janflone 00:59



Kelly Sampson 00:00



Kelly Sampson 01:23



JJ Janflone 02:10



Kelly Sampson 02:43

Yes, Tim joined us this week to discuss his new book "Misfire: inside the downfall of the NRA", which is truly wild. It's a blistering expose of the National Rifle Association, and I think very, very helpful to anyone listening who cares about gun violence prevention.



Tim Mak 03:04

So my name is Tim Mak. And I'm the Washington Investigative correspondent for NPR. So what that means is that I do a lot of political investigations. And, you know, one of the matters that I've been looking into for a long time, is the National Rifle Association, you know, so the book got started a few years ago, with some reporting that I did about Maria Butina. We can talk a little bit more about that later. But she's the person who got charged with being a Russian agent. And one of the things she was trying to do in the United States was that she was getting in tight with NRA officials. In other words, trying to infiltrate the NRA as a way to exercise political power. And that's kind of that was, you know, four years ago, that was kind of my introduction to the National Rifle Association. One thing led to another and here I am writing a book about the inner workings of the organization. So what the book itself is, is what happened behind the scenes what happened in the conference rooms, what happened inside NRA HQ, what happened in various places where this story about how gun policy was determined, and all this drama about the collapse of the NRA, all developed over the last decade.



JJ Janflone 04:16

And I think for listeners who may go like "oh, book on the NRA, that sounds really serious or stodgy." I was shocked by how this really is a book all about the chaos. The NRA seems to be like you think of it as being this big monolithic organization, or at least I do when it turns out that is that is not things are not okay inside, inside the organization.



Tim Mak 04:41

Yeah, the National Rifle Association has kind of been a black box to a lot of outside observers, right. There have not been a lot of folks who have been able to peek behind the curtain to see who are these people? Like who is Wayne Lapierre. What is his personality? What are his quirks? Is he competent? Is he incompetent? Is he courageous? Is he cowardly? There haven't been folks who have really been able to penetrate past that first layer behind the press releases and the the PR to show what the organization is like on the inside. And when I started, you know, reporting and researching on the organization, you're right, I mean, it's a behemoth, right? It's, it raises hundreds of millions of dollars every year. And so you think, Oh, well, they must be capable of all sorts of things. They must be running, you

know, XYZ programs. And they must be doing it with this kind of ferocious efficiency. But when you kind of look inside the organization, you see that there's a lot of bungling, there's a lot of corruption. There's a lot of almost comedic incompetence inside the organization, as it kind of develops over the last decade.

K

Kelly Sampson 05:44

And to your point about, you know, we may hear of these mythical figures or somewhat mythical figures, like Wayne Lapierre, but we don't really know who they are, or what they're really like. Could you talk a little bit about who Wayne Lapierre really is? And why is he so important to what's happened with the NRA?

T

Tim Mak 06:01

Well, so what I found really interesting about Wayne, is that you get a portrait of him as, as a human, and this in this book, that until now, it's all been kind of mythology, you've probably seen images of him looking like a Greek god at NRA conventions, and things like that. But very few people have, have been able to report out who he is as a person. And you find that he's a very kind of absent minded, indecisive person, a person who loves the perks of running a multi million dollar nonprofit organization. But also someone who kind of get the sense doesn't want to be there. Right, that he kind of fell backwards into repeated promotions, the organization has somehow woken up one day, and he realizes I'm in charge of the National Rifle Association, arguably one of the most powerful political organizations, in all of America. And you see that he takes this position, not with the great degree of responsibility, but almost but with a large degree of self pity. What does this mean for me, when a mass shooting happens, that's like, one of the themes of the book is that whenever there are really big events, like a mass shooting, Wayne will react by going into hiding by saying, this is going to be terrible for me personally. And you see, the book paints a portrait of the man in a very different way than we've been led to believe through the various PR pushes that have made him out to be some sort of almost godlike figure at the head of the Second Amendment movement in the United States.



JJ Janflone 07:43

Well, and it doesn't based on the research that you did, it doesn't even seem like he's a man who seems to enjoy shooting or firearms or sports shooting or anything like that. It seems like he's almost sort of, there's a numerous stories that one he doesn't really practice firearm safety to begin with, and to that just it doesn't seem like it's an area of interest for him. So you're right. It does seem sort of like he kind of woke up one day and went, Oh, my God, I run the NRA. How did this happen?

T

Tim Mak 08:09

There used to be a joke at NRA HQ, that those who misbehaved or didn't you know, meet their quota or whatever would, their punishment would be to go hunting with Wayne or to go shooting with Wayne. You really get the sense from people who know him really, really well, that Wayne does not enjoy shooting at all, does not enjoy the sport of it, doesn't enjoy talking about guns or the various features for a lot of people in America who enjoy collecting firearms, accessorising firearms, shooting, hunting, and Wayne Lapierre from everything that I know about him, he just doesn't enjoy any of those things. He enjoys the politics of it, he enjoys whip counts, he enjoys how does legislation get passed and he originally started the NRA as a lobbyist, as a lower level lobbyist and kind of moved his way through the organization until he became the CEO over several decades. But when it comes to whether or not he has a good shot, all evidence suggests he's not a good shot. And not only that, he's kind of fumbly, he's nervous,

he's not someone who who practices as you said firearm safety. He's been known to be distracted and point firearms in the direction of people obviously, and flag people. He is not, I think the bottom line is he's not he's not a particularly competent firearm user or owner.



JJ Janflone 09:40

One of the people though that does seem like they sort of very intentionally came into their position at the NRA and you're the first person I've ever read that really has gone into sort of a profile of this individual is Wayne's wife, Susan and sort of the the role that she holds and has helped with the NRA even though she's obsessively you know, a volunteer member. And I wonder if we can if we can even sort of dig into what, you know this this first lady of the NRA, like what her position is because that was I think one of the most striking things about the book for me is just learning about this, the intense amount of power that she wielded, because you know, I can speak for Kelly and I, we work at a nonprofit, I'm not allowed to hold the credit cards. I don't have access to the to the, to the Amex. So certainly my husband wouldn't you know, and so I think this is this is very interesting.



Tim Mak 10:31

Yeah, I mean, I think one of the things about, you know, we yeah, when you ask the question, how did Wayne get where he is, we talked about just a few seconds ago about how he kind of fumbled backwards into various promotions until he was at the very top of the organization. And the thing about Wayne is that, that he's extremely malleable, that one of the reasons that he is at the top of the organization is because a lot of people feel that they can take advantage of him. They that if you can hector him enough that you if you can kind of go up to him and demand what you want from him, and say it loudly enough and repeat yourself long enough, he'll eventually get into what you want. And that's one of the reasons actually why there are so many sweetheart deals with various vendors, the organization has had over the years. Susan Lapierre here is very different from her husband, Wayne, in that she is decisive. And she is ambitious. And she knows what she wants, and is very direct in a way that Wayne Lapierre is not. And now she doesn't have a formal paid title like you mentioned. She doesn't have a formal title at the organization. But she does run the Women's Leadership Forum, which is this big collection of high dollar donors. And she runs it ruthlessly, that she runs this organization of kind of NRA women donors. And what she does is she she runs it as an organization that is really dependent on loyalty. And there are parts of the book, which they get together and they demand loyalty to the current regime. The NRA is a very interesting organization. But a lot of the senior officials and top folks in the in the organization are the way they are because it's a critical and central part of their identity to be important at the NRA. And for Susan, her image, her image is really wrapped up and being an important part of the NRA.



Kelly Sampson 12:33

You've identified some of the major players that we need to understand. So we've got Wayne, we've got Susan, and then we have this advertising agency Ackerman McQueen. Can you unpack their role in all of what we're going to talk about, and how they contributed to the NRA's current situation? Well,



Tim Mak 12:50

So Ackerman is the longtime PR firm that has shaped the NRA's image over the last few decades. Now they've undergone a very kind of messy divorce with the NRA in the last couple years. But traditionally, when you think about the NRA's PR campaigns and their PR efforts over the years. Ackerman McQueen is what's been behind the in large part, the ascendancy of the National Rifle Association as a powerful or group in America. They've shaped the image,

they shaped the message. They're there for Strategic Communications, they're there for crises. When Wayne Lapierre over the last few decades has needed help, he has tended to turn time and time again to Ackerman McQueen, which for many years was run by this guy named Angus Macqueen.



JJ Janflone 13:48

Well, and it seems like in many ways, too, that a lot of what eventually gets Lapierre and the NRA more broadly, in trouble is he's trying to sort of be Angus in some ways, like, you know, trying to wear the same very expensive suits and put together the same sort of, you know, high fly lifestyle, although you lay out in the book, it seems like Lapierre really enjoyed his private flights. But that seemed to be, you know, a fond "there's been a mass shooting I got to get to a yacht." You know, it's not something I ever thought I would hear somebody say, but it comes out.



Tim Mak 14:20

Yeah, I think that, you know, Wayne Lapierre is the head of a nonprofit organization. And there are limits on what you can do as the head of a nonprofit organization. Angus McQueen is the head of a for profit PR consulting firm. And he's a very flashy guy, very snappy dresser, high end clothing, private jets. That was just kind of a part of the way part of the way Angus McQueen lived his life. And Wayne Lapierre became very close with eggs will clean over the years. He saw this and said why can't I have a part of that too? That's one of the big reasons for, you know, for the scandal that I'm sure a lot of your listeners have heard about, which is about private jets, extravagant meals, trips to Europe, yachts, 1000s of dollars worth of hair and makeup, things like that. Like all of that kind of stems from Lapierre's kind of peering over at the people across the table from them when they're having dinner and saying, why can't we live that kind of lifestyle too. At least it certainly seems that way. That's how that all developed. Because Wayne originally could not, you know, in the 90s, you would talk to Wayne LaPierre. He'd be very sloppy dresser unshined shoes, walking around awkwardly on Capitol Hill as an as a junior level, NRA lobbyists, and he didn't seem to care for fancy suits or lavish meals. And now you look at today and you see that a lot of the things that he has for himself a lot of things Angus Macqueen has.



JJ Janflone 16:01

One of the things that strikes me too, and I want to because I'm sure most of our listeners obviously if you're listening to a gun violence prevention podcast, I'm sure you're sort of aware of sort of the sermon drug that's happened over the last especially last like four or five years with the NRA. But one of the things that really struck me in reading your work, too, is that it's not like the NRA was party time central for everyone. Right? It's that there were Lapierre, there's a few board members at the very top who are being paid, but you really lay out when you interview a lot of like members and staffers who exited you know, after the NRA's response to Sandy Hook in Parkland, were you know, Wayne Lapierre doubles down with the "good guy with a gun" sort of mythos that they create, you know, that we need to arm teachers, when when that kind of goes down and people start leaving they detail folks who are there like workplace that's like all of these very stressful, very broken fiefdoms with like, moldy offices and just incredibly long hours for incredibly low pay and, you know, coworkers like actively fighting with one another. And so it's a very, it seems and the way you describe it as an exceptionally dysfunctional place to to exist with perks, if you can get to the very, very top, but for everyone else, it's certainly wasn't, I don't know, I wouldn't call it I don't know, if you would call it a labor of love.



Tim Mak 17:23

The NRA is a two tiered organization, right? For your average person, it's like they work at a non profit, right? They

cut off the coffee, you got to stay at the Best Western, you're going to travel coach for, you know, for the vast majority of people who work there. And then for the executives, and certain board members that are favored for a long period of time, it was the private jets, 1000s of dollars in meals, extravagant clothing. And there was a real break between those two. The NRA is an organization like we're talking about, from the beginning, you think it's powerful that all this money, all this influence. But inside it's just totally dysfunctionally run, it's got all these fiefdoms with warring warlords, and they're all arguing with one another. What this book does is kind of takes you into each of these fiefdoms. What do they mean? What is you know, how did how did NRA headquarters fight with its lobbyists? Why were there, was there a continuing source of tension? Why did the executives and those who actually did the did the work at the NRA, why did they, why was there so much tension between those groups of people. And so what we do is we take you behind the scenes and show you what was happening inside the organization.

K

Kelly Sampson 18:40

And you actually broke one of the stories that is sort of emblematic of this dysfunction and the fiefdoms in February of 2017. And that's the story of Maria Butina, Russia, and the NRA. And so I'm wondering if possible, if you could just give us sort of a short version of what that story is, and how does that sort of convey this dysfunction?



JJ Janflone 19:00

If it is possible to give a short form...

T

Tim Mak 19:01

The bottom line was that the NRA in 2013, and 2015 sent delegations to Moscow, you might think, what is an organization based in the United States, that is dedicated to advancing gun rights in America. Why would they send a delegation to Moscow? And that was the question that I asked when I first got into this story. What are the connections between this Russian citizen Maria Butina and the National Rifle Association and why would it benefit the National Rifle Association to be associated with her? And you know, there were a lot of questions about how or whether Maria Butina was was helping the National Rifle Association. But what you find in the end is that the National Rifle Association repeatedly went out of its way to help out Maria Butina who was later charged with being a foreign agent of The Russian government without properly being registered.



JJ Janflone 20:02


It just it seems, and I highly recommend that everyone read it because it was one of those things where every time I kept going, I was like, you can't like, it reads very much like if it were, and I believe it, in fact, if I remember the comment, like if it were a Tom Clancy novel, you'd be like, this one's a little bit too far, this is a little bit too a little too trophy, but it's real. And I think what got laid out really well is that there was there was a comedy of errors happening within the NRA, of just things of assistance, getting money for their kids, weddings, and constant permanent flights. And then also Rascal Flatts is brought in for a concert. And then it just, it's just all of these levels of sort of grift, that if you are a nonprofit, you cannot participate in. And they're just things you, for our listeners who aren't familiar, there are very strict rules and what a nonprofit can spend its money on and how that money can be spent. And when you do spend money, there are very strict reporting mechanisms for it. You can't just sort of decide to buy a \$200 bottle of wine several days a week, like that's not how it shakes out. And that certainly wasn't the image that I think NRA donors were getting either through for the most part, I think very few are flying in private jets, like most Americans and shopping on Rodeo Drive, and you know, getting to sort of participate in this very fancyb lifestyle.

 Tim Mak 21:25

Yeah, I think what I mean, just to kind of look at the narrative arc of the book, I mean, this book takes you from the ascendancy of Wayne Lapiere in the 90s, through to through Sandy Hook, which was a real turning point in this whole conversation about gun rights in America, you know, and the NRA strategy post Sandy Hook, which was to double down on the conservatives, culture war. And their decision to be less interested in bipartisanship and much more interested in being fit and focusing on their conservative and Republican base. And what that means when Donald Trump is elected president. And fundraising dramatically declines in such a way that some of the corruption, which was fine during a time plenty is now exposed. And that's what I'm hoping to do with this book, which is to show readers what really happened behind the scenes, what's happening inside these closed rooms.

 Kelly Sampson 22:27

And to that, and one of the things that I know many of our listeners are familiar with, because we were sort of following this story as it broke. But there's a lawsuit against the NRA brought by the New York Attorney General Letitia James, and the NRA attempted to dodge it by filing bankruptcy. And you cover this in detail in Misfire. And so I'm wondering, was there anything surprising that you uncovered about the lawsuit and the attempted dodge while researching the suit and the countersuit?

 Tim Mak 22:54

Well, there's a ton of interesting stuff in there. I mean, for me, the book is a human drama, right? It's about friends turning on friends. And whether people were really friends to begin with. I mean, the, the NRA, as you know, has been in pretty intense litigation with Ackerman McQueen, which was like their right hand ad firm for decades and decades and decades. And so they declared war on the people with all with all the knowledge of the dirty secrets within this the National Rifle Association. So that all spills out, not just in the litigation and in the complaint, but also in the book. There's there's a lot of stuff that we just didn't know about the National Rifle Association. But that's been forcibly pushed to the surface by a lot of this litigation that the National Rifle Association started.

 JJ Janflone 23:44

It does seem like a very human story, because no one is no one seems to be at least to me being very worried about, you know, the NRA within within the book, they're very concerned about themselves as part of-

 Tim Mak 23:55

Yeah, very few people. You know, that's a really good point. You know, I spoke, spoken to dozens of people and the main players, they don't primarily focus themselves about what is the future of the Second Amendment? What is the future of the NRA as an organization. They're really very focused on what does this mean for me? How do I escape blame or avoid responsibility or avoid a tough decision? And that's like one of the defining characteristics of some of the most senior national rifle association officials in this in this book.

 Kelly Sampson 24:30

And I mean, that's really affirming for a lot of the work. I know, we and our colleagues do or we'll talk about sort of the disconnect between the top brass and the executives and the messaging that's out there and how it's impacting the public in terms of like, what's in their best interest. And one of the things we would love to know is, you know, after all the research that you've done into understanding the NRA as an organization, where do you think they'll go from here? There's a lot of rumors out there. In a lot of speculation, but I'm wondering what you think?

T

Tim Mak 25:03

Well, as you know, I mean, the New York Attorney General, Letitia James, is in the middle of a legal effort to try to actually dissolve the National Rifle Association in its entirety, how that actually would go. And whether that will happen is something that will be that will be determined by the courts or through a settlement of some kind in the coming months. So I don't know exactly how that's going to go. But what has been really interesting to me is to see that the National Rifle Association right now in terms of its most senior official hasn't made serious changes in the wake of all these accusations and allegations, and all this evidence about wrongdoing, at the very, very top that the organization has very staunchly stood behind, in terms of its board of directors has very starkly stood behind Wayne Lapierre. And unless there's some sort of external force, that would shift the calculus, it really seems like Wayne Lapierre is here to stay.



JJ Janflone 26:04

And sort of then on that on the final note, for then, you know, if Lapierre here stays in, it somehow stays this, this isn't well, maybe they hit Florida. That's a fun new chapter for them. What, if anything, do you- I mean, I'm certainly hoping with the book that a lot of folks will read it, and they'll sort of learn what is actually happening within the NRA. But do you think sort of public awareness has increased or will increase around you know, what is actually going on there? I mean, like, do you foresee, for example, donors pulling back from the org even more than they already have?

T

Tim Mak 26:34

Well, certainly the NRA's fundraising has really struggled since a lot of this information came out. And you got to think if you're someone who has in the past, given in the six figures or seven figures to the National Rifle Association, you might well think twice about doing it, or at least want some reassurances that your money is gonna be spent for what you hope it's going to be spent. And what's interesting to me is that there is a kind of subset of NRA members and donors that are kind of revolting, that are trying to change the National Rifle Association on the inside and really struggling to make changes. And right now they're, they're on the backfoot.

K

Kelly Sampson 27:09

In terms of the the people who are trying to revolt. I'm wondering, too, this may be an unfair question. But do you think if they're successful, will that revolt make the NRA sort of more extreme? Or will it temper it some?

T

Tim Mak 27:24

There are all kinds, right, this is the like, like any revolt. it's Well, firstly, it doesn't look like the revolt. This, it seems that Wayne Lapierre has really consolidated, a lot of power inside the organization, and has the support of the board is by all of the allegations of corruption that have come out today. But among the folks who are trying to make a

change to the National Rifle Association, you have all kinds, some who are very conservative, some who are not interested in politics beyond the Second Amendment. So it's very hard to to kind of to get to that second order prediction. I don't, I don't, right now it looks like unless there's an external force that changes things dramatically. That Wayne Lapierre is here to stay.



JJ Janflone 28:11

Well, I think it's just it's definitely something that we're going to have to watch. And seriously, Tim, I cannot thank you enough for coming on to chat with Kelly and I today and for an absolutely amazing book. And once again, listeners, it's called "Misfire: inside the downfall of the NRA"



Tim Mak 28:31

I think that I think your listeners and I hope your listeners will really enjoy this, this book because it reveals an organization that's never really been researched and reported out in this kind of way before. It's the human drama that shows the tensions and the betrayals and the corruption in book format in a narrative way that I hope that is enjoying in terms of from a reader's perspective, but also very important.



JJ Janflone 28:56

And for a chance to win a copy of this book, which is again, you'll be shocked, it's so good, please read it. All you have to do is click on the link in the description of this episode that will explain to you how to enter.



Kelly Sampson 29:09

Okay, wow, JJ, I don't know about you. But between the book and our conversation with Tim, I feel like I have a much better understanding of the inner workings of the NRA.



JJ Janflone 29:20

I mean, I for one, and I think I've made this clear, I could not believe how much money was just like spent on nonsense.



Kelly Sampson 29:29

I mean, yeah, me too. And also, like, I'm still processing the disconnect between the NRA elites, and the organizations members. And I mean, it just goes to show what we've always been saying at Brady, which is that the NRA doesn't speak for all Americans, and they certainly do not speak for or represent all gun owners either.



JJ Janflone 29:46

Oh 100% and, like, I've got to think that it's gonna be really hard for those who have identified with the NRA for like decades, especially to come to terms with what the organization has become right? So my goal for this week is to really take a long look at the oras I support and what they do and to make sure that. you know. I'm not beina I'm not

being gifted. And also to I think to just sort of like renew our drive here to make sure that like gun owner and gun violence survivor voices are being accurately represented.

 Kelly Sampson 30:21

Yeah, that's a good one. And my goal is to continue to elevate the voices of the majority of Americans who support common sense gun regulations and safety practices. Because as we can see, Wayne and his buddy certainly have no interest in keeping the public's best interest at heart so we can do that.

 JJ Janflone 30:43

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 Kelly Sampson 30:58

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