

Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American Government and offer contexts around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. Now your hosts, Nia Rodgers, Public Affairs Librarian and Dr. John Aughenbaugh, Political Science Professor.

N. Rodgers: Hey Aughie

J. Aughenbaugh: Good morning Nia. How are you?

N. Rodgers: I'm good, how are you?

J. Aughenbaugh: I'm fine, thank you. I'm on my second mug of coffee, so you know, as far as I'm concerned, life is good.

N. Rodgers: 2 of 44. So I notice, so I know you're teaching. Uh, politics and film this this fall, right? And because I was privy to your syllabus, um, I notice that. Sorry, that's just a fun way to say. Syllabus. I know how to pronounce the word syllabus.

J. Aughenbaugh: See I didn't know if you went ahead and said the word that way just to get a reaction out of me.

N. Rodgers: I actually said the word that way to get a reaction out of one of our listeners who I know constantly dislikes when I say that. Um, so on your syllabus, there is a movie called Wag the Dog and I have never seen Wag the Dog. OK, so I don't know anything about it. Um, and I know that it's a political term Wagging the Dog, but I'm not entirely positive that I, that I completely understand it. Can you 'splain it?

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, so you're using, uh, the uh, the pronunciation of "explain" that was commonplace in I Love Lucy. Very nice. Ok.

N. Rodgers: I try. I also say pasketti so just so you know, yeah.

J. Aughenbaugh: Uh, you're just throwing out all kinds of cultural references.

N. Rodgers: Yes, that's my childhood playing out right there, OK?

J. Aughenbaugh: We're, we're barely 2 minutes into the podcast then OK, and I'm just like wow, I'm getting whiplash. Which is saying a lot, because many of my students are like taking class with you, Aughie is like intellectual whiplash. OK, we don't know where you're gonna go we, you know, but you're gonna get there in a rather, um, interesting pathway.

N. Rodgers: I think of it as pleasantly circuitous.

J. Aughenbaugh: Non linear thinking at its best.

N. Rodgers: Yes, that's us.

J. Aughenbaugh: So, Wag the Dog. Wag the Dog is actually a political um expression and it's commonplace, interestingly enough, with elections and campaigns, and the thinking is this. OK? OK, think about a dog whose tail is wagging.

N. Rodgers: Awww.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh yeah, very good. Most of us are, you know, uh, it evinces in us very pleasant feelings of when we see a dog who's wagging its tail.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, 'cause they hardly ever attack you when they're wagging their tail.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right,

N. Rodgers: They're usually being friendly.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, but, as you're caught up with. OK, these feelings of awe. How cute.

N. Rodgers: They are adorable.

J. Aughenbaugh: They're excited to see me. OK, it's distracting you from the fact that just a few moments ago, that same dog may have chewed up your favorite pair of slippers. OK, so Wagging the Dog refers to, if you will, politicians creating pseudo events to distract you, OK, from a reality, OK, that may be detrimental to them. So for instance in the movie. Uh, Wag the Dog, the incumbent president creates a fictitious war. A war that doesn't even occur as a way to distract the public from the fact that there are allegations that perhaps he acted inappropriately with a Girl Scout. OK. So he hires a media firm to create this fictitious war. OK, that the media buys into, that the public, you know, rallies around the flag to distract the public from the fact that he more than likely is a pedophile.

N. Rodgers: But nobody is getting killed in this war 'cause nobody's actually fighting this war.

J. Aughenbaugh: And nobody is fighting this war, but it's an event, OK, that Wags the Dog. OK, that distracts you from the fact that, OK, the commander in chief. OK, um is actually a sleazeball. OK, and they hire A, uh, a PR firm who then hires a big name Hollywood director, played by Dustin Hoffman, to go ahead and in effect, create a film of a war that doesn't exist that nobody dies in. OK to go ahead and distract if you will, the public from the fact, that our president OK, is more than likely a sleazeball. Wagging the Dog. OK, and there have been accusations. OK, some of which are based in conspiracy theories, but others that are like hey wait a minute here. OK, was this an example of Wagging the Dog, OK? So the most recent example and you and I have discussed this at length, is the current, if you will, controversy about the United States Postal Service. OK, the United States Postal Service. The allegation is, um, President Trump has appointed a director of the Postal Service, OK, to create delays in the Postal Service, OK. Processing, delivering, if you will, mail ballots for this fall's election in an attempt to either go ahead and harm the opposition candidate. OK, ballots that may have been cast for the Democratic candidate Joe Biden don't get counted or don't get delivered on time. So they don't get counted OK, or to go ahead and raise the specter. OK, that the only reason why the president lost is that we have all of these irregularities in fraud in regards to mail ballots. Is this an example of the president, if you will, creating the conditions of Wagging the Dog. OK. Does that make sense?

N. Rodgers: It does, although I think it's interesting that we would assume, um, malice, when it could in fact just be incompetence.

J. Aughenbaugh: Or

N. Rodgers: Right like? I mean, it could be that the guy who's running the post office just doesn't know what he's doing. Maybe he's not trying to destroy the election. Maybe he's just a schmuck. Like I'm not trying to be a jerk about that, but there is that possibility.

J. Aughenbaugh: There's that possibility. There's also the possibility that there have been long term structural problems with the United States Postal Service. They're gonna get really exposed by a whole bunch of Americans, OK, casting their ballots by mail this year.

N. Rodgers: Right, because it hasn't been used.

J. Aughenbaugh: For their mail.

N. Rodgers: In quite a long time at that level of mail.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, that bomb. OK, I mean, let's face it, if the predictions are correct by many voting experts OK throughout the country, OK, we're going to see the highest volume of mail ballots in our country's history. OK. Then it's... With a government agency and by the way, let's be very clear, the United States Postal Service is not a standard executive branch agency. The United States Postal Service is a government Corporation. OK, it used to be an executive branch agency that was controlled by the office of president because it was part of the executive branch. But in the early 1970s, in fact, I think it was 1971, the United States Congress passed the law, then made the Postal Service a Government Corporation, just like Amtrak, just like the Tennessee Valley Authority. OK, and in creating a government Corporation, OK, the expectation? As written in law, is that the Postal Service is supposed to be financially solvent, just like a private sector Corporation.

N. Rodgers: Although Amtrak isn't.

J. Aughenbaugh: No.

N. Rodgers: So it's it's some weird little thing because it got treated very differently. It has to have enormous amounts of money in reserve because of paying its, its pensions out into the future, like it's got all these weird rules that don't apply to any other agency, so one could argue that in the oh, I don't know the special year of 2020, that every single US Postal Chicken is coming home to Roost. Oh oh, we have. All of the structural mess that Congress created by trying to make it this independent thing that has to have a kazabillion dollars stuck in its account so it can't ever get out into the black because it's, it's constantly running at a deficit. Then you get a, uh, I don't know he's a secretary. No, he's a chair, the postmaster general. The postmaster you get a general, who may or may not have a real good idea of the functioning of the post office and then you have all these structural problems with, some of it having to do with unions, something having to do with training, all these other issues and it's all coming together in the 2020 election.

J. Aughenbaugh: Where we're going to have greater use of the Postal Service.

Nia Rodgers: Yeah, it's a little terrifying.

J. Aughenbaugh : OK, I mean...

N. Rodgers: But I'm not entirely certain that that any one person could have seen that coming 30 years ago or 40 years ago when they started this train down this track. To use the Amtrak reference.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, and I mean... For our loyal listeners, we've done two previous podcast episodes about the Postal Service. Um, one, how do you know the the, the creation of stamps? How do you get on a stamp? OK, uh, in episode we did, uh, uh, with our colleague and friend uh Hillary. OK um and then uh, we also did a standalone podcast episode about the history and evolution and why we ever even had a Postal Service. OK, which was really groundbreaking, um, when it was created.

N. Rodgers: Well, and a fundamental service that drew the country together.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah yeah OK. Which was the logic of Ben Franklin when he wanted the Postal Service created OK. But to your point, you know I could go ahead and possibly make the argument that the postmaster general, uh, what's the guys name, Louis?

N. Rodgers: I don't know. But he just came before Congress too.

J. Aughenbaugh

Yeah, uh, his name is Louis, Yes folks. We're looking it up on Google.

N. Rodgers: Um Oh my goodness. Louis de, Louis DeJoy. Oh, we should have remembered DeJoy.

J. Aughenbaugh

I mean, I could possibly make the argument that on one hand he was ill prepared, OK to be postmaster general. This is a guy who, in the private sector ran a logistics company. He had never worked in government, OK, and as you and I have discussed in previous podcast episodes, running a government agency, even if it's a government corporation, is not like running a corporation in the private sector, OK? On the other hand, you could go ahead and argue he was picked in part because he did run a logistics company. OK, whose purpose is to ship OK goods and services from point A to point B for various other industries. OK, but even if he was prepared. Nia, as you pointed out, OK, you're talking about how the United States Congress set an agency OK on a path. OK, by making it a government Corporation where they have to compete with the private sector for delivering mail. OK, but as you also pointed out with qualifications with burdens that private sector corporations don't have to deal with, right? So if you look at for instance there just the finances of the Postal Service OK. They're drawing in less money because fewer Americans are using first class mail. OK, we just know this right; you and I like getting mail.

N. Rodgers: OK, but we are ancient. OK we were around when dinosaurs delivered mail so.

J. Aughenbaugh: You in particular have said in previous podcast episodes you even like getting flyers and coupons in the mail again, OK? Then you have the competition from the private sector.

N. Rodgers: Including the guy who's the Postmaster General. Hello, yes, right? I mean, talk about a conflict of interest. I run logistics companies here. Let me run this one for the government into the ground.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, the United States.

N. Rodgers: Sorry, I'm a little bitter right now about what's going on with the post office, yes?

J. Aughenbaugh: And I understand. The United States Postal Service, as we discussed previously, has a mandate to deliver mail to our all parts of the country. So unlike private sector competitors, the Postal Service can't go ahead and say it's not cost efficient to deliver mail to Dubois PA my hometown, which is in the middle of rural PA, right?

N. Rodgers: Right or some ranch in Montana. Like it it.

J. Aughenbaugh: It has to deliver mail if they...

N. Rodgers: Don't get to say that. Right, they don't get to say yeah, you're too far I'm not feeling it today so will just bring you some mail sometime next month. I mean, that's not how they deliver to Inuit towns in Alaska.

J. Aughenbaugh: Like yes. OK, and they're required by law to do so. OK, they're required by law. As you pointed out, the personnel system for the United States Postal Service has been criticized by any number of folks. OK, it's bloated, like many federal government. Personnel systems, by the way, and I hope the VCU administration is not listening to this part of this podcast episode, but you know, Nia, you and I work for a state agency. It's personal system at times is extremely cumbersome. Slow to respond OK, etc etc.

N. Rodgers: Right, top heavy yes OK, and in the case of an agency like the US Postal Service. The

J Aughenbaugh: the sheer volume of people that have to manage and they and...

N. Rodgers: It used to be that you took a civil service exam. I don't know whether you still do or not to work for the Postal Service. But it wasn't that hard like I'm not trying to be difficult, but it was a test that most people could pass. Um, and they didn't get a huge amount of training when they when they went into Postal Service work because a lot of it is physical manual labor picking this thing up and walking across the room with it and putting it into a different bin. And that kind of thing. I don't know it it. There's a lot to it, and it's really big. I get it. I I just think but it's still super valuable. It's still important. The Postal person and I know I've said this before, but I'm gonna say it again because I feel like it bears repeating. If one of my parents was living alone like if my other parent goodness forbid passed away. The Postal person is the person who comes every day and would notice if the mail hadn't been brought into the house for a couple of days and they would come up and knock on the door and ask you all are right in here like that. That's sort of what they they have. This whole secondary purpose that is. That is

social. That that is so incredibly valuable that when people say we should just get rid of the post office, I think. OK, but the UPS guy didn't have time to do that. He's delivering 800,000 packages in a day. Doesn't go to the same house every day in.

J. Aughenbaugh: And your point here is, I think, relevant to this debate about the role of the post office in the upcoming election. Because there are some people who believe the post office OK should be made a private good. OK, where they have to compete with the private sector and if they're, you know. Uh, if the revenues do not exceed their costs, OK, then they have to go ahead and either find ways to increase revenue or decrease costs. And what you just pointed out is not something that's typically part of a calculation for a private sector Corporation. On the other hand, if you believe the Postal Service is a public good, then if it loses money, so be it, right? 'cause it is serving other goods, right? I mean you have your.

N. Rodgers: Parks don't generally make money.

J. Aughenbaugh: Money, right?

N. Rodgers: And that we believe that parks are a good thing generally as a society.

J. Aughenbaugh: And I remember OK in again and you know, we apologize if the podcast if these podcast episodes end up being an example of, you know, old people saying, I remember when.

N. Rodgers: That's right, and you kids get off my lawn.

J. Aughenbaugh: But you know, as recently as the 1990s and the early part of this Millennium there was a movement called the new, uh, NPM new public management And new public management arose, Interestingly enough, from a Democratic presidential administration, the Clinton administration, they did a review of federal government agencies and concluded that all the red tape associated with federal government agencies OK hinder the ability of agencies to be more entrepreneurial, more flexible. OK to take initiative. OK, and the idea of new public management was we should encourage federal agencies OK to adopt some of the methods in some of the practices of the private sector. We want greater efficiency. We want a greater effectiveness. OK, we got to reduce all that red tape that holds government agencies accountable.

N. Rodgers: I remember this. Wasn't Al Gore in charge of that?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yep, Yep, national performance review. OK, big report, right? But part of that OK as it related to the Postal Service. OK, is this idea that a lot of the public good functions of Postal of the post office or the Postal Service, like other federal agencies including parks? OK, I remember when they started debating whether or not we should charge. Admittance fees for either national or State Parks and the thinking was OK. They could make us money. But a lot of people push back. OK, aren't parks supposed to be public goods? Enjoyed by everybody whether or not they were rich, poor middle class, OK, people of color. OK, whatever the case may be OK. We should encourage people to go to parks because going to parks is a good thing, right? Get them out of their houses, get them out of their cars, get you know out in nature, learn about nature. OK, decompress, slow down, whatever the case may be.

But that's part of the debate here, right? Because you got a president. As we have discussed a number of times who comes from the private sector, right? Who appointed somebody to be the postmaster general? OK, who by the way, not for nothing. This week the Commission OK that oversees the United States Postal Service OK gave an overwhelming endorsement for the work that Louis DeJoy is doing. OK. The Commission made it very clear. OK, we have decided in our strategic plan that the Postal Service needs to go ahead and get rid of all those blue boxes, or at least some of those blue boxes that we you know we oldtimers still put our mail in because a lot of them OK require personnel OK to stop and get mail? And many of them don't have all that much mail. We told DeJoy to go ahead and get rid of postal sorting, mail sorting machines, OK, that hardly get as much use. While they would get a whole bunch of use this coming fall, we are predicting OK, but again. You know we have these tensions, OK? And it really struck a whole bunch of us as you want to go ahead and make fundamental changes to the post office during a pandemic that may cause a fundamental shift in how Americans vote. Why are you doing this?

N. Rodgers: Yeah, this is not the time, yes.

J. Aughenbaugh: Why are you doing...?

N. Rodgers: I'm fine with doing this two years from now after we've gotten used to what's going on with covid. Um and gotten some sort of normality back to...I don't know, uh, it yeah, but um. But in fairness to Mr. DeJoy and I was not being fair. And you're right, I was not being fair. He's doing what he was asked to do, and I'm sure he's like excuse me,, I was just doing my job and I what I was asked to do. I was asked to streamline. I was asked to cut the bloat I was asked to try to help with the finances, and that's what I'm trying to do. So I hate when you do this to me. I hate when you do this to me because I come in with an idea and I think of thing and you're like, Oh, it turns out and yeah, and I'm like Oh no, but I want to bring up a different thing. OK? 'cause I do think the post office is being used. I I personally don't think it's a conspiracy theory so much as I think it's, uh, I think it's, uh, uh. It's all the streams crossing in, uh, Ghostbusters, right like don't cross the streams. I think all the streams are crossing and I do think that there is some deliberation in that, um. I don't know, but I I'm I could be the down just a conspiracy theorist, however.

J. Aughenbaugh: It furthers a narative. It furthers a narative that we have seen with the current presidential administration.

N. Rodgers: Right, which is that the elections can't be trusted.

J. Aughenbaugh: I mean this was this was something that Donald Trump was saying when he ran for president in 2016.

N. Rodgers: Right, I don't know if I'm going to accept the results of the election because I don't know if election results can be trusted in the United States.

J. Aughenbaugh: Right and Oh yeah, by the way, OK, not for nothing. There's also a pocket of the Democratic Party base who is also skeptical that votes will be counted OK appropriately because these are the same folks who think that Bernie Sanders got screwed in 2016 and this year. You can't trust the elites, OK? In regards to voting outcomes because look what they did to my candidate. Right, yeah, so

we have a narrative already in place, right? We have a narrative in place, right? And I tend to agree with you. It is OK like in Ghostbusters where you know the streams are you know or in public policy literature? Uh this is John Kingdon's garbage can. A theory for how policy gets made. We got all these streams, these garbage cans. And this election gives a window of opportunity for all those streams to come together. All that garbage to float up from those cans, you know, policy ideas, policy entrepreneurs, and Oh yeah, by the way, a political leader who basically is going out and running around the countryside saying votes won't be counted correctly. There will be fraud. Even though that runs counter to decades of political science research that says by and large, OK, we do a fabulous job counting votes.

N. Rodgers: Oh yeah, the fraud is something like I don't remember the numbers, but let's just pretend that these are 'cause it's it's a proportion is right. It's like. 2000 fraudulent votes out of 2 billion ballots cast like it's some extraordinarily tiny number.

J. Aughenbaugh: It is less than 1/10th of 1% of the all votes counted, it's.

N. Rodgers: Not enough to influence an election.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes. OK, I tell students this all the time. OK, our individual votes have very little impact. OK, on election outcome right?

N. Rodgers: Your vote counts in aggregate. So by the way we're not saying don't vote. We're saying absolutely vote, but your individual vote mathematically is nonexistent. It's it's. It's in the aggregate that your vote matters.

J. Aughenbaugh: Matters and it would require a conspiracy. OK, of epic proportion. For vote fraud to actually have an impact. OK on an election.

N. Rodgers: And I think all sides would have to in join that conspiracy. Like you, you wouldn't be able to, just it would be one of those things where it would be almost impossible. Now, I'm not saying completely impossible, because we pulled off the nuclear bomb in World War Two without people knowing what was going on right? So it is possible to make something huge and have people not know about it, but it's pretty it. It would be pretty hard to do now with the number of watchdog groups and people who watch these sorts of things and people who are hyper sensitive and hyper aware of the potential. Of of um election fraud.

J. Aughenbaugh: Nia, just think about this and we're going to discuss this in a future podcast episode. Both candidates in both political parties have already hired armies of attorneys right and observers OK for for how votes are going to be cast and counted. OK and easily a dozen to 18 quote unquote Battleground States. For for that kind of, you know, conspiracy to occur OK in this day and age just boggles my mind. I mean, I just can't get my mind around it. But if you go ahead and say. OK, mail ballots increased the likelihood of fraud and Oh yeah, by the way, the government Corporation tasked with delivering these OK is a poorly run shop. OK, well now you got a story. You got OK, you got a tall tale. Right? And you know in in terms of Wagging the Dog, OK, it's not the equivalent of creating a fictional War. Very goodness. OK, but it definitely goes ahead and distracts us from the fact that it's going to be

difficult. OK to cast votes. And count them this year. Yeah OK, and of course it of course it would be because it's we're living in a pandemic.

N. Rodgers: Right, we're living in weird times. OK, case nobody noticed.

J. Aughenbaugh: Where being able to do your civic duty by going to your neighborhood polling precinct. OK is gonna be more difficult right? OK, the way votes are gonna be counted because more of us are going to be uh, casting votes by mail. OK, we're gonna require some significant reallocation of Staff Resources both at the local government level, but also at the state government level. OK. And you know, and I mentioned this, you know. But this past winter? OK, when the pandemic it, you and I were talking about this in a podcast, right? OK, that is going to be a significant challenge. For many States and local governments, right? And that's before going ahead and saying You shouldn't trust the post office OK, because the post office sucks and I'm sorry, but that is the equivalent of everything that has been being said about the post office on both sides. Oh my God, yes.

N. Rodgers: Oh, but can I? Uh, so I wanna make sure that I've I've got your Wag the Dog concept fully in my brain so this is this. Question about the post office is an open question because it could just be that all the streams are crossing and it's not actually a deliberate effort by the president in order to influence an election, but I put to you that we do have evidence of a deliberate effort of the president to influence an election. And that was when people got their stimulus checks they had the name Donald Trump on them. They were endorsed by Donald Trump. Yes, even though no check in the history of humankind in the United States issued by the federal government had had the name of the president on it.

J. Aughenbaugh: Before, that's correct.

N. Rodgers: That president, usually the name, is the Treasury Secretary, right? But that I, I perceive that as an as an attempt to influence voters. Is to say look in this time of need, I sent you a \$1200 check.

J. Aughenbaugh: Nia, what you're referencing is the fact that incumbents in elections frequently will do things to make them look OK, either more presidential or more like a governor, or more like a mayor OK, or more like you know, you're, you know, Congressional representative. it is a time honored practice, OK?

N. Rodgers: To put your thumb on the scale just a little bit.

J. Aughenbaugh: Sure, OK, you know it's like a member of Congress who goes ahead and announces two months before an election. We're gonna do a ribbon cutting for a new wing for the local hospital. Which by the way, because I had that earmarked in the most recent budget bill we passed. We're gonna get that new wing.

N. Rodgers: And it's going to be 45 construction jobs and it's gonna be that's right, right? X number of medical personnel, jobs and blah blah blah, yeah.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, OK, and that's a time honored practice. Which has been criticized by challengers OK for decades if not centuries. OK, well.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, I mean when the president can hold a press conference at the White House, yes. During his convention, which I honestly had never seen before.

J. Aughenbaugh: That was unusual.

N. Rodgers: I had never seen that that particular backdrop and part of that may have been covid and the lack of safety of travel right? Because we do know that when the president does travel to rallies, sometimes people. Because they gather in groups have become ill. Um, Herman Cain, may he rest in peace. Was that the? Yeah, was that the one in Oklahoma I think and became ill there, right so? Uh, but I'd never seen that before an I have to admit it threw me off a little bit. I was like, oh. That's, uh, an interesting use of that particular backdrop, but you what you're telling me is that. It that that's just an a normal practice of doing business in the sense of you will have a thumb you can put your thumb on a on a scale.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, well let's make a distinction OK? What the president did during the Republican National Convention by using, for instance, the White House OK, or using, for instance, a naturalization ceremony for New Citizens? That was different that broke if you will norms. OK, OK. There's typically OK with the parties national conventions. You would have some site in some important city or state with lots of red, white and blue balloons, balloons and flags and you know a band that plays all kinds of music etc etc. OK. That was that was unusual, but it didn't break any laws, it broke. You know, behavioral norms OK converge? OK, but it didn't break any loss, OK? I would distinguish that from if you will. Presidents and we'll just use presidents as an example of doing things that make them look presidential. OK, so you know, you know one of the allegations of, uh, that was leveled against Bush 41 was that the Persian Gulf War? OK was as much about. Oil and as much about Bush 41 winning reelection, then it was actually, um, freeing our friends in Kuwait. OK. OK, you know, was that a Wag? The Dog moment, right? OK, did Bill Clinton in an attempt to distract OK, the Whitewater special counsel's investigation? OK, um, provide military assistance to Haiti? OK or get us involved in Kosovo. OK, Were those Wag the Dog moments? OK, because again, for listeners of the podcast, if you were of age, when, uh, when Nia and I were OK, the pressure on Bill Clinton, OK, uh, definitely increased. After he won reelection. OK, when, uh, the Kenneth Starr Whitewater investigation report got released, it was pretty clear that we had a president who, for most of his elected professional Life OK was having extramarital affairs, right? So OK, the question became OK. Is he using foreign affairs as a way to distract the country from the fact? OK, that you know. He was having extramarital affairs, OK? You know? So these are... So I'm gonna draw a distinction between what the Trump Administration did during the Republican National Convention, OK, which broke a different set of norms. Behavioral norms versus a Wag the Dog event is designed to go ahead and distract the public from, shall we say, an unpleasant reality that may may make an incumbent look bad.

N. Rodgers: So the checks fit the bill because the handling of the coronavirus outbreak has not been particularly graceful and at the time of this recording, we now know that the president knew that it was more deadly and serious than he initially communicated to the United States.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right.

N. Rodgers: So the checks could in fact work in that sense because they're a distraction from... This sort of bungling of the initial handling of the I see OK, so you know... I see the distinction, okay.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, so trump can go, you know? Trump can go ahead and say I'm getting criticized for how my administration responded to COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, look at what I'm doing to go ahead and help you all. These checks that I've personally distributed with my name on it. OK, they're gonna help you get through OK, the you know you know economic dislocation being caused by the pandemic. OK, so I'm not a bad guy. I actually recognize you're going through a tough time. And you know, yeah, by the way, remember who signed your check?

N. Rodgers: Is a separate thing then yeah.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK yeah yeah. OK that that is an example of wag the dog, right? I mean 'cause you know. What I heard. I mean, you know, hey, I mean, you know my check got direct, direct deposited, right? But when I went ahead and pulled it up, OK, you know the underlying paperwork. OK, when it got reported?

N. Rodgers: The image yeah.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, I was just like really the president's name is on this. I'm like there's nothing that I've ever received from the Department of Treasury and the federal government that's ever had a president's name attached.

N. Rodgers: Right, I've never received anything that had a president's name attached.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah right yeah.

N. Rodgers: Course I'm not on the Christmas card mailing list, but I'm just saying I've never... Uh, which by the way, listeners, if you want to get on that list, all you have to do is mail them a Christmas card.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right, yeah.

N. Rodgers: And you will be added to the list and then you will get one of the First Family's Christmas cards.

J. Aughenbaugh: I have a couple of friends who have said Christmas cards to every presidential administration, and they've gotten one back in a future year.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, it's a it. It works like magic 'cause there's somebody in the office ...their whole job is to compile a list and then send out millions of Christmas.

J. Aughenbaugh: Cards and that's called constituent service. My friends OK.

N. Rodgers: Which you know what they're gonna need in order to make that work?

J. Aughenbaugh: A post office. A fully functioning post office.

N. Rodgers: Just saying, just saying. If enough of us send them Christmas cards, they're gonna have to keep the post office. That should be our new movement. Our new movement should be to encourage everyone to send a postcard or a Christmas card to the White House.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh, hey, well, let's not stop there, NIA.

N. Rodgers: And a Christmas card sent a birthday card. No nothing. Understand all kinds of cards to the president so that you can get on every one of their lists.

J. Aughenbaugh: Why stop with the president? Do it for all your elected officials.

N. Rodgers: That's true, send them to your members of Congress' office. Oh yeah, OK, 'cause You'll get on all their lists. You get a whole bunch of Christmas cards. You can compare them. You can make fun of different fonts. You can make fun of different pictures if you want to.

J. Aughenbaugh: Spend \$10 on buying a box of varied Christmas cards, spend another \$10 for stamps. OK and then identify who your elected officials are.

N. Rodgers: I'm totally doing that this year, in case you're wondering, that is gonna be my October Project. I'm going to send one to every single one of my elected officials. An and be like. Look forward to hearing from you exo ExoNia.

J. Aughenbaugh: Hugs and kisses. A hat tip, which is one of my favorite expressions. Hat tip OK, your your favorite political science professor? OK Augie.

N. Rodgers: And then they'll get right back to you. Dear Augie, right? Because that's how you will identify yourself? Yeah, right?

J. Aughenbaugh: Hey, maybe I should get a stamp. OK, with a coffee mug. And my name.

N. Rodgers: With Aughie written on the mug. You could have your own trademark. See earlier episode um. I think that would be fun, but so OK, but I can see that. OK, so yeah, so a greyer area for me about using sort of using agencies to further. Your presidential. Um? Or your congressional. Um um forays is so I know that the members of Congress go across the street to big rooms to make donor phone calls. Yes, and that traditionally the president has made donor phone calls from the residence, not from the Oval Office, right? Is there a law about that? Or is that just something that they do because they're trying to separate? The two activities election from elected.

J. Aughenbaugh: Historically, there have been no laws that govern what elected officials can do on government property. So it's been more of a behavioral norm, So what you're talking about in the is a kind of sort of a established practice. We need to separate. Campaigning from governing right. OK, so if we're in the Oval Office, OK, we can't do campaign work OK, and the reason why is it is, you know, kind of sort of expected by the public. the Oval Office is where the president does his job. The residence is, you know, considered the president's home. OK, so therefore, the president can go ahead and. Do you know phone calls to potential donors coordinate upcoming campaign events, etc. But the line gets very blurry, right? You know if the president goes ahead, and, uh, you know, goes to a state um, after a

hurricane? OK, on one hand, you you can say that the president is going there to make sure that the federal government is helping that state. After a natural disaster, on the other hand, it's quite obvious that the president is being presidential. Which is not something that the challenger can say.

N. Rodgers: Right, right? 'cause you get a photo up when you when you're the president and you show up at a place like that, you are going to be in the media that evening.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, when you know a Congress passes a spending bill, OK, they've done their job. They pass a spending bill. On the other hand, the spending bills, as we discussed an I believe. What was it season 2? Maybe season one? OK about appropriations bills, appropriations bills have all kinds of goodies. OK for current members of Congress to proudly go ahead and say. Back home hey, I got you this road project or I saved your Community Center OK? On one hand, they say I did my job. I'm your elected official. On the other hand, they get to say that whereas the challenger doesn't. Right? Challenger doesn't get to say that. OK, you know, my member of Congress is Abigail spanberger, right? Abigail spanberger Here in the next couple of weeks, goes ahead and has some local events where she highlights how you know, a bill that she cosponsored or a bill she voted for. Meant that X got done OK in my Congressional District. Well, on one hand, she can say I'm merely informing my public of the work that Congress did. That I did for them. The fact that she might say that in the you know two months before the election, well, isn't that convenient. So the line gets very blurry. Yeah, be OK. Between governing and campaigning, right? And that's why one's gotta be careful when they throw around the claim oh that politician is Wagging the Dog. Are they wagging the Dog? Or are they actually doing their job?

N. Rodgers: But it also seems to me that Wagging the Dog versus putting your thumb on the scale are two different things that Wagging the Dog is a distraction technique. Look over there a pterodactyl about to kill us right? Whereas putting your thumb on the scale is. Is, um, I have been doing a job. Yeah, I'm going to choose to inform you at this particular moment.

J. Aughenbaugh: What, yeah? What if you're a member of Congress, if you're a president, are you supposed to go right? Go go around saying, I'm I'm going to be humble and I'm not gonna go ahead and tell you the good work I'm doing. I don't know that. Yeah, OK, I I don't know anybody in any job that goes ahead and says I'm not gonna talk about all the good stuff I did.

N. Rodgers: Oh, I know lots of people, in lots jobs that do it but not narcissists. And if you're a politician, you're probably a narcissist, right? And just happens to work out that way most.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah right, you know and Wagging the Dog refers to pseudo events. They look like a real governing event, but it's a pseudo event, right? So example, I gave my students when we discussed Wag the Dog was votes taking in Congress OK, where?

N. Rodgers: Uh, when you know there's no danger of it actually costing you anything like the like. The bill that came out of the House of Representatives? We will spend 80 trillion dollars in the next 10 minutes on covid and they said it was like I'm sorry we can't hear you. What are you saying? 'cause they could take that vote knowing they were not going to have to pay the price for taking that vote.

J. Aughenbaugh: Infact, Nia, I gave that explicit example.

N. Rodgers: Hey look at me. I've been paying attention, OK?

J. Aughenbaugh: 'cause I went ahead and said OK in the week we're recording this podcast, the Senate took a vote call on a skinny stimulus. That's how the media referred to it as. Now the Republicans control the Senate, but in the Senate for a vote to actually be taken on a bill, you have to 1st go ahead and vote to close debate. And the Republicans knew there weren't enough votes to close debate, so there was no danger, no danger, that they would have to be stuck with that bill. In fact, they took the vote so they could go ahead and say all the Democrats who refused to end debate where against actually taking up the bill.

N. Rodgers: Right, they don't want to help the American people. They want you to starve and be evicted and have horrible things happen to you. Aren't they terrible? Look at us. We're trying to do something. Because it's an election year.

J. Aughenbaugh: It's an election year, right? That is designed to go ahead and distract you from the fact that the United States Congress did not pass a second stimulus bill. And both parties should be stuck with that going into the election. But instead they engage in Wag the Dog activities so that they can go ahead and say it wasn't us. It was them. It was them.

N. Rodgers: So, so to your earlier example invading... trying to defend Kuwait.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh hey, that could be a legitimate foreign policy.

N. Rodgers: Right or it could have been a we don't actually care all that much about Kuwait, but we are up for reelection and we need to look like we're, like we care about world events or we care about Kuwait or we care about whatever? Yes OK. Yes I see. That's a little complicated, but it is an interesting idea 'cause you do have to thread the needle as a politician. You do want people to know what you're doing, 'cause you want to get reelected, but I can see where income where where. Sorry where challengers would say, well that's unfair. I haven't had the opportunity to do those things so I have no way to talk about those things. Yes, except to talk about them in opposition and it's really hard to say to your, to your local like if if Abigail Spanberger came out and said. Here's a new road and somebody, her challenger said roads are terrible nobody in our county needs a road, right then they would look like an idiot yeah, so they can't. They can't really oppose roads. They'd have to say well, she could have made a better road or a bigger road or a nicer road, but that's the worst they can do. They can't...

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes.

N. Rodgers: That puts him in a really tough position to fight back.

J. Aughenbaugh: And that's why Wag the Dog pseudo events OK, can be so affective in campaigns. Because not only do they distract, but they put your opposition in a really difficult bind in regards to being able to attack.

N. Rodgers: Them, Oh well, who was gonna say? Oh no, we shouldn't defend little Kuwait against Iraq, like who was gonna say that nobody was gonna say that nobody in the United States was gonna say stupid Kuwait, nobody cares about them, we're like "Hey you can't be doing that that's not right" like. I could say, Oh, I see that's really clever. Yes, that's a really clever thing to do. Yeah, if you can get away with it if.

J. Aughenbaugh: You can get away with it, that's why it.

N. Rodgers: Works, it did not work for President Clinton. I'm just like look over there and people kept saying yeah we don't care about what's over there could you tell us about the women please like you just it didn't matter what he threw in another direction nobody looked in the other direction everybody was looking at him and part of that I put to you is because when faced with being actually caught, he tried to wiggle out yes. There there seems to be it there. It seems to be effective to say to the American Public, Yep, I did a thing and it wasn't a good thing and I'm sorry and it's now between me and my spouse or it's now between me and whatever like. Then it doesn't leave you room to keep talking about it and to keep. Yeah, you know what I mean to keep it going.

J. Aughenbaugh: Going yeah and and I understand why a lot of politicians refuse just to go ahead and own up to it. Because we've also had examples in our country's history. You know, this week was the anniversary of Gerald Ford pardoning Richard Nixon. OK, it was the anniversary this week. Um and and I've often thought about. Um? The difficulty Ford had in making that decision. Because he had to know, and it was born out in the public opinion polls.

N. Rodgers: It cost him the election.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, it was one of the things that cost him the election. OK, because a majority of Americans, OK didn't believe he should have pardoned ex. On the other hand, OK, four just owned up to it. He just came out and said. I am doing this because I think we have to move on as a nation.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, and I think ultimately history proved him right. That by closing that door. He could stop that. That poison from spreading further. Yeah, he could narrow that the, the, the pain from that yeah and start and start you know but yeah but it cost him the election. Do you do the right thing even though you know it's gonna cost you the election?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, because you know I've often wondered if Bill Clinton had gone ahead and owned up to the fact that he was a serial philanderer. OK, what that would have meant to how Al Gore ran his presidential campaign because one of the critiques of Al Gore's presidential campaign in 2000 was that Al Gore ran away from everything that the Clinton administration actually achieved, because Al Gore was so afraid he was gonna get stained OK by the fact that he was Bill Clinton's vice president, a president. OK, who almost was found guilty in impeachment.

N. Rodgers: Right, OK, he he distanced himself from what had been a rather successful presidency.

J. Aughenbaugh: Oh my goodness, yes, right?

N. Rodgers: Well, and also 30 years later, what did it cost Hillary Clinton? If he had, yes, you know what I mean? Yeah, that would not have been a sticking point that anybody could have used against her. If there had been, but I know that in one of the debates, Donald Trump brought several of the women. Right like he made it an issue that it wouldn't have been had, Bill Clinton said, Yep, that was the thing and I did it and it was wrong, yeah? OK, you know we don't know how. We don't know what what could have been would have been. Should have been, it's just it's. It is interesting to think about. I think about Ford and what a terrible position he must have. Like it must have been a really hard decision, but I think he made the good person decision by putting the welfare of the nation above the welfare of himself. Yeah, and I think that's when you know you've got a good president is when they say other people come first and my happiness is not part of that equation.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yeah, I mean because you know. He was a president that had very little political capital, right? He didn't run for election and get chosen as vice president. He he was appointed as a vice president to replace Spiro Agnew who had to resign.

N. Rodgers: Yeah, he's the only president in our nation, right? That didn't, wasn't elected to either of the offices.

J. Aughenbaugh: That's right, OK, he had no political capital. OK, he was the head of the political party, OK, who basically just trashed the presidency. OK, Um and you know this was a guy who was just like you know I have a shot here to win the presidency on my own merit. OK, I mean the political politically expedient thing for him to have done was to just left Richard Nixon hanging in the wind.

N. Rodgers: To let the trial go forward to let him be found guilty, right? You know.

J. Aughenbaugh: Let the Justice Department go ahead and investigate Nixon further and see. You know which laws? He did break OK, right OK?

N. Rodgers: What he knew and when he knew it.

J. Aughenbaugh: Bring an indictment against him. OK, but Ford did the decent thing, OK, um, you know, I mean, and I've often thought about that. Um, uh, because I know it's easy to go ahead and trash Nixon. Um in trash Ford's pardon, but I was just like wow. I mean, think about the guts he had to go ahead and do that right?

N. Rodgers: Yeah anyways, oh. Hey, so for next episode can we talk about Bob Woodward in his October, except September surprise?

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes, OK for listeners. Listeners. Um in a future podcast episode, we're going to look at another election phenomenon that's referred to as the October surprise. OK, so a little bit of foreshadowing. I occasionally like to do that at the end of my class sessions.

N. Rodgers: OK, well and apparently he's been involved in several of these.

J. Aughenbaugh: Yes yes he has.

N. Rodgers: Woodward, he just he sort of is like oh excuse me, Mr Nixon, I'd like to talk to you, Mr Deep Throat told me some things I'd like to talk to you about and now he's like. Yes, you know doing it again. So yeah good OK. Well then we'll talk about that in another episode.

J. Aughenbaugh: OK, well done.

N. Rodgers: Thank you, yes.

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