

Anne Applebaum on Autocratic Threats Around the World

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[00:00:03.2] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello, friends, I'm Jeffrey Rosen, President and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We the People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution Center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. My guest this week is Anne Applebaum, staff writer for The Atlantic and Pulitzer Prize winning historian. Her new book, *Autocracy, Inc.: The Dictators Who Want to Rule the World*, explains how autocratic elites around the world collaborate to remain in power and undermine the democratic order. She's a longtime friend. I've learned so much from her over the years about threats to the liberal order at home and around the world, and I'm thrilled to welcome her to the show to discuss the importance of liberal democracy and to teach us about the global landscape of autocratic illiberalism. And it is wonderful to welcome you to We the People.

[00:01:00.4] Anne Applebaum: Thank you so much. Very happy to be here.

[00:01:01.3] Jeffrey Rosen: Let's begin with the obvious question. What is Autocracy, Inc.?

[00:01:05.4] Anne Applebaum: My book describes a network of autocracies. It is not an alliance. It's not even really an axis. It's a group of countries who are not linked ideologically. So we're talking about communist China, nationalist Russia, theocratic Iran, Bolivarian socialist Venezuela, and a host of a dozen or so others. Countries who, some of them are one-party states, some of them are run by a single person, some of them are an oligarchy. All of them are states whose regime seeks to rule with absolute power, meaning without checks and balances, without transparency, without independent courts, without a media. They seek to control all the media space. And increasingly, they have begun to cooperate together opportunistically, where it suits them transactionally, to push back against us, essentially. They see the liberal world, the ideas coming from the liberal world, again, the rule of law, independent judiciary, transparency, accountability, rights, human rights, women's rights. All of those things are a problem for them.

[00:02:23.5] Anne Applebaum: Those things are part of the language used by their own opposition movements. But of course, they're also the language of our societies. And they're built into the treaties and the international institutions that govern or try to govern relationships between states around the world. They're trying to change those rules. They're trying to undermine the ideas and ideals of democracy and of liberalism. And they're seeking to rule with impunity. And the book describes both where this world came from, how it operates financially in the information space, and militarily how they've begun to collaborate. And it suggests at the end some ways to think about it and some ideas about pushing back.

[00:03:06.5] Jeffrey Rosen: So powerful. And the characteristics you just identified as core to liberal democracy and threats to autocracy are really significant. The rule of law, transparency, accountability, human rights, women's rights. You also said checks and balances, independent media, independent courts, and separation of powers. Are Autocracy, Inc. United in rejecting those values? And what can that say about the importance of maintaining those values around the globe today?

[00:03:39.2] Anne Applebaum: Again, these are ideologically different countries. Some of them pay lip service to democratic ideas. Some of them have elections. The Iranians have elections. The Russians have elections. Of course, the elections are manipulated and the outcome is often known in advance. Sometimes there's an element of chance, but not pure chance. But broadly speaking, yes, I mean, these are the ideas that are a problem for them. And so, you know, Vladimir Putin doesn't want an anti-corruption movement to examine where his money is from, where it is, what he paid for the spectacularly vulgar palace that he's built on the Black Sea or so who or what other people paid for it more likely. Xi Jinping is a billionaire, but we don't know how we don't know where his money comes from. And he's also not interested in enabling any kind of independent investigative journalism or even an ombudsman inside the state system to look at, to be able to examine him or question him.

[00:04:42.4] Anne Applebaum: So all of them have reasons why those values are a problem for them personally and for their ability to stay in power. I should say there are a number of other states around the world who, you know, my book is not a black and white argument. It's not saying that the world is divided by some kind of Berlin Wall into dictatorships and democracies. There are also a lot of countries in between, some of which have partially democratic systems or who have democratically elected leaders who question some of the liberal ideas. I mean, you can see it in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, for example, or in Erdogan's Turkey. Part of the other argument in the book, though, is that the ideas of the autocratic world do also appear inside our own political systems. So whereas in the 1990s, we used to talk about democracy moving from west to east, you know, as if the the the spread of ideas could only go one direction, it's become pretty clear in the last decade that the influence can also go the other way, that the appeal of autocratic ideas to politicians and also to ordinary people is growing inside our own societies. And again, that's not an accident. There's a chapter in the book about autocratic narratives.

[00:06:01.5] Anne Applebaum: So the Russians and also the Chinese, Venezuelans, and others collaborate together, but also individually to build an argument about democracy being divided, degenerate, even sexually degenerate and autocracy being stable and safe. And that intuition, that instinct, that democratic systems are fatally flawed and need to be torn down, that there is a one man rule or a strongman rule or an autocracy that's an alternative that's available to us. That idea, you can now hear it in the US in the debate inside the US and you can also hear it around the world, around the rest of the democratic world. I want to be clear that it's not them manipulating us. It's also our internal, it's also part of our internal politics. In other words, the autocratic narrative isn't only created by Russia and China. It's also created by Americans and by Europeans. So it's a joint construct.

[00:07:08.3] Jeffrey Rosen: This is what makes the argument of the book so powerful and complex. Autocrats adopt illiberal values for different reasons. It's not a grand battle between communism and democracy. And yet at the same time, may disseminate defenses of autocracy to the US and other democracies that are then embraced by domestic actors. You have a chapter on financial collusion, security collusion, propaganda, and the international institutions that are being undermined. Give us a sense of how financial collusion allows autocrats to avail themselves of tax havens to launder their money and evade sanctions.

[00:07:51.4] Anne Applebaum: So, you know, you can look at the rise of Putin as, again, a kind of joint Russian Western project. To make a long story short, I will tell a little bit more detail in the book. Essentially, one of the reasons why Putin came to power is that in the early 1990s, he was involved in a scheme to steal money from the city of St. Petersburg. He was the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, to steal money from St. Petersburg, to launder it through Western institutions using Western partners, German, Luxembourg, others, and then to bring the money back into Russia, where eventually he enriched himself and a whole group of colleagues, some of whom are still among the richest people in Russia. And this wouldn't have been possible if there wasn't a part of the European-American financial world that was not willing to help him. And, if you look back over the history of the rise of the Russian oligarchy and their use of exploitation of really shell companies and laws that allowed anonymous purchases of property, for example, in London or in New York or Miami or the south of France, their use of the offshore world. All those things were enabled by us because we set up those systems. We set up the system of offshore finance. It was 20 years ago. It was a pretty marginal thing.

[00:09:18.5] Anne Applebaum: It's now very, very large, something like 10% of the world's GDP may be hidden offshore in offshore bank accounts where they can't be reached, either by the world's police or by a tax authority. So that's money that's either hiding from tax or it's stolen or it's organized crime or it's drug money. These offshore entities function legally. They're connected to normal banks. The ordinary businessmen also use them. But if you look at the ways in which they're used legitimately, they're very, it's really very small and minor. And the ways in which they're now exploited is very dramatic. And one of the ways in which we could push back against the autocratic world is by putting an end to it. We don't have to tolerate money laundering or anonymous companies. There's no reason why people should be able to hide their purchases of condos in New York behind a fake shell company. I mean, it's not necessary. I mean, secrecy and the lack of accountability. These are autocratic traits. These are typical of autocratic societies. And we don't need to have them in America or in Europe.

[00:10:31.4] Anne Applebaum: And yet we do. And of course, there's a big lobby. The real estate lobby has tried hard to maintain this. But, there are political implications as well. And so I will just throw this out. The Trump Donald Trump's business model when he was just a real estate magnate was to build buildings and then to either he or a partner would sell condos in them and something like a quarter or a fifth of all the apartments, all the condos that were sold in Trump buildings or Trump branded buildings were sold to anonymous companies. And which, by the way, was totally legal. But it also means that we didn't know who bought them. And even when he was president, he was continuing to sell condos in Trump branded or Trump owned buildings to anonymous people. And therefore, we don't know what was the function or the purpose of those purchases. And, you know, if that was a bribe or if it was an attempt to

influence the White House, we have no idea. And we're legally barred from knowing. There is beginning to be a pushback against these kinds of practices, both in the US and the UK, partly, I think, because in the UK you now have a prime minister who's a former chief prosecutor of Great Britain, a former human rights lawyer.

[00:11:49.3] Anne Applebaum: He's interested in this subject. He and his foreign secretary, David Lammy, talked about it during their campaign. There are beginning to be legal changes also in the US. But it's a big project. What we really need is a coalition of countries who are willing to put an end to this kind of activity. And that would be good for global security and that it would push back against the autocracies, but it would also be good for our own democracies. It would be good for our own ability to be transparent and accountable.

[00:12:25.3] Jeffrey Rosen: That's such a powerful point you make that the rule of law can check this kind of corruption and laws of transparency and accountability are within our grasp. You mentioned Donald Trump and you have a new podcast that you're doing about autocracy in America. You have episodes on Start with a Lie, Capture the Courts, Consolidate Power, Join the Kleptocracy, a big topic. But let's begin where you just laid off. Is President Trump's being drawn to autocracy a reflection of his own financial interest? And is he behaving like a typical kleptocrat or not?

[00:13:10.5] Anne Applebaum: The podcast is something I put together with my colleague, Peter Pomerantsev, and this is about not autocracy as some distant thing that might happen in America. It's about the traits of autocratic rule and autocratic behavior that are already here. And so actually there is an episode. Exactly, it's on kleptocracy. It's on what I was just discussing on the ways in which dark money and anonymous companies and anonymous property purchases, how that shapes our politics and shapes even our political conversations. And we talk to people who have views about it. And because I did it with Peter, who spent a long time living in Russia at the time during the rise of Putin. I myself lived in Poland in a period when there was an autocratic ruling party that was trying to change the rules of the system and ultimately failed. They were voted out in an election in October. But that's where our perspective on this comes from. So it's a little bit different from the usual way in which people talk about these things, 'cause we're referring to how America looks compared to other countries. But when you look at Trump specifically, what's interesting to me about him is how his primary concern at all times is himself and his own finances and his own power.

[00:14:28.3] Anne Applebaum: American national interest isn't his primary concern. And the way in which he deals opportunistically and transactionally with other political leaders. So he's not, he doesn't feel tied to Europeans by values. He doesn't feel tied to Ukraine by a sense of values. He doesn't you know, a country attacked by another. He doesn't, the idea that there is some value in preserving the idea that borders aren't changed by force or that the Russians are building concentration camps or kidnapping children in Ukraine, that he doesn't, shouldn't, that he's not bothered by those things in the way other people are bothered by them. And he thinks transactionally and opportunistically. And in that sense, he does already resemble the behavior of many of the autocrats, whether it's the leaders of Zimbabwe or Venezuela or Russia or China. And I think there's a reason why he tends to speak positively of other strongmen. When he talks, he's an admirer of the North Korean dictator. You know, he talks also in flattering terms about Xi

Jinping and how much absolute power he enjoys. And he seems to, and he has the same scorn for whether it's investigative reporting or whether it's, the rules and norms around the American government, around the Justice Department.

[00:15:56.4] Anne Applebaum: He certainly shares that. I mean, obviously, he's operating in a different system. I've even written recently, I wrote a piece about the ways in which he could threaten our judicial system. And I was, again, comparing that to what happened in Poland over the last few years, which was an assault on independent judges. And it would be more difficult for him to make changes inside the United States because of the way our constitution is written. But he could do a lot of damage while trying. And he and already by altering the norms of conversation, a lot of, I'll just say this, a lot more of the American government and the constitutional system, a lot more of it depends on an acceptance of rules of fair play or norms or rules of behavior or assumptions about morality.

[00:16:52.7] Anne Applebaum: A lot more of it depends on that than you think. So we do have a very legalistic system. We have a written constitution. There are you know, as you've yourself written about. I mean, there are checks and balances built into it. But nevertheless, respect for all of those things is also an assumption. And the question is, would Trump have that respect? Certainly he talks now about abusing the Justice Department, about locking up his opponents. He's talking about weaponizing state institutions against his political enemies for his political purposes. And that is, it's not that it's never happened before in American history, it has. But it certainly goes against how our system is supposed to run.

[00:17:40.4] Jeffrey Rosen: Say more about this crucial question, how could it happen here? You just said that the rule of law is a question of norms as much as constitutional rights. But when you compare the US Constitution to other democracies that have slid into authoritarianism like Poland and Hungary, are we better equipped to resist it and give us a sense of how it can happen here?

[00:18:07.2] Anne Applebaum: So, as I said, our podcast is about ways in which some kinds of autocratic behavior have arisen. And the first episode was about Republicans who discovered that in order to maintain their status and role inside the Republican Party, they had to accept lies. And we interviewed both a former congressman, but also an election official in Arizona who who went through this process of learning that they have to behave in a different way, which to us seemed like a very East European kind of kind of realization, that if you want to get along in life, you just have to accept a conspiracy theory. You're not allowed to fight back against it. So in that sense, some parts of American politics have already gone down that road. In the case of judges, you know, people pay a lot of attention to the Supreme Court and so on. But there's another factor, which is that if you look at the behavior of a judge like Aileen Cannon in Florida, what's interesting about her is that she's a judge who is technically under no pressure. She's under no political pressure.

[00:19:13.5] Anne Applebaum: She's, the laws on courts that are in our constitution to keep judges independent involve making sure their salaries are paid, that their salaries aren't influenced by Congress, making sure they're well paid, making sure they're protected in various ways from political influence. But the constitution can't prevent a judge who seeks to do a favor

for a politician breaking the rules. So it can't prevent somebody who has all the benefits of independence and who's insured against political pressure from nevertheless wanting to play a political game. And so we explore that idea as well. And almost when you go through any set of, if you look at any US institution, you find the same thing. And so the Department of Justice, until now, and again, you're probably a greater expert than me, has been set up in such a way that it's meant not to function at the behest of the president. So it has some independent status. It's not supposed to be a political organ that's used to prosecute the leader of the opposition. Nevertheless, that's how Trump talks about using it. And so the question is, would the old standard hold up under pressure? I mean, the US has one huge advantage, which is that we're a very large country.

[00:20:34.3] Anne Applebaum: Also, we're a federal system. And so even changes at the top don't necessarily affect the way things work at the bottom. And we may be in a situation soon where there are enormous gaps between, I mean, we're really there already, between states and how states are run legally and otherwise. But so there would be a lot of elements inside the system in that sense, just at the state level and at the local level that would push back against any attempt to change the rules. And you would also find, there would be legal challenges and there would be, it's not like you have a tame judiciary that would just collaborate with whatever the president says. So there would be many places where there would be pushback. Actually, honestly, my fear about a second Trump presidency would be not that he would turn the United States into a dictatorship, but that he would try and in trying to create a massive amount of chaos. And that would be all that we would be consumed with that conversation for the subsequent four years. And it would make the United States incapable of acting internationally or doing anything positive. That's really my greatest fear. I don't know. This is your world more than it is mine. I'd love to know what you think.

[00:21:47.7] Jeffrey Rosen: It's now unconstitutional for me to have opinions on this podcast. I keep asking you, but I'm really struck by your powerful insight that federalism might in the end be the structure that preserves those other democratic values of the separation of powers, the rule of law and free speech. And also that the danger is that the US in the course of chaos would be unable to exercise the kind of check to autocracy that you think is so crucial. We're both interested in what history can teach about the rise of autocracy as well as what the global experience is in Greek and Roman history. And I think we've both been kind of reading some of that. I was struck in reading Livy and Tacitus, who are Jefferson's favorite historians, about how the brutal bloodbath of Caligula and the Roman emperors, the thousands that were murdered in order to keep them in power, was central in the Framers mind. To what degree does the Roman experience anticipate autocracy and the dangers we face today?

[00:22:57.0] Anne Applebaum: It's funny. I'm gonna, let me answer that in a roundabout way. How did I get interested in the subject, which I know you're interested in because I've been reading your book. But during, while writing a previous book, I was often struck by how shocked Americans are by even the idea that their democracy could decline. How is that even possible? We've been in democracy for X number of years. We've had X number of free elections. How is that even possible? And I kept reminding people and then eventually went back and re-read a lot of this myself. I kept reminding people that the Framers were obsessed with the idea that democracy would decline. And why were they obsessed with it? It's because they were

reading the history of Rome and they were, and in particular, the period that interested them the most was the period of the Roman Republic and the decline of the Republic and the rise of Caesar and then the rise of the empire. And what they had in their heads, literally, when they were writing the US Constitution was, how do we prevent the rise of Caesar? How do we prevent a demagogue from taking over the democratic system, corrupting it? How do we prevent somebody from persuading the people to believe false promises? And so on. And our electoral college, the electoral college was not set up so that every four years the people of Pennsylvania get to decide who is the president.

[00:24:18.9] Anne Applebaum: That was not the purpose of it. The purpose of it was originally to be a kind of break between the popular vote and the presidency, just in case the rabble chose somebody as president who's not appropriate. I mean, and this is of course, nobody talks like that anymore and it doesn't have that function anymore. And I actually don't think ever had that function. But the, but certainly the Framers of the US Constitution were worried about this. Certainly they talked about it. It's in the Federal's papers. It's in their debates. It's even in the arguments in favor of revolution a few years earlier. So the question is what changed? And of course what changed in the US is a very long experience of success. I mean, really from the second world war. And then I think maybe really, especially from the time of the civil rights movement, Americans had this confidence that, we were, we had a stable and ever more progressive and ever more inclusive democracy. After 1989, we won the cold war. Our system was the best system. Everybody was gonna want to be a liberal democracy like us too. This was the Frank Fukuyama thesis written at the beginning of the 1990s, which actually it's not exactly what he said, but it's what people wanted to believe.

[00:25:37.0] Anne Applebaum: And we had this very, very long experience of success, stability, and prosperity. And we just thought that was gonna last forever. And I think what's happening now is the thing that the Framers were afraid of, that the institution would become weaker, that they would become undermined, that people would feel doubt about them, and that that would help enable the rise of a different kind of leader or a different kind of political system. So, of course, one of the interesting things to me is the question of whether the constitution as it was written, many decades ago, whether it's fit for purpose now, whether it functions the way it was supposed to function. And that's a, that's probably a better question for constitutional scholars like yourself or your many colleagues than it is for me, but it's a good question.

[00:26:28.8] Jeffrey Rosen: It is indeed. The Framers are centrally concerned about a Caesar on horseback who will come to flatter the mob, persuade them to exchange liberty for cheap luxury, and then install himself as a permanent dictator. Hamilton and Jefferson thought it might happen in different ways. But what does the experience of Autocracy, Inc. Teach us about how autocracy could arrive? Does it always come in the same form? What have you learned from Hungary, Poland, and the other countries that you've studied about how it could happen here?

[00:27:03.4] Anne Applebaum: So, we're talking about wildly different countries. When we talk about China, when we talk about Poland, these are very, very different circumstances. I mean, China is run by the Communist Party, which has been in power for a long time, and it came to power through a revolution. Russia, as I said, is a kind of kleptocratic mafia state where the leader already had a very weak state when he came to power. It's not as if Russia in the 1990s

was a secure and stable political system of any kind. It is true when we talk about Hungary or Poland, which was, as I said, a failed attempt. We are talking about a phenomenon that is increasingly normal, which is that of a democratically elected political leader who then, upon legitimately elected, legitimate leader, who upon attaining power, upon winning the election, then begins to dismantle the state. And that was what Orbán did. That's actually what Hugo Chávez did. So this is not a right wing or a left wing phenomenon. And we sometimes talk about them as if it was only on the right, but it's absolutely that Venezuela is strikingly similar.

[00:28:14.9] Anne Applebaum: When you read the history of Chávez and what he did to the Venezuelan state, it's not that different from what Viktor Orbán did or what the Polish Law and Justice Party tried to do during the eight years that it was in power and ultimately failed. And capturing the state, what does it mean? It means changing the bureaucracy so that instead of hiring people who know about water pollution to work for the environmental agency, you hire your cousins, or your party loyalists. It means seeking to pack courts so that the courts will, at least in political cases, will decide, and will always decide in favor of the government. It means trying to create rule by law instead of rule of law. And so rule of law means that there's a separate constitution. Courts have some independence and at least in theory, when they make decisions, they make them on the basis of a constitutional argument, a legal argument.

[00:29:14.0] Anne Applebaum: A rule by law means that the courts do what the person in charge says they should do. And that's, and so you can see them, you can see attempts to pack courts in order to create that kind of effect. And again, not unknown in American history to try to pack courts, right? I mean, FDR did it. So these things aren't unheard of in the American past either. In fact, the more you look at the American past, the more you can see attempts to do it, both nationally and at the state level. What else does it mean? I mean, it means a personalization of the police. So again, the police aren't there to enforce the law. They're there to enforce the will of the ruling party or the will of the leader. Expression that political scientists use is state capture, meaning the ruling party takes over the state and uses it and politicizes it and does so successfully enough so that he or the party can't lose another election. So the point of doing it is to stay in power indefinitely and to remove the level playing field that democracy is supposed to ensure. I mean, it's interesting, if you think about it, democracy asks a lot of people. So it asks, it requires you when you win an election to preserve a system that will allow your enemies to defeat you four years from now.

[00:30:39.9] Anne Applebaum: And it also requires you when you lose an election to sit patiently while your enemies rule the country and then seek to win power the second time, legitimately using the rules. And the temptations to cheat there are very high if you're especially in very partisan political systems. But democracy requires you to continue respecting the idea of a level playing field, that elections are out of the realm of politics, the actual institutions of the election, the people, the counting the votes, the system is not something that you, that anybody's allowed to mess with. But you also have to preserve, again, an idea of rule of law, an idea of judicial independence, an idea of some media independence. And that's asking a lot of people. And democracies ask a lot of citizens and that they ask them to be able to tolerate a change of power and this legitimate rotation of leaders, whereas in autocratic states that is prevented.

[00:31:41.6] Anne Applebaum: I think many people have written about this as well. You can sometimes tell in advance when a political party is going to try to do that because of the language that they're using about the system or about themselves. We've used this word very often in the last few years, this word populism, which I actually dislike because in America there was a populist movement in the 19th century, which means something a little bit different and populism sounds fairly bland anyway, and sort of nice. I mean, it sounds like it just means that you're popular. So I don't like the word, but when we, the parties that we've been talking about as populist, what we often mean really is autocratic. So I sometimes will say autocratic populist. And that means political parties that describe themselves as the only legitimate party, like only we are allowed to rule. And we represent the real people, the real Americans, and our opponents are foreigners or elites or traders, who shouldn't count and who should never be allowed to rule. And so, when you have a party like that, that appears in a political system, that is a kind of dangerous moment.

[00:32:57.6] Anne Applebaum: And there's a lot of that language around right now in the United States, in different forms. And that's a sign that the language of the autocratic world is here already with us in our political culture. But again, the important piece of it also is that all of us have in our minds this idea that democracy ends with some kind of coup d'etat, right? There's tanks and there's a Colonel shooting up the White House and there's blood on the streets and so on. But actually in the modern world, that's not how democracies end. Mostly they end through this silent process of corrupting institutions, changing the judges, altering the rules, changing the civil service, capturing the state. And that's the thing that we should be aware of and worried about, not a coup d'etat.

[00:33:49.5] Jeffrey Rosen: That is so powerful. And your definition of autocratic populism is so helpful, looking in history, trying to define what the founders meant by demagogues. And one characteristic seemed to be efforts to consolidate power in one person and undermine the constitution and the rule of law to, to challenge democratic elections. And when, as you say, it's happened before in American history, Aaron Burr appeared to have conspired to do this by fomenting a revolution in Spain and setting himself up as dictator of Mexico. Huey Long, perhaps, is the best example.

[00:34:31.3] Anne Applebaum: One of our podcast episodes is about Huey Long.

[00:34:35.6] Jeffrey Rosen: Just one more beat 'cause it's crucially important. It sounds like party competition is crucial to preventing that kind of autocracy. And do we find around the world that it's the consolidation of power in one person in one political party that characterizes autocratic populism?

[00:34:53.8] Anne Applebaum: It's the consolidation of power in one, usually in one person, actually, a kind of personality cult, sometimes in a party. But it's, but a lot of it is the intentions of that person in that party. Are they trying to change the rules? Are they trying to reset and rewrite the rules of the system so that they can never lose? And that's the key element. How, are they trying to change the system in order to stay in power indefinitely? And as I said, there are many examples, left-wing, right-wing, of people who've tried it in the US, in other countries. It's not a, the desire to undermine democracy and stay in power doesn't belong to any political party

or movement. You can find it in plenty of places. But that's the thing to watch for. And that's the thing to try and understand. And it's why listening to what is said about, about the civil service, about the courts, about the media. This is why it's important to listen to those things because it's in the, in criticizing and attacking those institutions, as well as, of course, the institutions of elections and vote counting. It's listening to those things that will tell you somebody's intentions.

[00:36:09.2] Jeffrey Rosen: So powerful. All right. Well, back to the book, you describe, although autocrats come to power in different ways, sometimes from liberal democratic systems and other times from illiberal systems, you describe the ways that they preserve power, which they share in common. And those include security collusion, autocrats exchanging repressive techniques to remain in power and North Korea and Iran, supplying Russia with armaments for Ukraine is one example. Cuba, a secret policeman to beat up protesters in Venezuela. Talk about security collusion.

[00:36:44.5] Anne Applebaum: So again, in the book, I talk about different ways, whether it's through shared propaganda or whether it's through shared financial tactics, even the quasi-state quasi-private companies in one dictatorship investing in the quasi-state quasi-private companies of another. They share surveillance technology, but yes, they also increasingly cooperate in the realm of security and the military. And this was the, I mean, obviously the most dramatic example is the North Koreans supplying ammunition to Russia to fight the war against Ukraine and the Iranians supplying drones to the Russians, and maybe possibly even ballistic missiles. That's a recent story. The Chinese have also enabled the Russians in a different sense. They have continued to supply components for the Russian defense industry. And there's even a recent story. There was a Reuters investigation. And then I had also heard about it from another source that the Russians are building drone factories in China. So some of the, some of what they've learned from the war, they're beginning to deploy in order to create a drone arsenal with the help of the Chinese.

[00:37:54.7] Anne Applebaum: That hasn't quite yet risen to the level of international diplomacy, but if true, it would show you a different way in which it works. And don't forget, there would be a reciprocal arrangement. So there's also now evidence that the Russians are supplying anti-ship missiles or thinking about doing it to the Houthis who are an Iranian proxy, who are believed to want to use them against American or other ships in the Red Sea. And so this would be another further destabilizing factor. So, once these regimes begin to spread and share very sophisticated weaponry, we're already entering a different kind of reality. Again, it's rumored, and I can't say that it's true, but I mean, think about the significance of Russian and Iranian nuclear collaboration. If that were to happen, the Iranians don't have nuclear weapons yet. They allegedly are very close. The Russians do have them. If the Russians were to begin to help them. Again, it would speed up the process of nuclear proliferation. So that they've begun to share weapons and that they share these security strategies is also new. A few years back, the idea that Putin would be accepting help from North Korea was kind of unthinkable.

[00:39:16.5] Anne Applebaum: And the Russians even played for a time a somewhat constructive role in enforcing sanctions on Iran. And that's obviously that that whole world is now gone and will not come back. So they begin to see an interest in mutual creation of havoc. And I'd say, I should say another piece of that story is now unfolding in Western and Central

Africa, where in effect the Russians have a kind of security offer for dictators and would be dictators. They'll provide mercenaries who will help them attain power. Maybe the Chinese can invest and help them out with their economic problems in exchange they want access to, I don't know, diamond mines and other natural resources whose profits they can then take and employ to make their kleptocracy function. They're beginning to also look around the world for other kinds of alliances and other ways in which they can back up and support dictators or as I said, would be dictators who wanna take power. And that's not totally unfamiliar, I mean, it's not unlike what the Soviet Union did in the 1970s in Africa, but it's now returned and it's a particularly ugly version of it.

[00:40:33.6] Anne Applebaum: So the Wagner mercenaries in Africa are not very interested in human rights. They are very happy to beat people up and kill them. They don't abide by any laws either local or international. As I said, they're not exactly an arm of the Russian state. They operate semi-private, semi not but they now have to be understood as a factor in African politics. And that's part of the same system. It's part of the deterioration of norms and the attempt of Autocracy, Inc. To assert its values and to install its values in more places.

[00:41:15.2] Jeffrey Rosen: You also talk about the enabling of propaganda through new technologies. And state-sponsored misinformation, which operates transnationally to support autocratic narratives. Lots of powerful examples of Russian outlets promulgating a Chinese narrative to Facebook, or the story of the secret US funded bio labs in Ukraine falsely claimed to be experimenting with bat viruses. Talk about new technology.

[00:41:39.2] Anne Applebaum: This was for me a real revelation. So at the very beginning of the war, it started with the Russian diplomats, I think at the UN began talking about supposed biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. And the purpose of them talking about this was to somehow muddy the waters. I mean, they'd invaded Ukraine and they were looking for some way to muddy the narrative and make it complicated. And they claim that there were these bio labs, they were called, in Ukraine. It was debunked completely. It was even debunked at the security council. There's no evidence for it, and it's not true. Okay? Nevertheless, this went out on China's vast international media network. So, the many television stations, radio stations that either the Chinese run themselves or they run in partnership with African and Latin American and Asian countries, the Chinese do a lot of content sharing arrangements with other countries.

[00:42:40.6] Anne Applebaum: It went out on the Venezuelan news network as a story. It went out in all kinds of strange websites that look like they're from Ecuador, Argentina, but are in fact run via Moscow. And the story was even repeated in the United States. Tucker Carlson used it on one of his programs. There was a Twitter post that had many, many millions of likes that described these fake biological labs. So the story spread. When you just look at the spread of that story, you see how the autocratic network works. Again, Chinese, Chinese state media, Russian fake media, but real US pundits who are pro-Russian or who are pro-autocratic. And you see them working together to spread the story. And it's very hard to measure the impact of something like that. I did see a statistic that said something like 30% of Americans believed it. I haven't seen any surveys in Asia or Africa, but when you see a story like that in many different places, when you see it on Twitter and then you hear it on Tucker Carlson, and then you read it on another website, which you don't realize is actually a Russian website or a Chinese website you

hear it from a lot of different places, you might believe that it's true. And so it's evidence of how, again, a completely false story without even any real attempt to justify it made the rounds through this autocratic network all over the world. And that was just one example. And of course, there are many others.

[00:44:16.5] Jeffrey Rosen: You also talk about the assault on international norms and institutions and autocratic countries trying to rule back rules-based international order. And you say that we should think about the struggle for freedom not as a competition with specific autocratic states or war with China, but a war against autocratic behaviors, whether found in Russia, China, Europe, or the US.

[00:44:38.1] Anne Applebaum: Yeah, I'm very anxious that people not think about this as a new Cold War. No, I don't think there's like a geographic divide, and there's good guys on one side of the Berlin Wall and bad guys on the other. And I don't think the world is black and white. I think there are a lot of countries in the middle. There are autocratic states who don't seek to undermine the West. I mean Vietnam is a dictatorship, but it's not particularly interested in overthrowing American democracy or interfering in American elections. There are many democracies that decline, and as we've already discussed, there are autocratic behaviors inside the US and inside Europe. And so the way I'd like people to think about this, is really a war on them. I'm not calling for world assault on autocracies or war with China or anything like that.

[00:45:30.1] Anne Applebaum: I'm calling for people to look at these autocratic behaviors and create coalitions to eliminate them and want the most easiest one in a way to think about intellectually is kleptocracy, as we've discussed, you could eliminate the offshore world. You could eliminate the anonymous bank accounts or the anonymous companies rather. You could make all that illegal. And so beginning to think about how to do that, that would be a way of pushing back against autocratic behavior and institutions. You could also look at, and this is maybe a longer conversation for a different time, you could also talk about regulating the internet, by which I don't mean censoring it, but I mean reducing the attraction for advertisers and for people seeking to make money online from outrageous language and extremist publications and statements.

[00:46:24.2] Anne Applebaum: Whereas right now, the more outrageous you are, the more polarizing you are, the more followers you get, and then the more advertising you get, and it's possible to unpick that. For example, we could think harder about how to do that. We could give people access to algorithms or some choice about what it is they see and how they see it. We could give people control over their own data, and there are many ways in which you could think of reforming the internet that made it less susceptible to information more essentially. And so that's the beginning of a conversation. And then of course, there's a security piece of it, which I think is mostly about deterrence. I just think we should be prepared now for a world where we might be threatened by people we hadn't thought were threatening us. And I would just like us to be mentally ready for that. In a deterrence, it's better to deter, it's better to be militarily powerful in order to ward off attack than it is to be attacked. So getting people to think in those terms, how do we adjust our societies? How do we adjust our government so that we're better equipped for the new world? That's really the purpose of the book.

[00:47:32.9] Jeffrey Rosen: If you were an American politician making the case for why it's important to eliminate anonymous bank accounts, eliminate offshore accounts, regulate the internet, and deter, what would you say?

[00:47:46.4] Anne Applebaum: Secret foreign oligarchs are stealing money and laundering it through our economy and our political system, ripping off Americans and trying to change how we talk about politics. I mean I think there's a good case. There are people who do it. There are people who make the case. It just hasn't really risen to the level of high politics yet.

[00:48:12.3] Jeffrey Rosen: And another beat unless we stop these secret foreign oligarchs from stealing money, they will entrench themselves in power and undermine our interest abroad and try to bring down our own democracy.

[00:48:27.1] Anne Applebaum: Yeah. No, I mean, and as I've said, I mean, it's not theoretical. I mean, that's what's happening. That problem is already here. And I again described the international scene in my book *Autocracy, Inc.* And described, the beginning of a description of how it works inside the United States in our podcast *Autocracy in America*.

[00:48:51.3] Jeffrey Rosen: Back to history, is this an old, an ancient conflict between democratic and illiberal values, or has the new technology and new interdependence changed the debate?

[00:49:05.3] Anne Applebaum: I mean, it's as old as Greece and Rome in a certain sense. Again, as we've discussed, you can get the same kinds of issues in Livia or Tacitus as you get in modern politics. So in some sense, the contest between these different ways of seeing politics has always been there. You can argue, and once actually also one of the arguments of the book that the nature of modern technology has, at the moment, worked in the autocrats favor. So whether it's the rise of surveillance technology, whether it's the particular structure of the internet, which I think works for them. I think this is coming actually drone technology and other forms of military technology that are cheap and accessible. I mean, I think all those things are gonna work in the direction of autocracy and also in the direction of chaos. So again, being prepared for it, thinking of what technological and political solutions are better to do now than when it's too late.

[00:50:15.7] Jeffrey Rosen: Back to the US, does democracy hinge on individual elections and small contingencies? Ken Burns was at the National Constitution Center earlier this week receiving the Unforgettable Liberty Medal, and he recalled that Berlin in 1932 seemed like the apotheosis of civilization and the following year, not so much. So did democracies tend to fall through single elections or slowly over time?

[00:50:41.4] Anne Applebaum: I didn't think there's a rule about it. Again, my interest in my podcast has been in cataloging the autocratic behaviors that are already here. And those have nothing to do with any specific election. Obviously you can have a particularly bad election that ends in such a way that the person who wins it then seeks to go much further. I think whoever wins our election this year, the task of rebuilding democracy and fixing some of these institutions, whether financial information remains, I mean, it doesn't matter who the president is. It's a big task for all of us.

[00:51:29.2] Jeffrey Rosen: We, the listeners, are lifelong learners, and I know our listening closely to all the learning you are spreading, let me end by inviting you to give them homework. Why is it important to learn about the international dimensions of threats to democracy to focus on kleptocracy in order to preserve liberal democracy?

[00:51:50.2] Anne Applebaum: Because the global is local, because you think this is happening on palm-fringed Caribbean islands? Actually, there are US states that allow people to launder money, famously Delaware and now South Dakota and others that have created mechanisms that allow people to hide money. If you care about it, you should tell your politicians that you do, you should think about who you vote for. Are they people who are gonna push back against the interests that wanna maintain those systems? These are issues that affect our country and our political system, and we should care about them.

[00:52:27.0] Jeffrey Rosen: Thank you so much, Anne Applebaum, for educating and illuminating threats to democracy at home and abroad in your work and in your great new book, *Autocracy, Inc.* Anne, thank you so much for joining.

[00:52:43.9] Anne Applebaum: Thank you.

[00:52:48.2] Jeffrey Rosen: Today's episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari, and Bill Pollock, was engineered by Bill Pollock Research and was provided by Samson Mostashari, Cooper Smith, and Yara Daraiseh. Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of civil and thoughtful and deep constitutional illumination and debate. Sign up for the newsletter at constitutioncenter.org/connect. And always remember whether you wake or sleep that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit that we rely on your generosity, your passion, your engagement. Show that passion and engagement by becoming a member at constitutioncenter.org/membership. Give a donation of any amount, \$5, \$10 or more to support the work, including the podcast at constitutioncenter.org/donate. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.