



Michael Lewis on Who Is Government?

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[00:00:03.5] 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. In this episode, my old friend Michael Lewis joins me to discuss his compelling new book, *Who Is Government? The Untold Story of Public Service*. Michael is one of America's great nonfiction storytellers, and in the book and in our conversation, he explores the human stories of the heroic civil servants who make government work, what motivates them, and why their work matters. It's a joy to share Michael's light with all of you. Dear We The People listeners, enjoy the show.

[00:00:50.8] Jeffrey Rosen: Michael, welcome.

[00:00:52.9] Michael Lewis: Jeff, thank you for having me.

[00:00:55.2] Jeffrey Rosen: So your timing is always impeccable, and you begin this book by saying that you were inspired to write it after writing *The Fifth Risk*, your account of the able public servants who served during the Trump transition. You said that book was such a runaway bestseller, it sold so many copies that it convinced you that this was an untapped market. People were hungry for positive stories and effective public servants. You then commissioned some of your friends to write about them for the Washington Post. You've collected them in this new book, *Who Is Government?* And lo and behold, the central question of our day is whether or not we should gut the federal government. Tell us more about how surprised you were and how struck you were by how the public is hungry for these positive stories about the federal government.

[00:01:41.5] Michael Lewis: So I didn't set out to write positive stories about the federal government. I got interested in the first place when Trump fired his transition team right after he was elected the first time. And I learned that by law, the Obama administration had been required to prepare for the transition and that there were a thousand people waiting to give briefings across the federal government. And I just thought. Actually, I thought it started as a comic enterprise. I thought it would be really cool to take a reader in and. And the reader would know, because no one had showed up for the briefing, that the reader knew more than the president did about how the government functioned. And indeed, I could do things like wander into the Energy Department and get the briefing about how the nuclear stockpile was managed and have them

say, like, nobody's come in to hear this before. So it started that way. And then something happened. First, we ran it as a series in Vanity Fair and got stapled together into The Fifth Risk. It was three long magazine pieces about three previously mostly ignored departments of government, commerce, agriculture, and energy. And I'd purposely taken the ones that I thought nobody knew anything about, like my neighbors in Berkeley.

[00:03:00.3] Michael Lewis: I would canvass them and I'd say, all I do is talk about politics, but tell me what goes on in the Department of Commerce. No idea. Know, business, you know. And it was. And it was just like, oh, it was very clear that. That we just. We aren't really getting our civics lessons. Like, we don't really know what our own government does. Even very intelligent, educated people. But the moment for me, and you stop me if I'm monologuing, but there was a. There was a moment after the book came out. So the book was more about the functions of government. It was me wandering around a travel book after the book came out, kind of nine months into it, after the book came out, there was the famous government shutdown that lasted for a very long time. And the government furloughed 2/3 of its employees, describing them to themselves as inessential. And while working on the book, I had been struck by just the quality of the people I was meeting. I wasn't writing profiles. I was writing about what they were doing. But I just got kind of shocked by how.

[00:04:06.0] Michael Lewis: Mission driven, committed, expert, definitely not lazy, definitely not abusive or fraudulent. I mean, wildly interesting people. And I kind of backgrounded them. And so I had to write an afterword for the paperback. And I thought, let's just pick one of these characters and see how far you can go with it. Like, how is that going to feel as a literary exercise? Again, it's just like, it's exciting material. And so I went to an outfit called the Partnership for Public Service, which gives away awards every year to people who've done something great in civil service. No one pays it much attention, but it's an attempt to encourage a culture of recognition in what is usually just a culture of punishment. And I asked for the list of anybody who'd ever been nominated for their awards and then cross referenced it with everybody who'd been furloughed. And there were thousands of names on this list. And I literally just picked one out of a jar. Actually, what I did is it was alphabetized. I picked the first name on the list, Arthur A. Allen, and called him up and went and spent some time with this guy and the story, like, the emotional content.

[00:05:18.7] Michael Lewis: I'm going to tell you a little bit about him, because this is what is the jumping off point for Who Is Government? It's Arthur A. Allen. This guy I pick randomly turns out to be the only oceanographer in the Coast Guard Search and Rescue Division. It turns out he spent his career doing lots of different things, but the centerpiece of his career is essentially creating and developing science. And it's the science of how objects drift at sea. And you need this science if you're in search and rescue because you often know, like, where someone fell off a boat or where a boat capsized and when, and you're looking for them later. But to find them, you have to know how they drifted in the interim, and they can drift. And different objects drift in radically different ways. By the way, Americans have an unbelievable talent for getting lost. Lost at sea. We do this, like, better than anybody in the world. There's a metaphor in that. But anyway, Arthur Allen develops. He studies hundreds of objects, unprompted by anyone, and sort of develops a classification and mathematical formula to

describe the drift. And as a result of this work, thousands of people are alive today who would not be alive.

[00:06:35.8] Michael Lewis: But there was this moment. The moment was like, why are you doing this? I was with him in his kitchen in rural Connecticut, and I said, like, wait, what got you going on this in the first place? And these tears came to his eyes. And he walks over to his bookshelf, and he pulls out this yellowing newspaper article from one of the Virginia newspapers and starts to describe to me how it hands it to me. It's a story of a woman his wife's age and a girl his daughter's age who he had watched die because he had been in the Coast Guard Search and rescue operation that day in the Chesapeake Bay when their boat had capsized and they couldn't find them because they didn't know how an upside down sailboat drifted over a period of 10 hours. And he starts to cry, and he said, that could have been my wife. That could have been my child. And I promised myself when I saw this, I'd never let this happen again. So, two things about this. It's an incredible story. The work he did is really interesting. Just the intellectual content. But the fact that no one knew about this guy and what he'd done, and the fact that when I'm driving away after spending three days with him, he calls me on my phone and he says, hey, you're a writer.

[00:08:01.3] Michael Lewis: And I said, yeah, I've just spent three days with you, interviewing your family, interviewing you, getting to know you, getting to know your science. I said, what do you think I was doing there? And he said, I just thought you were really interested in how objects drift. They'd taken the call from this total stranger. He'd let me into his life, taught me all this stuff, and I thought, this is our civil servant. It's like he doesn't expect attention, is kind of blindsided by it, and has no ability to tell his story to a popular audience. Like, why didn't I do this more in the first place? And I thought, if I ever come back to it, that's the way to come back to it is through the people, because they're so impressive and don't come back to it alone because there's always the risk that people just say, oh, it's just Michael's take on it, or he's making up stories or whatever. Find a group of writers who you could parachute into the place and say, go find the story. Go find what I should know about these people. And it's yielded gold. I mean, absolute gold.

[00:09:05.2] Jeffrey Rosen: It's complete gold. And that's so extraordinary that it is this moment in people's childhood that makes them want to solve some problem and often be like their mom or dad. That drives the two characters you write about in the book. In particular, the incredible story of Christopher Mark at the Department of Labor who ends up doing a version of what his dad did and then has an incredible conclusion. Tell us about the story of Christopher Mark.

[00:09:36.2] Michael Lewis: So thank you for asking.

[00:09:41.0] Jeffrey Rosen: No trouble.

[00:09:42.5] Michael Lewis: But isn't it amazing? The bookends of the book are these two stories by me. And one is a man who was trying not to be his dad, and the second is a woman who's desperately trying to be her mom. And they both find their way into the civil service. So Christopher Mark again. So I had taken this leap, talking to six really talented writers, Dave Eggers, Geraldine Brooks, Kamau Bell, John Lanchester, Casey Cep and Sarah Vowell, into

going and finding stories. And then I realized, oh God, I've got to write one of these things. Where am I going to find my story? So I called up the Partnership for Public Service again. I said, just give me the list of this year's nominees. And again, it's 500 and something people. And I'm going to tell you the story this way. It's the way he told it to me. I was looking down this list and what they do when they're giving out this award. They're very focused on mission, on what people are doing, and not much about why they're doing it or who they are. And so it's a very dry list.

[00:10:41.1] Michael Lewis: It's like Joe Smith at the FBI broke up a cyber Porn Ring or whatever it is. And you never learn, like, why Joe Smith was involved in this. I was going down this list looking for, well, I got to pick a subject again. It worked pretty well to grab Art Allen out of a hat. I'm going to grab someone else out of a hat to see what happens. And I got it. So this wasn't quite that because I got to a line on the list and it said, Christopher Mark, Department of Labor has solved the problem of coal mine roofs falling in on the heads of coal miners, which has killed 50,000 American coal miners over the last century. It took them 30 years to do it. That was it. Except there was one last line and it said, a former coal miner. Part of what's going on in these stories and part of what was interesting to me was, was exploding the stereotype of the civil servant or the bureaucrat that you give people specific stories and you can no longer hold the idiot. Oh, they're all lazy, they're all wasteful kinds of things in your mind, or you've got to.

[00:11:48.4] Michael Lewis: It jostles up against it and disrupts the picture you have, which is a false picture. So. But a picture. Pictures pop into your mind when you give them just a little bit of information. And I just thought, man, this is going to be a made to order story. Former coal miner, probably grew up in West Virginia, goes and solves this technical problem that kills lots of people. I bet he killed people he knew, maybe his dad, maybe his brother. There's going to be some great things. There's a movie there. I thought, like already just in that paragraph. So I found him and again, cold-called him at his home in Pittsburgh and it turned out he knew who I was. He'd read Moneyball and the first thing out of his mouth was so deflating, he says, because I'm thinking of a coal miner. He says, I grew up in Princeton, New Jersey. My dad was a professor at the university. And I went, oh, like this isn't going anywhere. I don't know what to do now. So I talk. But in 20 minutes he tells me the following. So the question is, like, how did he get to this? He grows up in the late '60s and '70s, Vietnam War era.

[00:12:56.8] Michael Lewis: He rebels against his dad, starts throwing when he's like 14, he starts throwing words like bourgeois around the household. And the dad is this actually quite famous guy in engineering. His name is Robert Mark, and he's been brought to Princeton because he has a technique for stress testing. Like objects that are going to be subjected to stress, like fighter planes before they're built, he can test their design and see if it's going to work. Or small nuclear reactors that Princeton was building. Will these work if we. So Robert Mark, you need to know this. Robert Mark was teaching an engineering class at Christopher's dad at Princeton, when a Princeton undergraduate walks in who's just come from an art history class and, and says we just came from a class where they say nobody knows how the Gothic cathedrals were built and what holds the roofs of Gothic cathedrals up. Could you use your techniques to study Gothic cathedrals? He becomes the world's expert on how he builds models of all the great Gothic cathedrals and tests and stress tests, sees where the stresses flow through the building and

it can explain, like, what's decorative, what's holding the building up, why the roofs of Gothic cathedrals don't fall down.

[00:14:14.5] Michael Lewis: And there are PBS documentaries made about him. He's in Life magazine, all the rest. Chris, the son looks at his father's comfortable life, looks at the Vietnam War, looks at the inequality in America, and says, I want nothing to do with this life. And rebels against his dad. I'm not going to have anything to do with you. Goes off and joins the working class as opposed to going to Harvard or Princeton, which he could have done. And he's telling me all this in 20 minutes and says, like, I went and worked in an auto factory, I worked in a UPS warehouse. And finally this group of young rebels I was moving around the world with, we got to work in a coal mine in West Virginia and everybody else lasted a day. It was so terrifying and miserable. I liked it. But he spends a year working a coal mine and then is almost killed twice and realizes that these big problems he could solve. Extracts himself from the coal mine and goes and gets his rock engineering degree at Penn State and begins a journey of solving this problem. Like, how do you make these mines safer? How do you make them stop the roof from falling in? And the natural home for solving this problem turns out to be not a coal mining company.

[00:15:28.1] Michael Lewis: And there's a whole reason for that. And that's interesting, but the Bureau of Mines, the US Government, and he does solve this problem. Now I'm talking to him and I'm listening to the story and I say, well, this is really curious. Like, you rebelled against your dad, but you ended up just living your dad's life out all over again. Like him, he figured out how to keep what kept the roofs of Gothic cathedrals up. And you go underground and you figure out how to keep the roofs of coal mines up. And he goes, what I did, he got. He got angry with me on the phone. It had nothing to do with my dad. I led a completely different life from my dad. It was. I thought, and I thought, oh, this is so much better than what I thought. This is so much better. Now here's the kicker. Here's what I find out. It takes me out. He doesn't mention this at first. 20 years into his career, 25 years into his career, his dad is called by the federal government to try to figure out if the National Cathedral in Washington is collapsing because it's tilting and it's like, what's going on here? And you probably know this because you're a lovely historian, but the National Cathedral was built over a century ago.

[00:16:41.8] Michael Lewis: And people got more ambitious above ground without paying attention to what little had been done underground. The foundation wasn't adequate for the building. In the end, the dad figures out that his tools are just about above ground and he can't quite figure out what's going on below ground. So he calls the son and the son and the father together, figure out what's holding the National Cathedral up and will it fall. And my God, you're a writer. I mean, you talk about material navigating to father and son coming back together to save the National Cathedral with this drama that involves solving a problem in the government that saves thousands of lives. It's extraordinary and it's emotional and it was just like a joy to write. And it's really clear. And these stories are all over the government. I didn't just get lucky twice. I think what it is when you have a character who is extremely mission driven, not about themselves, obsessed in some way and not aware they're a character like that. They're just doing their job. That is a character. When people are like zany characters and look at me and all the rest, they can hold the reader's attention for about 10 seconds.

[00:18:10.0] Michael Lewis: And then they start to lose altitude on the page when the reader starts to get in on a joke that, oh, this person does not appreciate how interesting they are. They do this on the page. And our government's filled with these people. I mean, it's filled with these people just like that. And so the question, I'm sorry to go on so long, but the subject still excites me. The question is where the obsession comes from in each case. Like, why are they there? Because they could all be making more money outside of there, why are they there? And when you get to that, it gets fun.

[00:18:46.1] Jeffrey Rosen: It's stunning. I just wrote wow at the end of the chapter where you noted that not only had the careers of both men been redirected by a simple question posed in a college class, that was the thing that sparked both of them.

[00:19:02.2] Michael Lewis: That's right.

[00:19:02.7] Jeffrey Rosen: And there were different questions that sparked both of them, but they ended up converging on figuring out how to measure stress in stone, using scientific methods to answer questions that seem to everyone beyond the reach of science. And both, as you say, sought to understand what prevented roofs from collapsing in addition to all that. As if that weren't enough, you then tell the incredible story of the effort to make mines safer. And in addition to the incredible storytelling, you also have this incredible ability to explain the technical challenges really clearly. I love this sentence where you say the more coal you remove, the greater the so-called abutment load. Not the load that was vertically over the pillar, but the load that moved horizontally onto it. It was such a complicated concept and you helped me understand it. And this guy, because of his obsession, just studies for the heck of it how to make the mines safer and in the end ends up reducing mine casualties to zero. So it's stunning.

[00:20:06.9] Michael Lewis: And he becomes the intellectual historian of his own movement. He becomes the world scholar on what happened, the history of safety in coal mines. And that is its own story that starts to get at what our government's about. Because he shows, and this is riveting, he shows that there was a technology that was, I'm going to get my dates wrong, but a technology that was invented in like the '40s, or maybe it was a little earlier, roof bolting in coal mines. It's an odd thing. You're taking these long bolts and bolting the possibly more fragile, more collapsible roof right above the miner into more stable rock above it. It was counterintuitive. And then they invented it. The miners are like, what? We're going to bolt the roof to itself. But it worked. And the technology was all there to make the mine safer. But what the industry had done was just underused the bolts. The bolts were cheaper and they were cheaper the less of them you used. And they used them to basically achieve exactly the same level of safety that the miners had experienced before at lower cost to the mine operator, so that the benefits weren't transferred onto the miners and they were just effectively exploiting the West Virginia miners tolerance for risk.

[00:21:35.7] Michael Lewis: And they'd already kind of got acclimated to, oh like one in 20 of us are going to die. The job was more dangerous than being in the service during the Vietnam War. It was a wildly dangerous job. And Chris shows that it's not until the federal government actually had enforcement powers in the mines that the coal mine companies actually started to use this stuff to minimize the death of the coal workers. And it's like a riveting case study of why

you need government. I mean this probably isn't true in every industry. There's, the industry will just neglect worker safety, but it's a case study where they did. And I came to think as we're working on this series, I had this thought, and so I spent months with president Obama when he was president writing a piece just about what it was like to be president. And he said to me in the course of something that stuck in my head, he said, he said if you're in this job, it's a decision making job and all the decisions are horrible decisions. Any easy decision is made by someone before it reaches you.

[00:22:55.5] Michael Lewis: So you just know if you're making a decision, it's an unpleasant decision that rhyme with what I observed in all the pieces in this book is that if the problem is getting to the government, it's kind of, it's kind of an unpleasant problem. It's a problem the market doesn't want to solve and it's the government kind of. It's where, it's a vessel where all the problems rattling around the world that the market won't solve ends up. And, and it's kind of surprising what those problems are sometimes. Some are not the military, but some are and, and you never can be quite sure what the, what they are, which, which ones they're going to be.

[00:23:36.3] Jeffrey Rosen: There are problems that the market can't solve and doesn't always know that it wants to. You show that the coal miners welcome the job. They loved it. They were willing to take unreasonable risks just because it gave them such a sense of accomplishment. And yet when this mission driven, driven dreamer, this passionate guy, applying not the standards of statistics that would meet an academic journal's requirements, but more or less developing data that no one collected before, identified both these risks that people haven't tabulated and then solving them in ways no one had before industry came to see it's better than paying for the cleanup or dealing with the lawsuits that come from the deaths. It's not a story of bureaucracy, but of passionate mission driven work kind of combined with the weight of the federal government.

[00:24:33.5] Michael Lewis: This is where it gets even more interesting. It's not like the industry's upset with his work. They're grateful for the work. Everybody conformed to his standards. And it's funny, the reason he knew who I was was because of Moneyball. And the reason he knew Moneyball was he thought of himself as Moneyballing minds that was gathering data and looking at the data in a different way about past mines. That is what the government had done without knowing quite why it collected over decades really detailed information on disasters in mines or roof falls in mines. So he could go and see the conditions in which the roof held and the conditions in which it fell. But you're absolutely right. It wasn't like, oh, the oppressive bureaucracy. In this case it was this guy who really helped us and it saved us money and it worked. But the industry wasn't going to do it itself. And so this gets back to just the quality of the stories, all the writers. My fear when I sold them all ongoing and writing about the government was they weren't going to have the luck I had in finding stories that it was just.

[00:25:52.2] Michael Lewis: Maybe it was just me and my interest in it. And it took about a nanosecond for that to not be true. That every one of them found something almost right away and sometimes more than one thing. And they were like, do I do this or I do this? And could not believe the quality of the untold story. It was like there were all these stories that just don't get told. And I think it's not just this is not a trivial thing. Part of what we're living through right now is a consequence of the disconnect between society and its government. And people don't know

where their taxpayer dollars are going. People don't know these people. There's no face on these people. It's very easy to stoke an ugly stereotype and very easy to attack them because they don't defend themselves. They don't describe themselves and they don't defend themselves. And they live in a culture that we've created for them where all attention is usually bad attention. So they avoid it. It's just like nothing good comes from recognition usually. And that seems shrewd politically, maybe to the communications people who are running the various agencies and certainly to the White House, who's there temporarily, the administration that's there temporarily.

[00:27:11.4] Michael Lewis: But we pay a huge price for this, this lack of felt understanding of the value of government. And it's. And so the whole thing, I mean, to the extent there was a social purpose, to me, it was principally a literary exercise. I just thought, this is fun. Like, I love these stories. But to the extent there's a social purpose, it's like, it's like trying to break up this logjam in understanding, trying to introduce the idea into people's minds that government is not just essential, but kind of admirable. And the kind of people who go into it, the best of them are the best among us, that they are the givers, not takers, they're not money people, they're kind of they're the kind of people. This and this, this is one of the things that just pops out from between the lines of every story. But no one ever says it. They're the kind of people who figured out how to lead life, like, like how to lead a meaningful life. Like, I think it's true of all the people in the book, when they're on their deathbeds, their lives, they'll think I served a really important purpose here on earth. They're not going to think, oh, I made 100 million billion. And what was that about? They're going to think I did something that was really important.

[00:28:34.1] Jeffrey Rosen: Wow, what an extraordinary lesson. They figured out how to live life because they've lived mission driven lives devoting themselves to a higher purpose. And it's a purpose they often find in childhood and they pursue through the federal government, but it is ultimately driven by the purpose itself. I want to ask you in a moment to tell the story of Heather Gold, you're last.

[00:28:58.2] Michael Lewis: Heather Stone. Heather Stone.

[00:29:00.6] Jeffrey Rosen: Sorry, but before you do that, the purpose of the book is to put a human face on government and to convince people that it's not a faceless bureaucracy. How are you succeeding? This book is a bestseller, as all yours, as the fifth, as the previous book has been. But it's very tough to cut through a political narrative that demonizes the government. Will this make a difference?

[00:29:25.6] Michael Lewis: Who knows? It hasn't made that much of a difference so far. On the other hand, how do you change hearts and minds? It all happens very gradually and then it happens all at once. And I think this is all anecdotal. Everything I do is anecdotal. The point is for the anecdotes to be representative. But I have had more people tell me that *The Fifth Risk* changed them, made them think a lot more about how they thought about government. So I know that the prose works, I know that people read it, and either it helps them articulate what they sensed before. If they're predisposed to realizing the importance of government or it forces them to kind of, if it gets to them, it challenges their bigotries, their prejudices, and these. So here's an analogy. This is not a completely apt analogy, but if you'd have asked anybody in the early days of the fight, the struggle for gay marriage, you're telling these stories, you're making these

arguments, but nothing's happening. How is this ever going to change? And what happened in our society where it was all of a sudden that whatever, whatever people had in their heads about gay people changed.

[00:30:54.2] Michael Lewis: And what happened was gradually people came out of the closet, you got to know someone who was gay, you realized whatever you were thinking about gay people was wrong, or you had cognitive dissonance about it. And eventually there came a time where Obama could stand up and say I'm for gay marriage. I've changed my mind. I mean, it was kind of artful politics, but you start with facts, you start with stories, you start with just presenting people with reality and hammering it into them, and you let them process it. And I think I will. So the happy story is this book. The pieces in the Washington Post that appeared. Some of the stuff appeared in the Washington Post, most of it, and The Fifth Risk are among the most responded to things I've ever written. And so it's not just falling on deaf ears, and it's not just falling on the ears of progressives who love government. I'm getting lots of interesting responses from business people who don't think about the government. That's the typical response I get, and that's a very good sign. It means there's a receptiveness to the stories.

[00:32:18.7] Michael Lewis: On the other hand, we're watching right now a chainsaw being taken to the federal bureaucracy without any indication that anybody's paying any attention to who the people are. It's like, you're fired just because you're there. You're fired just because we can. And we're going to treat you as if you are villains, as if you. I mean, they've actually explicitly said that they want to traumatize and demoralize the federal workforce, which is insane. But that's going on. So I can't say that, oh, this writing is going to change the world and save us from ourselves, but I can't say it won't. So it doesn't feel futile yet. I think that we're in early days sort of. We're reckoning with something right now. We're reckoning with our. Among other things, our lack of civics lessons, our lack of understanding of what our government does and our. This luxury we've had for a very long time as a society of being able to ignore our government. This is a byproduct of basically a long unusual period of peace and prosperity. And some trauma comes along and you all of a sudden have to.

[00:33:32.1] Michael Lewis: Some threat comes along and you have to respond to it and everybody turns to the government. So I don't know where it all ends up. It just feels like it's the beginning of a conversation. And there's much more to write about this. How you do it so you don't. Repeating yourself is another challenge. But I'm not despairing at all. I'm feeling like this stuff is connecting with an audience. I mean, if I told you, Jeff, if I told you back in our New Republic days, hey, I'm gonna go get six writers, we're gonna write six, seven pieces about the federal bureaucrats and put them in a book, you would have politely said, well, you have fun with that, Michael, but nobody's gonna read it. Well, it's about. It's a big bestseller.

[00:34:22.2] Jeffrey Rosen: When you told me this summer that the Fifth Risk was among the best selling of all of your incredibly best selling books, that surprised even you. It's what, and I want to say it is such an honor for the National Constitution center to be hosting you giving America an urgently needed civics lesson. Our mandate from Congress is to be America's leading nonpartisan platform for civic education. You're showing us that the way government actually works is mission driven, passionate, competent individuals who are saving lives and changing hearts and minds. So it's very. It's great for us to highlight this crucially important

work, but what are people responding to? And that made these books among your biggest bestsellers?

[00:35:05.1] Michael Lewis: So just to be clear, they. There. It's like number seven for me. So, the ones, the ones that were movies and liars, Poker and maybe one other sold a couple of million copies each. So this is like not quite that. But. But The Fifth Risk has sold more than half a million copies. Actually, when you throw in Britain, close to a million. And, and it's what is happening. Because they aren't what they aren't. Neither book is one whole narrative. It's in each case, it's, it's. Unless you buy the conceit that it's a travel book, the Fifth versus a travel book. And it's just me moving through the government, but it's. You're moving, you're not with a main character from beginning to end. So it has literary disadvantages, but it's the feeling of urgency. It's a feeling, and it's a feeling of. It's not that hard when you press someone's nose into the federal government to wake them up and make them realize how important it is. Here's an example. I mean, this right random popped in my head. But I started with the Department of Energy when I started The Fifth Risk.

[00:36:14.5] Michael Lewis: And I started it because Trump had named Rick Perry to be secretary of the Department of Energy. And everybody remembers Rick Perry when he's running for president, saying he was going to eliminate all these departments, including the Department of Energy. And I thought how peculiar it was that the guy who said he was going to eliminate the department was going to be the Secretary of Energy, and watched it as he went into his Senate confirmation hearings and said, oh, I just actually went into the Department of Energy and we can't cut it. They managed the nuclear arsenal, among other things, also gave Tesla the loan it needed to get off the ground in the beginning, in its early days. But it's sort of like even Rick Perry, you press his nose into, into the thing and he realizes, oh, this is serious. So this character exists across the government, the person who thinks ill of the public sector, who's done very well in the private sector, who's got themselves involved in politics, and one of their rewards is aplomb, is to come in and fix work at one of the departments, and they come in from their private equity firm or the Wall Street firm or their VC firm or, or wherever, and they get there secretly thinking they're smarter than everybody else.

[00:37:42.0] Michael Lewis: And if they're honest, and I've been. A lot of them are. I've. I've heard this story a lot. They're. Oh, they, They're. Oh, my God. The caliber of these people, they're narrow, yes. Lot of them, they're specialized, but they're intense. They work their asses off. And they're. And what they're doing is the problems they're dealing with are terrifying. And that awakening I've seen over and over and over, and the opposite of they walk in and, oh, all these people are doing nothing. They're a bunch of clerks. We don't need clerks, let's just get rid of them all. So that's what's going on as I'm giving the reader, we're giving the reader that experience of pressing the nose up against this enterprise, which is, for all its faults, one of the more impressive institutions that's ever been built in the history of man. It is a. I mean, if we can think of another institution that's managing a bundle of, of problems as complicated, thorny as the United States government, I'm all ears. But it's, I mean, one example, and this is John Lanchester in Who Is Government rebelled. He smelled that I wanted him to go find a character.

[00:39:05.3] Michael Lewis: I didn't tell anybody that to find anything. But he said, I'm not writing about a person. My character is the Consumer Price Index. I'm going to show the reader

just what a monumental achievement the Consumer Price Index is and how hard it is to create. And he takes us on a journey where he says, like it's in the counting of things is in the Constitution. It's like the enumeration clause. Is that what it is? I don't know anything about the Constitution.

[00:39:31.9] Jeffrey Rosen: I'm not sure.

[00:39:33.7] Michael Lewis: I'm not qualified to be in your presence.

[00:39:34.7] Jeffrey Rosen: Not at all, I don't think so.

[00:39:36.5] Michael Lewis: But it's like, I do know that to distribute power, we need to know where the people are, how many there are. And he says it starts with that and that the United States government counts more things than any institution on earth and as a result has pictures of things that no one else has pictures of. And it's a profound insight that counting is at the king of the bottom, it's the beating heart of democracy, that keeping the statistics and good statistics and honest statistics is an extremely important thing. And how hard it is to do is amazing. So you press people's noses up against what it's actually doing as opposed to the idiotic conversation that takes place in our political life. And they go, oh, this is different than I thought.

[00:40:26.6] Jeffrey Rosen: You just said something really powerful, which is that the federal government is among the greatest achievements in history and of our society. And you quote Oliver Wendell Holmes, who said that taxes are what we pay for a civilized society and really make a convincing case that this is the part of government that works. Why is that? And the urge for nonpartisan federal civil service was the main reform movement of the late 19th century, culminating in the Pendleton act, which resulted in civil service protections which are now under assault as the government tries to recategorize employees from protected to non protected status. But, but broadly, why do you think that the federal agencies you're profiling are so effective?

[00:41:11.3] Michael Lewis: Well, so I would, I don't want to say that the government just works. That's obviously not true. But how it does, when it, when it doesn't work or when it, when it fails, there tends to be just big systematic issues at play rather than it's not, not the quality of the federal workforce kind of thing. It's not, it's not, oh, these people are bad people. It's. And so I'm gonna, lemme just focus on when it's ineffective first. If you, if I could wave, if you gave me a magic wand, I mean, and I'm not the world's authority on the federal government. There are other people who are. But just me talking. What other enterprise has its management turnover at best every four years, but actually more like every two years usually has its management. When the president's elected, four and a half thousand people come in with him to run this thing. We are more top heavy as a democracy with political people even after the Pendleton act than any other civil service in a democracy. And it's not an efficient way to run things. It's like the staff know that whoever is up there is going to be gone.

[00:42:30.3] Michael Lewis: And often they're without someone up there because it takes them forever to be confirmed by the Senate. So that's a messy bit of management that does. Makes no sense. What other big institution functions properly if the employees sense that all they're going to be for if they're recognized is just to be punished. Like there's no culture of recognition, no

reward for taking a risk that was a smart risk that didn't work out. Just the opposite. Everything's evaluated after the fact. And nobody looks at the process, everybody looks at the outcome. And if you took a really smart risk on behalf of the American people and it didn't work out, your head gets lopped off. No business would run themselves that way. What other business is run by people who routinely insult all of its employees? I can't think of any. So they're real problems there. What other business doesn't get invested in? I mean that I don't know anything about computer systems, but I know that Cobalt is not what computers should be running on now. And half the federal government's technology is on this old system. And you talk to people, people who are in. Interesting stat.

[00:43:47.2] Michael Lewis: Fewer than 5% of the workforce in the federal government, like making the computers work, is under the age of 30 and more than 50% is over the age of 55. Now that's in a normal business that's almost inverted. It's like we have not invested in this enterprise. So you're giving people not even the tools they need to succeed. And we're not attracting young talent to it because of all this. Like, if you're a smart young person and you get an offer from Goldman Sachs and an offer from the Energy Department, it's unlikely you're going to take the offer from the Energy Department. So all kinds of problems. And this just scratching the surface of the problems, we have a pay system that goes back to 1949 where the whole government pay scale it's premised on the idea that they're all clerical workers. And so when they're hiring a sophisticated civil engineer, there's no reference to what a civil engineer gets paid in the private sector. So, I mean, it's just like one thing after another like this. So it is not all happy. It's not all hunky dory and mistakes get made. But given that, why does it work? Why does it work as well as why are we able to find story after story of success?

[00:45:08.6] Michael Lewis: I mean, I'm repeating myself a little bit. But one answer is, and it's definitely an answer that all the characters in both the books would give, is that there are problems that are crying out to be solved that are extremely important problems. We have to talk about the last chapter of the book. It's an example that's just sitting there that is just not being addressed. And when a person who senses they have a capacity to solve that problem, like stopping thousands of miners being killed by roof falls, that is unbelievably energizing. Like it creates purpose on a kind of Superman scale.

[00:45:57.1] Jeffrey Rosen: We'll tell the story of Heather Stone. She's solving the problem of how to address rare infectious diseases. She gets this passion and mission from her mom. And one thing that strikes me about her story is how much flexibility she has to solve this problem and to respond quickly to urgent needs for help.

[00:46:16.3] Michael Lewis: So I think this is a story of government failure. The person succeeds, but the government is failing. And I'll tell a story kind of like how I came about upon this person. So I wrote a book about the failure of the CDC. Was part of the story about the pandemic. It was called the premonition. And at the heart of that story was actually, if you want to know why the CDC's capacity has been degraded, go back to when Reagan turned the director of the CDC from being a permanent civil servant to being a political appointee that everybody in the CDC knows the place has gotten less and less and less capable, more and more and more bureaucratic, more and more cover your ass kind of place less and less. We're going to actually stop disease from spreading. Less operational, less wartime kind of footing the minute it became

politicized. But anyway, while I'm working on that book, there was this wonderful character who is a researcher at UCSF out here in California named Joe DeRisi. He's a mad scientist type. I mean, obviously a genius of some sort. I'm not going to go into the technology of what he did, but.

[00:47:32.5] Michael Lewis: But he was at the beginning of the genomic study of disease, and I was interested in him because of what he was doing with COVID. But while we were talking, he said he was giving me an example of one of the things that his lab had done. And a woman had walked into the hospital there with. Nobody knew what it was. Something in her brain. Normal times, it would have been classified as unidentified encephalitis. And it kills her pretty fast. Joe gets to work on what this thing is, and he finds it. He's able to identify that she has a brain eating amoeba called Balamuthia. And there's no. No known real cure for it. It's like, it's almost certain to kill you if you get it. And he goes to work in his lab, figuring out if there's anything, any known drug approved in either Europe or the United States that would kill this thing, and he finds one. It's called nitroxoline. It's used for urinary tract infections in Europe, not approved here. The next time someone walks into the hospital and they discover it's Balamuthia, they get permission from the FDA to use this drug, and the person actually survives.

[00:48:47.9] Michael Lewis: So he tells me the story. I said, that's amazing. You found a cure for. I mean, I've never heard of Balamuthia, and I don't know how many people get it, but you found a cure. And so this is. I don't have to worry about this anymore. And he says, nope, not true. He says, yes, our lab has found this, and, yes, our docs down in the hospital know me, and they follow this. They know the case. They might know about it, but case studies tend not to get written up, and until we publish our paper, no one will know about it. And even after, unless the doctor has seen the paper and identifies Balamuthia in the patient. So most likely what we've done is not very much. And I said, this is outrageous. Like, isn't there some database where if you find and discover something like this, you can just drop it. And every doctor knows to look. And he said that's funny. There's a woman all by herself basically at the FDA named Heather Stone who's taken it upon herself to try to create such a database she calls a cure id.

[00:49:44.1] Michael Lewis: It's an app, you can get it. It's an app on your phone and she's running around the world. He says he has no resources trying to get doctors. When they do things that work, or do work with rare disease like something works on a patient or doesn't work for that matter, they let you know. Because the problem with the rare disease is one, the drug companies have no interest in it because it's rare, it's not going to be a moneymaker. And two, you can't really do science on it. You can't do big randomized control trials. So what you have is an anecdote. But the anecdote is not without value, which maybe is also a line to be used to describe my career. Anecdotes are data. And the story of Heather, I'm not going to blow the whole story here and we don't have the time for it. But the story is Heather Stone kind of personally intervening to save the life of a six year old girl in Arkansas. But the thing she created which should have saved the life of the little girl never gets known or used. It's sitting there because the government hasn't had it. It's a combination of no resources being put into it and all.

[00:50:51.1] Michael Lewis: Also a kind of lack of trust I think is at the. It's like the doctors, if the, if the doctors had more trust/respect for the FDA there would be more pickup I think and also just like the management of it. I mean she could use business help, she needs someone to

help sell this thing. But the idea is brilliant like that we need a place if you come down with something no one has a cure for. You would really like to know every case of this that ever happened in the world and what they did and if someone treated it with something weird in Sydney, Australia, you would sure like to know that. And this is a mechanism for that. So it's a case. And she herself, Heather Stone is a character, horrible story, horrible life experience with rare disease herself. So she was alive to the problem. And this gets to like why people do things in the government. She saw this problem, she saw what a big deal it was, she saw how solvable it was and she saw there's like one mechanism right now for this that it's not a market. The market is not going to jump in and solve this. Or if it does, it's going to, hard to see how.

[00:52:06.0] Michael Lewis: But the FDA could or the CDC could. I mean it's kind of an accident that she does it in the FDA as opposed to the CDC. But an amazing story. But what I loved about the story, when I got into it, I didn't know what it was. The parents of the little girl in De Queen, Arkansas, Alaina Smith is the name of the little girl who's alive and well. I touched wood today, but who was dying. The parents gave me this lovely metaphor. They're pistols. They're great people, like, more fun than a barrel of monkeys and more interesting. I descend on their life in Arkansas and they are quite open about their relationship and their marriage was falling apart. When their little girl gets this thing, they're at war. Like our society is at war. Their marriage is a civil war. It's like, what's good for you is bad for me and what's bad for me is good. What's good for me is bad for you. And the existential threat to their family caused by this brain eating amoeba in their child changes their relationship from it's falling apart to this is a marriage that's working.

[00:53:26.1] Michael Lewis: And I thought in that marriage there was a metaphor for the society that's our country. And what is the existential threat that's going to cause us to reach across the aisle and say, never mind our differences, let's figure out how to stop this bad thing from happening. And I don't know what it is, I think we're headed in that direction. But I thought that it opens with their family and closes with their family. The story. And their family was actually the story. And Heather Stone was really important in this story, but it wasn't the whole story. And again, it's just like when you're dealing with big problems and you've got really interesting characters and they're obsessed and they don't think of themselves as characters. It's amazing how those ingredients give you this beautiful gumbo.

[00:54:14.9] Jeffrey Rosen: That's extraordinary. I choked up when you told the story about how at the end the couple had been on the verge of divorce. She was asked what kind of a man he is. And she said, he's the best man I know. And that experience of saving the life of their daughter had brought them together. And using that as a metaphor for union and the possibility that we might in these polarized, challenging times come together over some crisis is a note of hope. Let me ask you to end on this note. Yesterday I had the privilege of interviewing another friend who's also another of my heroes, Ken Burns. He is America's storyteller in documentary films, just as you are America's storyteller in nonfiction. And I asked him despite all the challenges, what. Whether he's optimistic or pessimistic, telling stories about history, the successes and failures, might ultimately inspire people to keep the union together. And I won't tell you what he answered, but I'll ask you a version of the same question. You're telling the stories. You're trying to call attention to the successes and failures. Are you optimistic or pessimistic that they might hold us together?

[00:55:27.7] Michael Lewis: I'm very optimistic. We think in stories. That's why we need these stories. People think in stories. And so if you don't tell the good story, the bad story will seep in. And. And I mean by bad, the false story. Like, if you don't tell the true story, the false story will be. They're always at war. But I'm optimistic just because I move around a lot in this country, and I move in different places. I just don't. I don't hang out with just people like me all the time. I find I'm writing about people who are very different from me, people whose politics are very different from me. And there is. The country has a fabric that's very strong, and there's a basic decency crying out to be expressed that people feel and in their local lives exhibit that is very different from our national political life, that our national political life feels false. To me, it feels like it's a bad reality TV show right now. And the question is, does this bad reality TV show drag us, make us all more like it, or do we get our arms around it and make it more like us? And I just think we're stronger. I think it's kind of tinny and cheap, and we're deep and rich and interesting.

[00:56:48.4] Jeffrey Rosen: Michael, it's been a joy to share your light with the National Constitution Center for giving us a great civics lesson and for inspiring all of us. Thank you so much.

[00:56:58.1] Michael Lewis: Loved it Jeff. Good to see you.

[00:57:00.6] Jeffrey Rosen: Thanks. Good to see you, too.

[00:57:03.4] Jeffrey Rosen: This episode was produced by Samson Mostashari and Bill Pollock, who was engineered by Bill Pollock and David Stotz. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh. Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional illumination and debate. Check out the new Constitution 101 class [@constitutioncenter.org/con101](https://constitutioncenter.org/con101). Sign up for the newsletter [@constitutioncenter.org/connect](https://constitutioncenter.org/connect) and remember in your waking and sleeping moments. At the National Constitution Center's a private nonprofit, we receive, thank goodness, few government funds and this podcast and all of our work is made possible only thanks to the generosity of people from across the country who are inspired by our nonpartisan mission of constitutional education and debate. Please consider supporting our efforts by donating today [@constitutioncenter.org/donate](https://constitutioncenter.org/donate) on behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.