

The Breach 209: The Symbiosis of Donald Trump and The Worst People in America

Lindsay: Welcome to The Breach, your deep dive into authoritarianism and corruption in the era of Trump. If you're enjoying the show, please take a moment to rate and review us on Apple Podcasts. It really helps new people find out about the show. Consider it an act of resistance. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein.

My guest today is Jared Yates Sexton, an associate professor of creative writing at Georgia Southern University and the author of the compelling new book, *The People Are Going to Rise Like the Waters Upon Your Shore*, a political portrait of the United States in the run up to the 2016 election and a glimpse at the dark political and cultural forces that brought Trump to power. Jared, welcome to the program.

Jared : Hey. Thanks for having me.

Lindsay: Your book has an evocative title. Where did it come from?

Jared : *The People Are Going to Rise Like the Waters Upon Your Shore* actually comes from a chalk drawing that I saw on the street outside the Democratic National Convention. This was when the Bernie Sanders supporters and protesters were protesting and eventually rioting the nomination of Hillary Clinton as the Democratic nominee. There were all these drawings that people had drawn on the sidewalk that were protesting the nomination. I came across that one, and I thought it was pretty evocative. I thought it was actually kind of beautiful and apt for the political moment.

Lindsay: It sounds almost biblical.

Jared : Yeah. I saw it and I took a picture of it. When I was going through my pictures afterwards, I kept looking for quote because I thought it was from something. For some reason or another, it sounded like some sort of Old Testament verse that might have taken place during the battle of Jericho. I looked around and I couldn't find it anywhere. I guess the person who chalked in on the street came up with it.

Lindsay: That's great. Adds a little bit of mystery, I think.

Jared : Yeah. It's a pretty good metaphor too, I think, especially for the idea of this groundswell of rage that we had in the past couple of years. I think it's a pretty good image.

Lindsay: It's kind of a nice parallel for you having this sort of literary quote considering your own kind of unusual journey to writing this book.

Jared : Yeah. Well, I guess I'm still a fiction writer, but I'm taking this detour right now. I'm usually a fiction writer by trade. I got my MFA in fiction from Southern Illinois University. I actually started writing this book as sort of a way to procrastinate a novel that I was writing at the time. The novel didn't exactly work out, and I kept looking for reasons to do other things, and this election thing just sort of fell in my lap.

Lindsay: The theory of structured procrastination.

Jared : Well, it's never done me wrong in the past. I'll tell you that.

Lindsay: You started blogging as a first step?

Jared : Yeah. I originally was covering the election for a literary journal called The Atticus Review. At first, I was just writing these small columns that were responding to the issues of the day. It was about once a week, and it would be a take on whatever was going on at the time. Eventually, I sort of got this urge to start reporting and start going to events and rallies and sort of see this stuff first hand. It developed as sort of a blogging article sort of a thing, and it turned into a reportage exercise.

Lindsay: You write that your upbringing prepared you to connect and understand with Trump voters. Can you describe some of that background that you brought to the project?

Jared : Sure. I grew up in southern Indiana. I come from a very, very poor blue-collar family. Most of my family are factory workers, miners, laborers, things of that nature. I saw firsthand growing up and over the past few years that this anger that we see at the heart of the Trump movement, I saw it early, early on. I saw it starting in the early 1980s, which is when we really started seeing manufacturing start to fall apart. We started seeing rural communities start to erode. I watched this sort of grow from the 1980s to now. My family is, for the most part, Trump supporters. They are the type of people who voted for him, and follow him, and see no problem with him, so I was prepared for that sort of mindset and that sort of a movement.

Lindsay: When you saw that anger emerging back then, did it have the same kind of right-wing tinge or was it more broad-based in terms of people's frustrations about their lives and prospects?

Jared : No, it wasn't at all. One of the more interesting things and, I guess, terrifying things, honestly, is that my family was a Democratic family. My grandmother basically preached the gospel of JFK and FDR. They would talk all the time about not trusting the Republican party. In the '90s, particularly, with the advent of Fox News, and Rush Limbaugh, and this new sort of strategy among the Republican party, they started to gain persuasion over parts of my family. You started to see this political movement from the left to the right, and so that anger actually changed as it was stoked by the Republican party.

Lindsay: Did you feel like talk radio had a big role to play in that kind of ideological realignment?

Jared : Yeah, absolutely. I talk about this in the book quite a bit. In the 1990s, particularly with syndicated talk radio, again, your Rush Limbaughs, with Fox News, which basically became a propaganda wing of the Republican party, I started to see that there were these narratives that were starting to, not only be peddled by the right, but swallowed by my family. They were won over by this constant chatter. In my town, especially, which is a small Indiana town of about 3,000 people, I started to notice that most of the people started repeating these narratives as well. You could tune in Rush Limbaugh, and you would hear what he would have to say in the afternoon, and by evening and the

next morning you would start to hear those narratives going around.

Lindsay: What do you think he tapped into that made people so ... Rush Limbaugh, I mean, that made people so receptive to that message?

Jared : Well, a lot of it has to do ... and this is what continues, especially with things like Alex Jones and Breitbart. You have people in my family who, for generations, have sort of suffered economically. They've never been able to get ahead. They've never been able to make ends meet. They've always had a feeling that something was wrong, that somewhere, somehow, something wasn't being done right. That sort of lends itself to conspiratorial thinking. My family is the type that talks about the new world order, and the UN taking over, and these sort of ideas that there's a plot against them. I think, in a lot of ways, Rush Limbaugh, Fox News, and now Alex Jones and Breitbart, they sort of speak to that. They know that language. They talk to disadvantaged people who understand that something isn't right, but maybe they don't understand the nuanced explanation behind it. When they're given an explanation, and it sounds like it could be right, and when it's hammered home day after day, I think that's when it takes hold.

Lindsay: Can you describe your first encounter with a Trump event?

Jared : Sure. My first one was a ... I believe it was Tim Scott's candidate forum, which was in South Carolina, he had with all of the Republican nominees. I went in and there were all these people, traditional Republicans I'll call them. Then there were Trump supporters. They were sort of clashing with each other and arguing with each other, and there was a lot of talk about bubbles and they called clouds, things like that.

That incident, though, was sort of eclipsed, I guess is the best way to put it, by an event I went to in December of 2015, which was the night that Trump announced his intention to ban Muslim immigration. When I went there, I started noticing that he was hitting a nerve with these people. He was starting to sort of stoke their anger in a way that I think they'd been waiting for for a while. Then outside I watched his supporters threaten to kill protesters multiple times. I watched them clash with them. I watched them say all these terrible, awful things, these homophobic, misogynistic, xenophobic things to these protestors. It was from there that I started to notice that there was this sort of ... that anger was bubbling up, and he had, somehow or another, harnessed what I had seen, basically, for the rest of my life.

Lindsay: The big party game right now in political circles seems to be saying, "Is it economic anxiety, or is it racism, or is it a false dichotomy?" What do you think?

Jared : It's both. I think the biggest problem is when people say that it's economic anxiety. I think that what they're doing is they're undermining the fact that that turns into something. Economic anxiety doesn't just stay where it's at. We definitely have, in our system, racism. We've had racism there for as long as we've had an America. When the two intermingle, so for instance, when my family, who is racist a lot of the time and has been for years ... When they are feeling the squeeze, their racist tendencies intermingle with that "anxiety," and it makes it worse, especially when there's somebody like a Donald Trump or the Republican party, to be honest, tells them that the problem is with

a different group of people. "These people are taking your money. They're taking your opportunities. They're the ones who are making your life hard." When those two things come together, I think, is when you have this volatile cocktail that we're seeing right now.

Lindsay: What do you think the role of women in our society has to do with the rise of Trump?

Jared : Well, I'm actually writing a book about this right now. People have called it a crisis of masculinity but, for the longest time, white working-class and middle-class men had this patriarchal advantage. They didn't earn a lot. Maybe they didn't even earn enough to really keep afloat, but at least they had this societal currency that they could carry around.

With the rise of feminism and progressivism, we've seen that sort of idea and that inherent privilege challenged. I think that the more that that gets challenged, the more that the people who enjoyed that privilege and, specifically, embraced it, I think that they are reacting by entrenching themselves in it. You turn on the TV and you see that they're buying construction-site-worthy trucks, and they're starting to say these crude things, and openly, and they're starting to harass women online in huge, roving droves of people. I think that there's this crisis of identity that is leading towards them lashing out, and I think that's a big part of why Donald Trump is president.

Lindsay: Do you think that a Democratic candidate who had tapped into that anger, like Bernie Sanders, would have had a chance nationally?

Jared : It's hard now, especially looking back at this election and trying to figure out who could have won, because we now have seen this Russian influence. Bernie Sanders, to me, I think tapped into the economic populist rage of the Democratic party. This is the kind of thing that I think my grandparents loved FDR so much for. I think, for somebody to have beaten Trump or for somebody to beat Trump in 2020, it would have to be a candidate who is able to do that and also the social issues at the heart of the Democratic party. It's going to have to be somebody who can bridge the gap between the two wings, the Bernie wing and the Hillary Clinton wing, and be able to bring all those people under a tent, which I think is a monumental task.

Lindsay: You think Elizabeth Warren might be up to it?

Jared : That's a possibility. I did see her on the campaign trail a couple of times, and she certainly seems to really enjoy attacking Donald Trump. It seems to be one of her favorite pastimes.

Lindsay: Practice makes perfect, you know?

Jared : Yeah.

Lindsay: She's good at it.

Jared : She's really good at it. It's like when you watch a boxing match and you start to notice

that the two boxers really enjoy taking and trading punches. Elizabeth Warren likes it, and she likes this battle with Donald Trump. I think that she could probably stand toe to toe with him and really given him a run.

Lindsay: It's weird that Clinton's economic message never got much traction, because she was running on the most progressive platform in the modern Democratic history, free college tuition, expanding social security, public option, Fight for 15, all that stuff. Why do you think that it didn't catch on more, that people didn't come to realize, even, that she was advocating all this stuff?

Jared : Well, I think what she ran into with Donald Trump was a person who basically took all of the oxygen out of the room in terms of narrative. There wasn't a single day that wasn't dominated with either a scandal around Donald Trump, or some criticism he had levied at Hillary Clinton, or some sort of story around him that he had created. What we saw with the Hilary Clinton campaign, and this goes back to her husband Bill's campaign that enjoyed a lot of the same theory, political theory. He had this saying that said, "Speed kills." The old idea with Bill Clinton was, with speed kills, if somebody levies a criticism or an attack towards you, you answer it immediately and you take it on head on.

That strategy, in the 1990s, was a little bit more potent because we didn't necessarily have this rabid, media-driven, 24-hour cycle that we have now. Now, because Trump could define every single day and basically own cable news, Hillary Clinton was always on the defensive, and the only thing that we ever reported was how she responded to Trump's attacks or his scandals. I don't think that she had much of a chance for any of her narratives to really take hold.

Lindsay: Race is a big theme in the book. There's a passage where you talk about guys from Indiana fetishizing the Confederacy, which they have no historical reason to do. Where's that coming from?

Jared : Yeah. In the book, I think the phrase that I decided on is that a lot of these people see the Confederacy as a symbol of opposition to the way things are. In Indiana, you see the Confederate flag everywhere. Of course, Indiana was a northern state. Nobody from Indiana fought for the Confederacy, but yet it's in garages, it's on cars, it's on hats, it's on shirts. In a way, the Confederate flag has gained this metaphorical power as being in opposition to America as it is. You have a lot of people, particularly a lot of poor people, who feel like America is against them or isn't serving their best interests anymore, that when they put up this Confederate flag, I think a lot of them are basically showing a giant middle finger to society as it is. I don't think they necessarily have an idea of what they want the world to be, but I think that they want to express that they don't like the world as it is.

Lindsay: Can you talk about your experiences in Charleston after Dylann Roof's massacre at the AME church?

Jared : Yeah. After that happened, this was one of those moments where I really felt pulled to the scene of a story. I drove up to South Carolina, and the first place that I went was ... We had heard these stories about how he had hung around this mall in South Carolina

and had been thrown out of there and sort of menaced some people. I went to this mall where he had gone. It's like any other mall.

Then, after I went there, I went to where his house was. It's in this very poor part of South Carolina, and it's across the street from this general store that, quite frankly, was very sad. It reminded me of a lot of small towns that I've been in and a lot of communities I've been in in Indiana and in Georgia. These are communities that are destitute. They are impoverished. They sort of break the spirit the more that you're in them. I just started to look around and realized that this is a person who had grown up in these circumstances and, as a result, had gained this rage or this world view that led to this unfortunate, terrible tragedy. I left there, and I went to Charleston itself. I joined in this march down to Mother Emanuel Church, and I just sort of took in the morning, and the healing, and just watched this community try and put itself back together.

Lindsay: What are some of the ways that Trump stoked white supremacy and extremism amongst his followers and legitimized that kind of stuff?

Jared : Well, one of the things that Donald Trump did is ... I've had a lot of people in interviews ask me if Donald Trump is racist himself, and I believe he is, but he is also racist in the way that a lot of my relatives are racist, which is they do not believe themselves to be a racist. They say a lot of things which are, "I'm not racist, but ..." or, "This is gonna sound racist, but I don't mean it that way." I think Donald Trump basically spoke this language that said racist things without saying that they were racist, which I think gave an excuse to a lot of people. It gave voice to a lot of people who simply believe that's the way that the world works, right? You get rid of political correctness and, instead, you're talking about the world as it actually works.

I think that that happened, but then you also had, when Steve Bannon came onto his campaign, I think that the message of the campaign was actually synthesized and boiled down to specifically reach out to white nationalists. We had language about white nationalism, about economic nationalism. He started to do that, and on top of it, he started to retweet them. His social media director started looking for pieces from white supremacists, and so we actually had a pretty sophisticated outreach population that got these people invigorated and gave them power and strength. I think that, in a lot of ways, that wasn't on accident.

Lindsay: It's really strange how the discourse is going around what it means to be racist, where you see people on television who are marching in Charlottesville under a Nazi flag who are simultaneously denying to the camera that they are racist. What does it even mean anymore to deny being racist?

Jared : Well, and that's the other thing about it, is, Donald Trump's campaign was, I think, a watershed moment in our history because we started to see a breaking of objective reality. I think that it's been breaking for a while, but now people ... You have people who are calling themselves, I think, ethno-realist, or something like that, which-

Lindsay: Oh, yeah. Human diversity, which sounds so nice until you realize they mean genocide.

Jared : Exactly. We've actually gotten to this point where subjective rhetoric basically breaks reality, and so you can say, again, "I'm not racist, but ..." and so you're not actually talking about racism, right? You're not actually being racist. You're just talking about how the world actually "works," these people who believe these things. By getting rid of political correctness, which they believe is a subjective reality, you're just telling it like it is. I think a lot of people now have convinced themselves that they see the world the way it is instead of through a racist lens. I think that it helps with cognitive dissonance, because no one wants to believe that they are a racist or that they have these prejudices. Instead, if somebody tells you that that's the way things work, then all of a sudden it entrenches that idea, and I think it makes it more powerful.

Lindsay: It's kind of fascinating because what people have basically done is sort of abstracted a way to kind of theoretical racism in which it's ideological, that racism means that you hate members of other races a priori, and if you just have a narrative that says, "No. They actually are all bad," somehow that doesn't count as racism.

Jared : Right. It goes back to ... It was within the first few minutes of Donald Trump announcing his candidacy, his now-infamous remarks about Mexicans coming over the border. I think he says, "They're dealing drugs. They're criminals. They're rapists. And I assume some are good people." That statement, in and of itself, I think, encapsulates what's going on in the world, which is people can say, "This entire race of people or most of this race of people are bad, but if I believe that not all of them are, and maybe a sliver of them are, that's not racist because then I'm acknowledging that it's not an entire group," which is a mind-bending mental gymnastic that I have a really hard time trying to understand, but I think a lot of these people live their lives according to that sort of maneuvering.

Lindsay: Then there's the whole sort of narrative about culture that, "I don't believe 19th century racial pseudoscience about the size of people's brow ridges, but I believe that it just so happens that the races I don't like have cultures that make them act like jerks all the time and losers."

Jared : Yeah. You look back at those things about skulls and this hackneyed science. That's the original fake news, right? It's these things where they exist outside in the world where, if you want to find them, and if you want to believe in them, and you want to empower your own beliefs, they're there.

It's like with Dylann Roof. I was looking through his manifesto when I was in South Carolina. A lot of people just want to write him off as sort of this lone wolf who is ignorant. He got online and found unbelievable resources of fake information that basically proved what he wanted to be proven. He obviously was able to do research. He was able to write. He was able to put these things together. It just so happened that he wasn't able to discern reality from unreality because he was looking to have these things confirmed. What you actually have is it's this, again, idea of fake news, but it's actually a manufacturing of a personal reality that suits your own needs.

Lindsay: Do you think our society is falling down in terms of the public school system, in terms of teaching people critical thinking skills they need to navigate and the vast information

universe in which you've got all kinds of great true stuff but orders of magnitude with more garbage?

Jared : I absolutely think that's part of the problem. I think this is a nuanced issue that ... We're seeing a lot of different parts of this society that have fallen down on their job or they haven't received the support that they necessarily need. I think the fact that we have drained the school system for decades or generations now ... We haven't paid schoolteachers what they deserve, and we keep trying to fix the problem by taking money away and by changing the system and putting more tests on them. We definitely have seen a loss of critical thinking. We've seen a loss of people being prepared to enter the world and, instead, they're prepared for tests. I think that, absolutely, we need more money in public education. We need more money to get good teachers out there. Not to say that there aren't good teachers, but they're overworked, and they're overstretched, and they are not supported the way they are supposed to. That is definitely one cog in this problem, but it's a multi-faceted problem and nobody is addressing hardly any of the issues.

Lindsay: Sometimes Neo-Nazis are talked about as being sort of in a different breadth than Trump supporters. I'm not trying to imply that all Trump supporters are Neo-Nazis, but when I read your book, I was really struck by the fact that the sort of ... You were encountering members of the same crowd that we saw in Charlottesville. The Unite the Right label wasn't just a coincidence, that there really does seem to be an ongoing scene about this. Does that make sense? Does that seem like a valid interpretation?

Jared : No, that's absolutely true. When I watched what happened in Charlottesville, I felt like it was a ... This sounds cold, but it seemed like a logical extension of what had happened over the course of the campaign trail. There was hardly a rally I went to ... Matter of fact, I can't think of one where I didn't see some outward member of a white supremacist group. Neo-Nazi tattoos, separatists, militia uniforms, I saw them everywhere. I saw them outside the rally intimidating protesters in the same way that you saw them clashing in Virginia. They were everywhere, and they were amping up towards this. I think a lot of people expected it to boil over into murderous violence at the Republican National Convention, and we were very lucky that it didn't happen that way. This was heating up starting back, at least, in 2015, if not earlier. If you went to these rallies, if you went to these events, you definitely saw these same people, and you saw the beginnings of it.

Lindsay: I don't know if this is true. I'm not sure I believe the sources that have been saying this, but people have been claiming that, last night in Arizona, there was a lot more presence of heavily-armed, left-wing people facing off their heavily-armed counterparts. Does that seem credible to you that there's a rise of force on the left as well?

Jared : Well, there's a rise of action on the left. I know that what I saw on the campaign trail, and this goes back to the Democratic National Convention where I saw protests and unrest, there are definitely people on the left, and a lot of them are anarchists, there's definitely socialist groups. You have groups that are angry at the system in the same way that Trump supporters are angry at the system. They do not like the way things work, and they want a radical change. I've seen them. I have not seen them be violent. I

haven't seen them lash out against these people. I've seen tense confrontations. I've, of course, seen them burn flags. I've heard them advocate revolution, but I haven't personally seen them attack anyone.

A lot of these narratives feel definitely artificial because we have a lot of "evenhandedness" or on both sides or, as the President said, many, many sides. A lot of people push this narrative that antifa or people like them, are doing these things, but I know, personally, I haven't seen it except for at the inauguration I saw a riot, but I only saw demonstrating in the street. I didn't see anyone attacked. I saw a car set on fire, which is obviously-

Lindsay: They vandalized a limo, which is not the same.

Jared : Right. Exactly. I saw property damaged. I've seen windows be broken, but I have literally never seen a person from the far left attack someone from the far right. Obviously, I think we've all seen video now of the far right attacking the far left, but I personally have never seen that antagonism.

Lindsay: I've covered a lot of protesters, and I agree completely. The thing that concerns me is not trying to establish some kind of moral equivalence, because there's none, just the concern for me is that we've got untrained people facing off with a potential for deadly force anywhere. It just seems like this is just ... The tensions are ratcheting and ratcheting and ratcheting, and I'm just really concerned more people are going to get hurt, probably by white supremacists, because they're really good at hurting people.

Jared : Yeah. On top of that, they're mobilized. I mean they have militias. They are training themselves to be street-fighting operations. Quite frankly, they've been doing this for a long time. Far-right militias have been preparing for something like this for decades. I definitely agree. This does not feel like Charlottesville, unfortunately, is going to be the end of the violence, it'll be the finale of it. It definitely feels like this is just another step along the way because I've been doing research on far-right websites, and forums, and people for a long time now since I started getting threats from them, and the rhetoric is definitely ratcheting up. We feel more tension brewing. They're like, "Well, they're gonna blame us for stuff in Charlottesville. Well, good. It's gonna pale in comparison to what we do next." Yeah. I would be absolutely shocked if something worse doesn't happen.

Lindsay: What's it like to be in the center of a right-wing hate maelstrom like that?

Jared : It's awful, to be frank. I mean you never want to admit that because you never want to give people power with the idea of anxiety or fear. I had people who showed up at my house. I had a couple people try and break into my house. I've had strange, bizarre letters appear in my mailbox and at work and all these sort of terrible, terrible threats and memes. They definitely have a power. It's very much like a focusing of the sun through a magnifying glass. Who knows how many of these people there are, but they definitely mobilize and work together to create an overwhelming swell of hate, and anger, and intimidation. They are very good at this. They are very trained at this. The more that they gain power, I think that you notice they're able to change things based

on that power. I mean I've seen multiple people who are going to run for office who have received threats and have left. I've seen journalists who have told me that they won't cover certain things anymore. They definitely have a power, and they definitely have a sway that is gaining a hold in culture.

Lindsay: What do you think the organizing strategy that beats that is?

Jared : I don't know exactly because, on one hand, you have to think that there are people out there who are ... I call them traditional Republicans. These are a lot of people, I think, who held their nose while they voted for Trump and are definitely concerned, and they can definitely turn away from him. I think these are people who, when they see Nazis out in Charlottesville, they say, "No. I'm not okay with that. That's a step too far." We've definitely seen polls in the past week or so that have shown that more people have been okay with that and with authoritarianism than you would expect. So I'm not really sure how that gets beat. I feel like this is a long, long game. I feel like this is a situation that isn't going to go away any time soon, and this is going to be a lot of communication, a lot of hard work, a lot of organizing. I hope, at some point or another, it shows benefits.

Lindsay: Jared, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for coming on the show.

Jared : Hey, thanks for having me.

Lindsay: Now it's time for recommended reading, a hand-picked selection to deepen your understanding of the current political moment. This week's selection is called Dylann Roof, A Most American Terrorists. It's by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah in GQ Magazine. It's an amazing piece of reportage that examines not only Dylann Roof's background, but the author's own experience covering the story as a black woman. That's it for recommended reading.

The Breach is produced by Nora Hurley for Rewire Radio. Our executive producer is Marc Faletti. Our theme music is Dark Alliance performed by Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. I'm your host, Lindsay Beyerstein. Tweet your suggestions, comments and questions to @Beyerstein on Twitter. See you next week.