TRANSCRIPT:

January 25, 2008

BILL MOYERS: Welcome to THE JOURNAL.

Let's first connect some dots in the week's news. In Washington, two public interest groups — The Center for Public Integrity and the Fund for Independence in Journalism — finished a report they have been working on for months. It's an old story but with new math. They went through the record and counted every false statement made by the Bush administration in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq and even six months after we were at war. How many?

If you guessed 935, you are right on the button. That's at least the number of times the president and seven of his top officials, including Condoleeza Rice, said Saddam Hussein was a national security threat.

On at least 532 separate occasions those officials told us unequivocally that Iraq had links to Al Quaeda or weapons of mass destruction, or both. Remember when this alarm went off?

CONDOLEEZA RICE: There will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.

BILL MOYERS: It was one of the most smoothly orchestrated and successful propaganda campaigns in our history, and it was one big lie. The war it produced still has no end in sight, five years later.

Now as this report was released in Washington, Secretary Rice was attending a gathering far away in Davos, Switzerland, where the masters of the universe gather every year to assess how they're doing in running the world. Condoleeza Rice delivered what was described as a 'bold' speech, painting one of those rosy scenarios that so endeared her to the nation's press five years ago:

CONDOLEEZA RICE: The U.S. economy is resilient, its structure is sound, and its long-term economic fundamentals are healthy.

Well, I can assure you that America has no permanent enemies.

Diplomacy, if properly practiced, is not just talking for the sake of talking.

Diplomacy can make possible a world in which old enemies can become, if not friends, then no longer adversaries.

BILL MOYERS: Set aside for a moment that Ms. Rice was a key enabler in dismissing diplomacy in favor of an unprovoked attack on another country. Instead, consider what was happening in the real world far below the lofty gated community of Davos where she was speaking to the powerful and privileged.

In Iraq, continuing carnage testifies to the foresight of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Rice. As insurgents gunned down another eight soldiers. One G.I. lost his life while riding on a specially designed vehicle the military was counting on to resist the most lethal weapon in the war. one hundred pro-American Iraqi militia have been assassinated in the last month.

TALKBACK: THE BLOG
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OURPOSTS
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In Afghanistan, the totalitarian Taliban is on the move once again. But NATO troops aren't their only target. Attacks against students and teachers have tripled. Over a hundred have been killed outright as hundreds of thousands more have been frightened out of even attending classes. Many of those teenage boys are joining the Taliban.

In Kabul, which Rice and company assured us would see the flowering of democracy in this ancient land of tribal feuds, the Afghan court — intended to be the crown jewel of the American regency — has just sentenced a young journalism student to death for downloading from the internet a document said to offend Islam. Some democracy.

And in nearby Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated soon after being personally urged by Condoleeza Rice to return and run for office. The dictator Pervez Musharref, who also spoke in Davos, recently set up an operation to counter what he calls "western propaganda." Some ally.

Meanwhile, far from the Midas-like luster of Davos, the impoverished people of Gaza ...caught between Hamas and Israel...almost out of food ...their homes, hospitals, and generators cut off from fuel... did what desperate people long to do they took matters into their own hands, bursting through the wall and making their way into Egypt, on foot, by car, or in donkey carts, seeking food and supplies.

There, reality is survival.

But it was here at home that Rice's romanticized view of the world, so eloquently detailed to the swells in Davos, grated jarringly against facts on the ground.

While media focused on the wild gyrations of the world's stock markets, most Americans weren't checking their portfolios. They were watching their pocketbooks shrink. New reports reveal that the average wage for most workers has been stagnant since 2000.

New York's multi-billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg could have been in Davos but he remained at home, tending to reality:

MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG: We're the ones on the front lines of the economy, and we've got a lot to be worried about: The stock market has already given up more than the entirety of the gains it made last year, in just three weeks. Housing starts in all our city are in average at a 16-year low.

BILL MOYERS: Bloomberg had a message for those who had gone awol from the front lines of leadership:

MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG: Now we can't borrow our way out of this. The jig is up. It's time to start getting our house in order once and for all, which I believe starts with a simple idea: Making decisions based on the business cycle instead of the election calendar.

BILL MOYERS: So with so much reality lying all around us, at home and abroad, how to explain Secretary Rice's rhetorical flight of fancy in Davos? Is denial simply the ballast to which she clings in order to survive in a world that melts away her every premise every day? Or is it simply another reflection of the congenital defect of an administration determined from the start, as one of them famously said, to create a reality of their own, contrary to all the evidence.

I wonder if anyone in the cozy circles at Davos had the gumption to ask Secretary Rice about that report published this week by the Center for Public Integrity and the Fund for Independence in Journalism.

You'll find a link to it on our site at pbs.org. Forward it to a friend at Davos.

BILL MOYERS: As Congress and the White House on Thursday were announcing the proposed stimulus plan, the Chicago based company, Methode Electronics, announced that it's cutting 700 jobs in its Illinois plants. Meanwhile, it's opened a new plant in Shanghai, China. Talk about a slap in the face for working Americans. So with news like that, and after a week of wild gyrations on Wall Street, fears of a deep economic meltdown, the Feds rate cut, more falling home prices, and the bursting of dreams as well as bubbles, it's time to welcome back Katherine Newman. She was here some weeks again to discuss her new book, The Missing Class, just one

of several she's written about how regular people live their lives and cope from paycheck to paycheck. She teaches at Princeton University, where she also directions the Institute for International and Regional Studies. Good to see you again.

KATHERINE NEWMAN: Good to be back.

BILL MOYERS: What do you make of all this bad news?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: Well, it's a bad news situation out there for millions of Americans who are really going to worry about their futures and their children's futures. I think the world's looking like a shakier place, and the country's looking like it's not in control of its destiny in ways that people had hoped would be true. And I think they'll be pleased to hear that Congress and the president have found some way to cooperate with one another. But I think a lot of people will be left out and left in the cold, especially in-- in places like the Midwest.

BILL MOYERS: What do you think of this new stimulus plan? I mean, the fine print is still out. But are you encouraged, or are you skeptical?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: I'm more encouraged than I thought I would be, because it provides rebates for people lower down the income spectrum that I thought it would. But I am very concerned about the long term unemployed, which is rising, not only in general, but as a proportion of the unemployed. And that's one of the disappointments of the stimulus package, because not only do those people really need the money, but they would spend it quickly if they had it. And so, the stimulus effect is going to be absent for that group of people.

BILL MOYERS: Do you think we're forgetting in this country, what work really means to people? I mean, yes, it means a paycheck, but it means more than that, doesn't it?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: I think that we need to remember that work anchors people in the social world we live in. It is a lot more than a paycheck. It's their identity; it's their sense of purpose. And that's been true, you know, more or less from the birth of the country. And since the great depression, we've recognized how important it is for people to be able to do for themselves. They do sometimes need the support of government to make that possible. And that's why I think if we could invest more in public employment, and if some of the stimulus package ends up creating jobs to help create the sort of infrastructure that we need to repair the roads, repair the schools-- we've got a lot of unfinished business out there. And the American people are willing to go to work and finish that business, if given a chance.

BILL MOYERS: Michael Huckabee, the Republican candidate, was quoted this morning as saying, look, if we borrow all this money, this $150 billion for the stimulus, from China, people will spend it on things that are made in China, sneakers and gadgets and things like that. But if we borrow the money from China to build highways in Florida, where he's campaigning, then the money will stay here. It will be spent on things in Florida. What do you think about that?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: Well, I think people would probably still spend money on things produced in China. But I think if we built more infrastructure, we would see a greater long term benefit from the money we're investing, because we will improve our roads, our schools. And you know, that's exactly what Franklin Roosevelt thought. And that's why he put millions of Americans to work pretty quickly, actually, building the early precursors to the federal highway system, building Penn Station and all the beautiful railroad stations that we have in between. So I think putting people back to work in-- and producing things that we can make use of here in the U.S., is a very valuable thing to do. And that's why, actually, candidates on both sides, John Edwards on the Democratic side, Huckabee on the Republican side, have talked a little bit about public employment and public investment in infrastructure as one solution. The problem with it is, it takes time to ramp that up. And I think what the economists are calling for is a quick shot in the arm. And it takes a little while to ramp those things up.

BILL MOYERS: Even as we speak, the U.S. Conference of Mayors is meeting, holding its regular meeting in Washington, D.C. And I saw a report that the mayors estimate that 1.4 million homes will be foreclosed in this year. What's the effect of this?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: The effect is devastating, of course, to the families who lose their one most valuable asset, their home. It's also devastating for millions more who

are now sitting in homes that are a lot less valuable than they were before, because they don't reallyâ€"itâ€™s like, their bank accounts have been emptied by about a third, because the equity they had is falling as the value of their homes has declined. And that means they won't have as much that they can borrow for all these purposes, like medical insurance, like college education, like protecting themselves in old age. Because that asset isn't worth what it was worth before.

BILL MOYERS: Now, what does it mean when you're-- the mortgage on your house is worth more than the value of your house?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: It means you are in deep trouble. And if the houses around you go into foreclosure, and your neighborhood starts to look seedy because nobody's living in those houses-- if the banks won't lend so that people can move through the housing market-- it's like paralysis out there. And it will be years before we recover from this, years.

BILL MOYERS: The taxi driver this morning told me that houses-- two houses on his block are being foreclosed. And he's got two kids in college, you know. If he loses the ability to borrow against that house, he's going to be in trouble paying their college tuition, right?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: That's exactly right. So I think we worry about whether the nation is in control of itself internationally, we worry about whether there's anything we can do to protect ourselves individually. We worry about whether the next generation is going to have any chance to follow in our footsteps. And you add all this up, and it's a big headache out there.

BILL MOYERS: Are people going into debt merely because they're spending too much money?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: The biggest source of bankruptcy, the biggest pressure leading to bankruptcy is actually medical expenses. So this is not what we would call--

BILL MOYERS: Wait a minute.

KATHERINE NEWMAN: --out there buying Cadillacs.

BILL MOYERS: More people are going into bankruptcy because they can't afford their medical bill?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: That is the biggest push toward bankruptcy for most people who file. It's an unexpected and very high medical cost. And this is something we don't really appreciate. We often think, oh, well, they've been on a spending spree they couldn't afford. But it's a spending spree with taking care of a spouse who is ill, or, you know, a ruptured appendix. Well, that's not really a very discretionary expense. You sort of have to do that. And that is a really important reason why we're seeing a lot of people reach bankruptcy. The foreclosure crisis, of course, is not helping matters.

BILL MOYERS: I read a story just this morning from the Reuters News Service, a reporter based in Philadelphia who said that the poor in Philadelphia-- and I think this is true nationwide-- are still recovering from the recession six years ago. So he said there's something unusual about the fact that there's more poverty now as this downturn occurs, than there was at the last recession.

KATHERINE NEWMAN: That's true. There's some really unusual features to this downturn. One is that poverty remained high. The other is that the long term unemployed are a larger proportion of the people who are unemployed, than they were before.

BILL MOYERS: And aren't more of them college graduates? That's a new factor, isn't it?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: That is something that I find very worrying. So if we think of education as protective of the individual out in the labor market, which it is, of course-- if you are college educated, you 're better off than someone who isn't. But the proportion of long term unemployed who college graduates has jumped up. So it's not as protective as it once was. It's lasting longer, it's lasting longer into the business cycle, long term unemployment. And that is a real worry. Because the

longer you stay out of work, the harder it is to find another job, the more devastating the consequences for your family. And that, I think, is a real worry for all of us.

BILL MOYERS: As you talk, I'm reminded of reading a story just yesterday, about five Wall Street banks that paid out record bonuses, $39 billion, five banks, three of them having just recorded record losses. And these are companies, banks that are-- have been stimulating this bubble, this speculation. They win even when they lose. Is there a moral component here? Is there a moral factor at work in what we're talking about?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: I think this issue of inequality, which sounds like an arcane concept that only people in the universities worry about, is going to hit home with people when they see those kinds of headlines. They're going to want to know why the pain isn't broadly shared, why it is that some people seem to be even profiting off the pain of others. It's not fair. And fairness is actually a concept that Americans care about. They don't mind if people at the top share in prosperity, but if we're going to hit this downturn and only the little guy suffers, yeah, we're going to hear again that in the ballot box and every other way that Americans can express themselves.

BILL MOYERS: What does it say to this-- and I know this sometimes sounds to people, naÃ¯ve-- but what does this say to that old sense of, you know, we, the people, the solidarity of the country?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: Well, the question is, who's "we"? Is the "we" really the inclusive "we" that it-- that once was? You know, when prosperity was growing after World War II, when we had really a long, long period of shared prosperity, everybody was doing better. We now see these projections that kind of fan us out into haves at the top and have-nots at the bottom.

BILL MOYERS: And the gap's getting definitely bigger.

KATHERINE NEWMAN: And the gap's getting much larger than it was before. And the remedies that affect some people positively and leave others out in the cold, like the long term unemployed.

BILL MOYERS: You remain optimistic about the capacity of the American people to handle crises like this. What are you looking for that would give you the most encouragement?

KATHERINE NEWMAN: The American people have never been fond of the idea that someone else needs to rescue them. They want a chance. They don't need a guarantee. They want a chance. But if the see the chance start to slip through their hands, if they see that the next generation won't have the kind of credentials it needs because they can't go to college, or if they're heavily burdened by debt when they finish college, their ability to compete will be impeded. And so, what most of us want to see is that we have the tools. Just give us the tool, or give us the opportunity to gain the tools for ourselves, and we will try and take care of the rest. But absent those tools and absent the kind of security that we need to hold on to the assets we have, when we feel like we're falling in an elevator that's got no back stop to it, and that, I think, will be very frightening.

BILL MOYERS: Katherine Newman, thank you very much for returning to The Journal.

KATHERINE NEWMAN: It's my pleasure, Bill.

BILL MOYERS: Despite all the economic woes, you have surely noticed by now that we are in the middle of the most expensive political campaign in American history. And we still have nine months to go. At the outset last year the former chair of the Federal Election Commission called it a high-stakes poker game. To get in, he said, a really promising presidential candidate needed an ante of at least one hundred million dollars. More than half of that - more than 50 cents on the dollar -- goes to buy ad time on television. That would be a big windfall for your local television station. Except that in most cases, it's not your local station, or even your local economy, that keeps the money. The profits from selling the public airwaves for private gain are sucked up the food chain to the folks at the top -- those mega-media conglomerates that now control most of the airwaves. No matter who wins in November, big media can't lose -- just like the house in a Las Vegas poker game. Here's our report by producer Peter Meryash and correspondent Rick Karr.

RICK KARR: Political advertising is about to set a new record: two and a half billion dollars. That's how much analysts predict will be spent on political TV ads before November's election by candidates, from the White House to the state house by the groups that support them and by groups that oppose them.

That's two thirds more than they spent in two thousand four - which set the previous record.

The Presidential race will account for at least a third of the total - some eight hundred million dollars. And that can buy a lot of ads. Before the Iowa caucuses, for example if you'd watched every single ad that the candidates ran - all 50,000 or so of them, back-to-back - it would've taken more than 15 days. In New Hampshire on the night before the primary the state's biggest TV station - WMUR in Manchester - aired 34 political ads in just ninety minutes. In the run-up to the primary, the station reportedly earned $11,000,000... from political ads.

BROOKS JACKSON: The 30-second ad definitely is the dominant form of political communication in the United States today as it has been for many years. And as I expect it will continue to be for some time to come.

RICK KARR: Brooks Jackson is a veteran journalist who runs a web site called factcheck.org. which evaluates the claims that politicians make as they campaign.

As a voter-- if I see nothing but 30-second spots for the presidential candidates, what kind of picture do I get? How accurate is that picture of what these candidates stand for?

BROOKS JACKSON: If all you know about candidates in an election is what you see in your ads, you are going to cast a very poorly informed vote. Because those ads quite frequently are-- based on information that's selective, or twisted and, sometimes just downright false and made up.

RICK KARR: Political consultants will tell you that TV ads are essential because a candidate can't run an old-fashioned door-to-door campaign from coast-to-coast. And given this year's compressed primary schedule and the twenty-four states voting together on Super Tuesday the only way for candidates to reach the masses and keep control of their messages is with TV ads.

MEREDITH MCGEHEE: After Iowa and New Hampshire, I think we're kind of in a ready, set, go. We are going to see, because of the way the primaries are set up, huge amounts of money spent on advertising, because, there's just no way. There's no way physically or otherwise that these candidates can be in all these states. They're gonna have to run in these states on television.

RICK KARR: So who really profits from the two and a half billion dollars that they'll bring in through this campaign? The biggest beneficiaries will be media conglomerates which have been buying up more and more local TV stations. Take New Hampshire as an example: More than half of the stations that serve the state are owned by conglomerates - media giants such as News Corp., which owns 35 stations nationwide CBS, which owns 39 Sinclair, with forty-six and one you may never have heard of: Ion Media, which owns 57 television stations coast to coast.

Even though those conglomerates broadcast to New Hampshire, not one has its headquarters there. The state's biggest TV presence - the conglomerate Hearst-Argyle, which owns three stations that broadcast there - is run from corporate headquarters in Midtown Manhattan.

Campaign reform advocate Meredith McGehee says that's a big change from the days when most stations were owned by local businesspeople.

MEREDITH MCGEHEE: When you talk to station managers off the record, not on the record, they'll say the way the system works now is, a number comes down from the suits in New York or wherever, to say, "Here is your number for the fourth quarter of 2008. Meet it. Either get it with ads, get it through the politicians. I don't care how you get it. Make it, or we'll find somebody who will."

RICK KARR: And they do 'make it' thanks to political ads and the cash bonanza they bring in. So much so . that corporate bosses at media conglomerates are bragging about how good campaign spots are for the bottom line: In its 2006 annual report, Hearst-Argyle, for example, wrote "We expect that our stations will benefit significantly from the 2008 election cycle." "Political revenue" got its own line in that

report. And other media conglomerates have made similar claims. CBS President Les Moonves reportedly told investors last December, "We like the fact that there are a number of candidates with a lot of money behind them".

Now, you might wonder, "What's the big deal? These are corporations, after all - aren't they supposed to maximize profits?" The answer is yes, but - because broadcasters aren't like other businesses. The airwaves that we use are owned by the public.

Think of it this way: when a company drills for oil on public land it owes the public a royalty - a percentage of whatever it earns. Broadcasters don't have to pay for the licenses that give them the right to use the public airwaves but in exchange for those licenses, they ARE supposed to give something back to the public.

MEREDITH MCGEHEE: What they're supposed to do is fulfill these public interest obligations. Insure that the public gets information it needs to be an informed and engaged electorate.

RICK KARR: But local TV stations have been doing a lousy job of that. Nearly two-thirds of Americans say they get most of their news from local TV. Yet when scholars studied how local TV news covered the 2004 campaign they found that the average political story was just 86 seconds long that stations spent more time reporting on weather, sports, and crime than they did on politics and that when they did report on campaigns, nearly half of all stories covered the "horse-race" - who was ahead and who was behind. That kind of reporting dominated the conglomerates' newscasts in the run-up to the Iowa and New Hampshire votes this year.

BROOKS JACKSON: We saw the-- you know, the futility of-- horse race coverage in the period between-- the Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire. When all the polls indicated it was going to be this-- cakewalk for Obama.

I mean, the first amendment gives the press in this country, and that includes-- broadcast outlets, terrific freedom, which is used to make a lot of money. But it's there because-- the voters need information to base a sound decision on. And I think in-- too many cases broadcasters and cable outlets-- are making-- huge amounts of money from running these political ads. Which in many cases are false and misleading. And they're putting very little of that money back into some reporting that would inform their viewers-- about when they're being scammed.

RICK KARR: Broadcasters can get away with reaping huge profits from the public airwaves without giving back to the public because Washington has abandoned its obligation to hold stations accountable to the public interest.

MEREDITH MCGEHEE: The failure is a failure public policy. It's a failure at that Federal Communications Commission, and a failure in Congress. They are not getting for the American people a fair compensation for the value of these airwaves that are being used by the broadcasters. The American people are the ones that get robbed here.

RICK KARR: So in the end, what the public gets is a political campaign dominated by thirty-second sales pitches.

BROOKS JACKSON: What it does that is pernicious is it forces the candidates and their handlers and their media experts to compress-- their message into a very small space, basically a bumper strip. And to try to make it as dramatic as possible so it'll punch through all the competing advertising and all that noise and clutter on 100 cable channels out there, and grab people's attention. And frequently-- truth goes by the wayside. If you think commercial advertising is misleading, you gotta realize it's the wild, wild West when it comes to political advertising.

BILL MOYERS: Those big conglomerates may be laughing all the way to bank with their loot, but clearly many of you are unhappy about what this means for democracy. Several studies have measured your frustration. Two-thirds of you simply do not trust the media's campaign coverage. Eighty-eight percent say we focus too much on trivial issues. 77 percent of you want us to get more serious about just where the candidates stand on the issues. There is something to be done about this. Congress and the FCC could require the big media companies, on a rotating basis, to provide candidates free air time each week to debate face to face, no journalist playing middle man. These companies are fined for obscenities; why shouldn't we ask them to give back some of the airwaves we've let them use for profit? Public broadcasting too - we've used our primetime to little to enable the

candidates to speak freely, and hold each accountable. That would be a far better use of these airwaves than another series on the British monarchy. By the way, CBS, the network Murrow built, recently advertised a job opening for an internet reporter to cover the environment. The posting called for applicants who are 'wicked smart, funny, irreverent and hip ....knowledge of the enviro beat is a big plus, but not a requirement.' By now CBS has no doubt found out that anyone with those qualifications has already been snapped up by Jon Stewart and Comedy Central.

BILL MOYERS: My next guest has written twenty one books in all — with titles you'll recognize. A TIME TO KILL, THE FIRM, THE PELICAN BRIEF, THE CLIENT, THE RAINMAKER, THE TESTAMENT, THE INNOCENT MAN, A PAINTED HOUSE. Believe it or not they have sold nearly a quarter of a billion copies in 29 languages. Some were made into blockbuster movies

THE RAIN MAKER: I'm asking you, the jury, just do what you think is right in your hearts.

BILL MOYERS: The writer, of course, is John Grisham, the small town lawyer who never wrote a book until he was 30 years old. For all his wild success, John Grisham is not a very public man. He keeps a low profile and makes few speeches. So I was surprised to read that he is going to make a keynote address next week in Atlanta, Georgia before the first meeting of the "New Baptist Covenant". It's a group formed by former President Jimmy Carter to unite Baptists "around an agenda of Christ-centered social ministry."

JIMMY CARTER: Strengthening God's kingdom on earth in the name of Jesus Christ our savior.

BILL MOYERS: Former President Bill Clinton and former Vice President Al Gore will speak so will Republican Senators Lindsey Graham and Charles Grassley. John Grisham is a devout Baptist laymen .a member of University Baptist Church in Charlottesville, VA. And a veteran Sunday school teacher, like Jimmy Carter himself. He has some strong feelings about social justice and the state of democracy. I invited him to the studio for a conversation. Welcome to the Journal.

BILL MOYERS: You so rarely give speeches that I'm curious as to why you chose this gathering in Atlanta for a forum?

JOHN GRISHAM: I didn't have much of a choice. The phone rang a couple weeks ago, on Saturday morning, and it was Jimmy Carter. And I'd never talked to him before. And he invited me to come down. And I told him I probably couldn't do it because my next book comes out that week, January the 29th. And he said, "Well, can I be pushy?" You know, I don't know how you tell a former president they can't be pushy. And I said, "Sure." And he said, "I really want you to come." I said, "Okay. I'll be happy to do it." So I'm looking forward to it.

BILL MOYERS: What is the new one?

JOHN GRISHAM: It's called THE APPEAL. You'll love it. It's got more politics than anything I've written. It's tons of politics, tons of legal intrigue. It's about — all my books are based, in some degree on something that really happened. There's an element in truth in all these books. This is about the election of a Supreme Court justice in the state of Mississippi.

Thirty some odd states elect their judges, which is a bad system. Because-- if they allow private money. Just like a campaign. Just like the campaign we're watching now for president. You got corporate people throwing money in. You got big individuals. You got, you know, cash coming in to elect a judge who may hear your case. Think about that. You've got a case pending before the court and you want to reshape the structure of the court, well, just to get your guy elected. And that's happened in several states. Big money comes in, take out a bad judge, or an unsympathetic judge. Replace him with someone who may be more friendly to you. And he gets to rule in your case without a conflict.

BILL MOYERS: Is this the story of the corporation that dumps the toxic poisons into the stream. Ruins the community's drinking water?

JOHN GRISHAM: It starts off with a verdict. Chapter one is a verdict where this big chemical company has polluted this small town to the point where you can't even drink the water. It's become a cancer cluster. A lot of people have died. And so there's a big lawsuit. And that's the opening of the book. And then it's all the intrigue

about what that company does. Because the guy who owns that company doesn't like the composition of the Supreme Court. And he realizes he can change it. And so--

BILL MOYERS: By buying an election. He can buy the judge.

JOHN GRISHAM: Buy your judge. It's bad at the Supreme Court level, but even at a local level, you know--

BILL MOYERS: You mean at the state Supreme Court level.

JOHN GRISHAM: State Supreme-- oh yeah, state Supreme Court. All these are state Supreme Court--

BILL MOYERS: What practical consequences issue from the fact that judges in Mississippi are often determined by the most money that goes into the campaign? What's the practical consequences for citizens?

JOHN GRISHAM: In a state like Mississippi, where the court has now been realigned in such a way where you have a hard right majority. Six or seven. Two or three dissents. When you've got a majority you only need five. Virtually every plaintiff's verdict is reversed.

BILL MOYERS: Virtually every one?

JOHN GRISHAM: Virtually every one. So if you have a-- if your neighbor's son gets killed in a car wreck, and there's a big lawsuit, and there's a big verdict against the, you know, the guilt of the negligent party-- or if your friend is injured by a negligent doctor, or a hospital, whatever, you're pretty much out of luck.

BILL MOYERS: So the court is now decidedly biased, in your judgment, in favor of the powerful.

JOHN GRISHAM: Oh, it's not in my judgment. It's a proven fact. You can read the Supreme Court decisions in Mississippi, and Alabama, to those two states are next door to each other. And both states have a hard right majority. And so people with legitimate claims are, not always, but generally out of luck.

BILL MOYERS: Isn't there any outrage among all those good Christian folks, as my mother would say, who live there, who are ordinary folks, little folks?

JOHN GRISHAM: No. Because they sell it, the Chamber of Commerce sells it. Corporate America sells it and the Republican party sells it as a way to protect business, economic development, economic growth. "Look at our state. We frown on lawsuits. We frown on unions. This is a good place to do business." That's how you sell it. Sounds good. It's how every politician does it down there. And you end up with a court that that's very unsympathetic to the rights of victims. To the rights of consumers. To the rights of criminal defendants. Yeah, that's what happens when these elections — when those types of people are elected.

BILL MOYERS: What is your understanding of why these good Christian folks, these so many Baptists voted for the party that is in fact the party of money.

JOHN GRISHAM: They live poor and vote rich. They live poor and vote rich. I mean, it's a-- effort to-- the brilliant things the Republicans did was get all these guys under one tent. From your traditional Republican base-- wealthy republicans, your country club Republicans-- your corporate Republicans, and bring in the NASCAR bubbas and all those folks. And then bring-- and then get religious right. All these good Christian folks. Get them all under one tent. All voting-- really for-- one purpose, and that's to protect, you know, the rich folks. That's worked beautifully for the Republican party.

BILL MOYERS: You know I think I've read just about every one of your novels. Predators show up all the time. The little guy does get screwed until one of your protagonists shows up to take on the case. But you're describing, you know, I grew up in a small town too. You're describing small town justice.

JOHN GRISHAM: Yes sir. That's what I know. I was there. And-- but I also study it. Watch it. You know, by reading about cases. The Innocent Man was, you know, the most recent example of I never wanted to write a nonfiction book. I'm having too

much fun with the novels. It's a whole lot more fun — a whole lot more easier to create stuff in the-- than to go research a bunch of facts and have to do the hard work. And I try to avoid hard work if at all possible. But I had to go do a lot of research.

BILL MOYERS: THE INNOCENT MAN was John Grisham's first foray into non-fiction — a deeply researched investigation into Why Ron Williamson and another man were wrongly convicted of a 1982 murder. Eleven years later, DNA evidence proved their innocence, freeing Williamson from death row.

JOHN GRISHAM: We've sent 130 men to death row to be executed in this country, at least 130 that we know of, who have later have been exonerated because they were either innocent, or they were not fairly tried. That's 130 people that we've locked down on death row. And they've spent years there. Including Ron Williamson, the guy I wrote about. Well, you know, if that doesn't bother you, go to death row. Go see a death row. Go look at one.

Your first reaction is how could someone survive here? How could you live? You're in a very small cell. Just a few feet by few feet. And you're there usually with a bunk mate, roommate, or whatever-- a cell mate, I should-- celly. For 23 hours a day. And you know, how do you keep your sanity? They do, most of them. They function, they survive. It's you know, they are very, very harsh conditions. And perhaps they should be.

I'm not saying prison should be, you know, an easy place. But-- imagine, it's tough enough if you're guilty. If you're a serial murderer, there-- it's tough enough. But think if you're an innocent man? If you know you didn't do the crime. And the guy who did do the murder is still out there. You're serving his time, and nobody's listening to you. Nobody's listening to you. Those are powerful stories.

BILL MOYERS: I found THE INNOCENT MAN my favorite of your last number of books, because I could recognize so many of those characters. And what struck me is, the prosecutor was reelected unopposed, despite the fact that the town knew he had convicted the wrong man. What do you take from that?

JOHN GRISHAM: Let me say, exonerations are there have been a lot of them. We've kind of gotten used to them. They happen all the time now. But it's still unusual, you know, for the wrong person to be convicted of a murder. However, in this one town there were two men who were wrongfully convicted for this murder. There was another crime — a rape — that happened about the same time, that they got the wrong man there. And he spent 20 years in prison. Wrongful convictions happen every week in every state in this country. And they happen for all the same reasons. Sloppy police work. Eyewitness identification is the most-- is the worst type almost. Because it's wrong about half the time. Think about that.

BILL MOYERS: Eyewitnesses?

JOHN GRISHAM: Eyewitness identification. They get it wrong about half the time. And that's sent more men to prison than probably anything else. Sloppy police work. Sloppy prosecutions. Junk science. Snitch testimony. What-- it happens all the time. You get some snitch in a jail who wants out, and he comes in and says, "Oh, I heard your defendant confess." And they'll say, "Well, okay, we'll reduce your time and we'll let you out if you'll testify at trial."

So there should be rules governing snitch testimony. But there are a lot of reasons.There are five or six primary reasons you have wrongful convictions. All could be addressed. All could be fixed with the right statutes. And it would save a lot of wrongful-- the human cost of wrongful convictions is enormous. But the economic cost is huge too.

BILL MOYERS: What do you mean?

JOHN GRISHAM: Keeping a guy in prison costs 50,000 bucks a year. Executing one costs a couple million. I mean--

BILL MOYERS: A couple million dollars?

JOHN GRISHAM: It varies from state to state, yeah. It varies from state to state.

BILL MOYERS: Wow.

JOHN GRISHAM: But it's expensive to crank up the machinery of death.

BILL MOYERS: What would you do with someone who's known guilty?

JOHN GRISHAM: Oh, listen, I have no sympathy for violent criminals. And this country was so sick of violent crime. That's one reason we've reacted the way we do. And we still have the death penalty. And we still have two million people in prison in this country right now. Two million. Our prisons are choked they're so full, okay. And most of them are non violent. You know, most of them — and we're spending between 40 and $80,000 somewhere to house them. Every guy in prison.

Now, somebody's not doing the math here. You know, we're spending all this money on these people. But for the violent people, the murderers, rape-- or what, you know, whatever. And there are some criminals who do not belong outside of, you know, prison. I'm not in favor of the death penalty. But I'm in favor of locking these people away in maximum security units where they can never get out. They can never escape. They can never be paroled.

Lock the bad ones away. But you gotta rethink everybody else. You gotta rethink the young kids who are in there because of, you know, crack cocaine. I mean, they need help. And if-they serve five years they get out there and do the same thing over and over again. So it-- we're not-- you know, the system's getting worse.

BILL MOYERS: You know, I know writers don't often know the sources that influence their work, and don't often like to be asked about it. But do you think your faith has been responsible for shaping this sense of injustice that comes through so often? Your taking on the predators--

JOHN GRISHAM: Yeah, in the later books. In the early books-- you know, I write two or three different kinds of books. First you have the legal thriller the early books --THE FIRM, THE PELICAN BRIEF and THE CLIENT were-- that was fresh, it was new, and it was suspenseful, and the books were you know, very popular. And it was just pure entertainment. There was no message. There was no issue. There was nothing serious about the books -- it was just pure entertainment. And they worked beautifully.

But as the years have gone by, I've caught myself more and more taking an issue. When I can take an issue, whether it's the death penalty, or homelessness, or to-- big tobacco, or insurance abuse or whatever. But when I can take an issue and wrap a novel around it, and make it compelling, make the pages turn and make it very suspenseful, and get the reader hooked up in the book, and also get the reader, for the first time, maybe, to think about a problem from a different viewpoint. Those are the best books.

The more books I write the more I seem to think about social injustice and the stories I have for future books -- there are a lot more ideas dealing with what's wrong with our systems. And maybe how to fix them. Not that I know how to fix them. But I can sure show you what's wrong with them.

BILL MOYERS: You do, in your work, paint a pretty dark portrait of what it's like to be poor, to be marginalized, to be in the minority. Where does that come from?

JOHN GRISHAM: Well, I didn't live it myself. But when you grow up in Mississippi and Arkansas you see it. You can still it now. And, you know, the deep south and in other areas.

BILL MOYERS: You were a lawyer eight years, right? In Mississippi before you wrote A Time To Kill.

JOHN GRISHAM: Almost ten years I practiced law in a small town in Mississippi. And my clients were working people and poor people. And-- people-- victims. People - accused of, people that lost their jobs, that lost their insurance. But, also on the criminal side, people accused of crimes. And that's shaped my life. Because I was always fighting for these people against, you know, something bigger. The legal experience was formative. I would never have written a first book had I not been a lawyer. I didn't dream of writing. When I was reading Steinbeck in high school I was gonna be a professional athlete. I had no talent, but a lot of big dreams. That didn't work out. I couldn't even play in college. But I I never thought I was going to be a writer. It came later in life, after I'd practiced law for a few years.

BILL MOYERS: Why so much politics now? You seem to be talking more politics.

JOHN GRISHAM: Yeah.

BILL MOYERS: Playing more politics. Writing more politics. Which is something risky for a writer to say because your readers may not agree with your politics.

JOHN GRISHAM: Yeah, you know I guess it's risky. I think we're all caught up in politics. I think what-- with the war going and how-- how could you not be caught in politics? A bad war. A lot of the issues of the day are political issues. And then we just did something in '07 we've never done before -- we went through an entire year before the election, 12 months of nonstop politics. We had debate a year ago in January, in '07. It's been the entire year. We'll spend this entire year. It's two years, you know, electing a president. And that's probably the way of the future. I think as a society we just have this insatiable appetitive now for more and more politics. We've got the 24 hour cable shows. Everybody's an analyst. Everybody's an expert, you know. So we get caught up in it.

BILL MOYERS: You once called the war "a moral abomination."

JOHN GRISHAM: I did. Still do.

BILL MOYERS: How so?

JOHN GRISHAM: Well, it's, you know, we attacked a sovereign nation that did-- was not threatening us. What was our justification? I don't know. We were lied to by our leaders. It wasn't what they said it was. We have killed, I'm not saying "we" have killed, but estimates are half a million Iraqis have died since the war started.

BILL MOYERS: You can't get an exact figure. It ranges from 125,000 up to...

JOHN GRISHAM: 600,000--it's still a lot of people. They wouldn't be dead, I don't think, had-- we not gone there. How do you get out? We lost 4,000 very brave soldiers who would love their country, and would go fighting where they were told because they're soldiers. Tens of thousands of shattered lives. We're not taking care of the veterans when they come home. The social cost of this will go-- is enormous.

BILL MOYERS: The brutality of war. And the battles of politics couldn't be further removed from A PAINTED HOUSE - my other favorite of John Grisham's books. It tells the story of a little boy growing up on a cotton farm in rural Arkansas.

BILL MOYERS: Why did you write PAINTED HOUSE? Is it autobiographical?

JOHN GRISHAM: Yeah, it's very autobiographical up to a point. The setting is very accurate. The first seven years of my life I was on a cotton farm. I remember the Mexican farm workers living in the top of the barn. I remember playing baseball with Juan. We had the same name. I remember the floods, losing crops. The house in the book was my grandparents' house. We didn't live with them. We lived not too far away.

So this and the church stuff is very-- Black Oak Baptist Church, that's where we went. It was in town. And my mother was a town girl. She grew up in Black Oak. My father was a country boy-- he was, you know, five miles apart. But, you know, the social structure in these little towns are very important. And my mother said one time she got in a big fight with-- two kids. She got in a fight with a kid who lived out in the country. And as the ultimate insult, little girls to-- said to my mother, she said, "Yeah, but you live in a painted house." Meaning that you're kind of a uptown snooty girl because your house is painted. And it was very real, very true. And Mother's told that story for years. And the title was always-- that was always the title from day one.

BILL MOYERS: How do you explain the fact that so many southerners do become good storytellers and good politicians? They tell stories from the stump.

JOHN GRISHAM: I think anytime you have a geographical location a region where you have-- had and still may have a lot of suffering, a lotta conflict-- you gonna have good stories. You're gonna have great writers. Because there's so much material. You look at the tortured history of the south, the cruelty, the war, the poverty-- all the violence in the history of the south-- it gives rise to great stories.

BILL MOYERS: There's also the conversation. I remember my mother talking across the back fence to Miss Platt who was our landlord. I remember the voices of the

people coming home from the theater at 9:00, at 10:00 at night, walking just five yards from my bed. I went down to the courthouse square and heard the white farmers on one side of town telling their stories and the black farmers on the other side of town telling their stories. It was hard to come out of there and not have stories-ratcheting in your head. You remember that?

JOHN GRISHAM: Well, I can remember my, not necessarily my grandfather but my father telling stories his grandfather told him. And these were poor folks with no television, maybe radio, no telephones. They talked. They talked. They talked. They told stories.

BILL MOYERS: What about the sermons? Did you hear a lot of sermons?

JOHN GRISHAM: Well, good gosh, yeah. I mean, I heard 'em all-- from the-- from the long sermon on Sunday morning when you're sitting there soaked with sweat to the revivalist, the evangelists who'd come to town for the big crusades, the tent crusades with-- where the whole town would show up, And it was kind of exciting at times and boring at times. But I've heard a lot of sermons.

BILL MOYERS: Were you born again?

JOHN GRISHAM: Sure. When I was eight years old first Baptist church in Parkin, Arkansas. I felt the call to become a Christian. I felt the need to. I talked to my parents. I talked to my pastor. And I accepted Christ when I was eight as old, just a little small boy And-- like most of the kids, you know, in my church, and my brothers and sisters --that was very much a part of growing up.

BILL MOYERS: And when you look back half a century later, how do you think that moment has played out in your life and in your work?

JOHN GRISHAM: Well-- you know, once you make that conversion, you are and always will be something different, a different person. I can't say it impacts what I choose to write. But it certainly impacts how I write. The great secret to THE FIRM, and this is what, you know, people don't realize--

BILL MOYERS: The second book.

JOHN GRISHAM: --second book, that book was-- first printing was 50,000 copies, which is nothing to sneeze at. People read that book And when they finished it, they realized they could give it to their 15-year-old or their 80-year-old mother and not be embarrassed. It sold a zillion copies because of that. My books are exceptionally clean by today's standards. There are things I don't want to write, can't write. I wrote a sex scene one time and showed it to my wife. And she burst out laughing. She said, "What do you know about sex?" But--

BILL MOYERS: Spoken like a true Baptist--

JOHN GRISHAM: --the language-- the content, the language, even the violence, is something that is easy to stomach. And I would not, because of my faith write any other way.

BILL MOYERS: John Grisham, thank you very much for joining me. I've enjoyed this immensely.

JOHN GRISHAM: My pleasure. I enjoyed it too, Bill. Thank you very much.

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