

**KENDZIOR, from page 4**

political climate of the U.S. We are still the bellwether state, in the worst possible way.”

So I asked her, what do we have to learn from Missouri right now?

**Sarah Kendzior:** Historically, Missouri tends to be ahead of the curve. You see all these innovators in American life that came out of Missouri, like Mark Twain, or Chuck Berry or Walt Disney – the sort of people who kind of invented the idea of, or this fantasy of, what America was.

It also was the center of industry. And St. Louis was one of the first cities to have a huge decline in the mid-century when you saw the problems of poverty and racial strife. We're located between East and West, between North and South. The issues between white and black populations really came to a head in regions where we lived. So you saw white flight, you had segregated housing, you saw a rise in violence. All the bad trends that the U.S. has been dealing with for the last 50 or so years hit Missouri and St. Louis first.

I think it's continuing now, and one of the worst trends we have nationally is our corrupt officials behaving with total impunity with no regard for the will of the legislature, no desire to serve the public, no interest in the public welfare. Greitens really embodied that. There had been calls for his impeachment since January, when these revelations about him came out. In a rare moment for Missouri there was a bipartisan consensus that he was so abhorrent, and so awful for so many different violations – he was charged with multiple felonies – that he had to go. And he just stayed there!

That's exactly how I think Trump would behave if Trump were impeached by the GOP. It's hard for me to imagine the GOP actually getting their shit together and having the guts to do that, but if they did, I think he would just refuse to leave. And that impunity, that total disregard for consequences or accountability, is very upsetting to see and you're certainly seeing it play out in Missouri in that it took so long for Greitens to leave.

**Joanne Zuhl:** *What compelled people to support Trump? Did people struggling in middle America really look at Trump and think, "Yeah, that guy gets me?"*

**S.K.:** This isn't a monolithic group of people. People voted for Trump for a variety of reasons. One thing that is monolithic is race, in almost everyone who voted for him is white. I think you would basically need to be white in order to overlook all of those attacks on racial and ethnic minorities and feel that you are going to be protected from them.

That said, I did encounter voters who really fell for his kind of economic talk. They felt desperate, they felt angry, they felt betrayed, and Trump is very good at tapping into others' pain. I don't think he is capable of empathy or compassion for other people, but I think he has vulture-like instincts for preying on people's pain and exploiting it and using it. You see demagogues across history who have been very effective at this.

I'll never forget, (Trump) once said the unemployment rate was 40 percent. All the pundits were laughing about it, like, "oh my

God! Who would believe such a ridiculous claim.”

And I kept thinking, that is exactly how it feels. It feels like unemployment is 40 percent. Because almost everyone I know is underemployed, working a part-time job, or has no benefits, or has really low wages or hasn't had a raise in a decade. They're constantly on the edge of losing everything they have or losing their home. And that feeling is real.

So he told a lie that felt true, and that can be effective. That resonated with a lot of people because they felt like their concerns weren't being heard. And I think if he hadn't been such a massive bigot and xenophobe, this approach of talking about the economy that way might have also been effective with low-wage workers who are not white. But of course, (non-white voters) were listening to him denigrate Mexicans, and knew his lifetime of denigrating black people. They saw through it and saw him as a con man, whereas a lot of white people fell for it.

In Missouri, there has been a lot of outcry, even from Republicans, about his policies. Still, there's kind of a sense of community in confronting this, in saying, "Wow. We were conned, yet again. We're going to be in for a worse ride, yet again, and we brought this on ourselves by voting for him." And I hope that people just admit that this is a lifelong con man, and when you feel vulnerable it is easy to be exploited. And the point should be how do we solve this? How do we make people's lives fairer, and turn this around? I think a key step in that is getting rid of Donald Trump.

**J.Z.:** *But it feels like things are getting even more divided. We can't rubber-band our way back to where we were before. What are we going to be like as an electorate, or democracy, in the next elections?*

**S.K.:** The majority of my adult life, America, in my mind, has been in decline. We've had two wars, one of which was fought on completely false pretenses. We've had a recession that never ended. We've had all these very dramatic changes with social media and how we can communicate, which I think has been handled really badly, leading to a mob mentality.

I don't think we'll ever be the same. I think the goal should be to be better than what we are, and to try to confront the problems at hand rather than having nostalgia for what came before.

What I've seen now is less assertive. There is hyper-partisanship for those who claim allegiance to a political party. That has really intensified under Trump where you have this tribalism and this blind loyalty, especially on the Republican side, for authority. But I think people in general are mostly disillusioned. They're scared. Most people in the U.S. don't belong to a political party. Most people are independent. About half of the country didn't vote. So you've got a lot of people who are fed up across the board.

We've had these record protests, the women's marches, the anti-gun violence marches, the teacher marches. We've had all these mass movements of people who just said, "I've had enough. I'm going to stand up for myself. I'm going to stand up for other people." And that can lead to positive change.

You see people confronting these

problems in a very direct way and mobilizing others to do so.

But then you have a power structure that is much more oppressive than the ones we've had before. One that has no regard for the Constitution, for freedom of speech, for freedom of assembly. One that's actively attacking the courts and our constitutional principles. That makes for a difficult situation.

I think the kind of surveillance effect of social media is really damaging because if people have a more ambivalent attitude or they want to have a good faith argument, it's really hard to do when you have an audience. And I see that on Twitter all the time, where someone comes in with a genuine question and they get battered down. Or people will take Twitter as an opportunity to humiliate others. And all that is very negative, and it's contributing to a bad climate, but it's not entirely representative to what's happening on the ground.

**J.Z.:** *You studied kleptocratic and authoritarian countries. What are the lessons for America today?*

**S.K.:** I started out studying the authoritarian states of the former Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia. And the difference between those countries and us is that they've never had a democratic tradition. It's not to say there aren't people there who seek freedom, who seek justice. You definitely hear a lot of demands couched in those terms, but there's never been a government that's given them that. So their expectations are different.

We have a set of expectations, we have a constitution. We're used to basic rights, although those rights are unequally distributed. And we have had authoritarian policies throughout our history – the very obvious being slavery, the genocide of Native Americans, Jim Crow laws – so we were never immune to this. But it's kind of hard to compare because of those expectations.

I think better examples might be the move toward authoritarianism in kleptocratic governments in Europe, particularly Hungary, Poland, Turkey – countries which did have a democracy.

In the case of the former Warsaw Pact countries, they had come out of being dominated by the Soviet Union and being deprived of freedom. They became democracies and those democracies eroded. There are a lot of things to look for, and I document in this book the institutional weaknesses: weaknesses in our economy, in social trust, in our political system. Trusting different parties to actually represent you and acknowledge problems on the ground. When that anger burns for such a long time, it just takes a demagogue to come in and exploit it.

Another thing that characterizes this era is digital media. There's a lot to learn about propaganda when you look at Trump, and a lot of people have rightfully brought up Nazi Germany and its propaganda apparatus as an example. But there has never been a digital media infrastructure and this ability to impersonate people – hordes of anonymous bots that stand in for conventional wisdom but don't actually

**See KENDZIOR, page 7**