

Robert E. Lee & Volunteer Networks to Solve Crime What Happens Next – 10.3.2021

My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where experts are given just SIX minutes to present their argument. This is followed by a Q&A period for deeper engagement.

This week's topics include Robert E Lee and Bellingcat: How a volunteer network solves crimes.

Our first speaker today will be Allen Guelzo. He is Director of the James Madison Program Initiative on Politics and Statesmanship at Princeton University. Previously, he was the Henry R. Luce Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College. You may recall that Allen spoke on What Happens Next about the monuments controversy, and today he will discuss his new book which is a biography of Robert E. Lee. I hope to learn about why the confederate general has such a continuing historical relevance.

Our second speaker is Eliot Higgins. Eliot started an organization called Bellingcat that works with volunteers to solve war crimes using open source video and data. Bellingcat has successfully exposed some major atrocities such as exposing that a Russian missile shot down a Malaysian airliner over the Ukraine. Bellingcat's volunteer network also proved that Russian agents used a biological weapon to kill a double agent on British soil. I hope to learn from Eliot how he successfully put together an organization with 1000s of volunteers to solve crimes faster than the world's best law enforcement agencies.

During the live call, please feel free to email me questions at larrybernstein1@gmail.com

Let's begin today's program with our first speaker Allen Guelzo.

Allen Guelzo

Larry, it is a pleasure once again, to be talking to you and to your audience, and today, I'm going to talk about Robert E. Lee, who in the days before the American Civil War could have been considered the very model of an American soldier. He was the son of a revolutionary war hero, Light-Horse Harry Lee, protégé of George Washington. He entered West Point in 1825. Did so well, he graduated in 1829 second in his class. Went into the elite core of engineers and earned his most impressive military bouquets serving under Winfield Scott in the Mexican War. He was Scott's Chief Aide in the dramatic campaign from the coast of Veracruz to Mexico City in 1847 during the Mexican American War.

He later then served as Superintendent of West Point, then from 1855 to 1861, Lee was the Lieutenant Colonel of the 2nd Cavalry. And then finally, with the outbreak of the Civil War, he was offered Field Command of the United States forces to deal with the breakaway Southern Confederacy.

And at that moment, he turned his back on more than 30 years of service and took command, first of the Virginia State Forces, and then of the biggest Confederate Field Army, the army of Northern Virginia, which he led to many victories, but finally was compelled to surrender in 1865. Almost nothing in those preceding 30 years gives the slightest hint of the decision he made to leave the army, to reject his oath to defend the United States, to really commit treason against the United States.

So the great question about Robert E. Lee is why? Why did he do it?

His general answer in 1861, was that he was a Virginian, and when Virginia seceded from the Union and joined the Confederacy, he was obliged to follow them. But really was he? Robert E. Lee was born in Virginia in 1807, but he'd grown up in Alexandria, which was then part of the District of Columbia and most of the places to which he had been assigned in his long career, as an engineer were other places; Georgia, St. Louis, Baltimore, New York City. In fact, the curiosity is that he actually spent more time consistently in New York than he did almost any other place in the country.

What Lee could not ignore were two very important factors that were confronting him. First of all, his father, the great Light-Horse Harry Lee, had been a real hard luck husband and father, and he left his family for the West Indies when Robert was only six years old. The shadow that Light-Horse Harry cast over the Lee name was one that Robert struggled all his life to redeem, so there's always this broad streak of perfectionism in his behavior. But he also yearned to breathe free of his father's reputation in other ways. He wanted independence. He wanted to be his own man. And in one sense, when he marries Mary Randolph Custis, he's marrying into one of the first families of Virginia. That's an attempt to stake out a realm for himself.

But Lee also yearns for security. While most of his contemporaries in the army resign their commissions and go into private practice, he stays in the army because it's secure employment. Now the hinge factor where this touches his decision was the family estate at Arlington. This is today the great National Cemetery, but in Lee's day, it was his wife's property. It was the property of the Custis family. He lived there and it was as much to protect Arlington for his family, as it was for Virginia, that he chose to resign his commission and refused the offer of command. But that's only one factor.

The other factor in Lee's decision is his expectation that there really was not going to be a Civil War after all. He makes this decision on April 20th, 1861. Now, hard as it may be for us to appreciate this, in April 1861, even after the secession of the Southern States, even after the firing on Fort Sumter, it was not clear that the crisis would only result in a Civil War. Lee could have simply resigned and stayed neutral, or he could accept the invitation extended to him to take command of Virginia forces and play the role of mediator between Virginia and the Union, and thus achieve by peacemaking, a fame greater than his father had ever enjoyed.

Now, it didn't turn out that way. Like many others Lee found the secession crisis galloping away from him, and in the end step by step by step, he found himself by 1862 as the Commander of

the Army of Northern Virginia. And he played that role as perfectly as he tried to play every other role in life. That he failed did not necessarily surprise him. On the way to Appomattox, he frankly admitted that he'd always expected that the war would turn out the way Appomattox showed that it would. But at least his conduct would show how he could rise even above defeat. So in the end, he still keeps that pursuit of perfection intact. But I think that's the real nub of what we sometimes call the decision, but really a series of incremental decisions that leads Robert E. Lee away from being a model US army officer to becoming the Robert E. Lee, who becomes the great Confederate Army General.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's start out with that critical first decision where Winfield Scott and Abraham Lincoln want to smoke Lee out, to find out which side of the battlefield he's on, and I think you're absolutely right. I mean, he could have stayed neutral. If he really wanted to preserve the family estate by obviously joining the Confederacy in the way he did, he put that at risk. Why did Lincoln want to put a Virginian as head of the US army? Was that a serious offer? And second, why didn't he just stay neutral? Why did he have to take command of the Confederate Army? Why didn't he just say, "I'm on both sides of this. I'm staying out. I'm neutral?"

Allen Guelzo:

Well, understand that Lincoln, from the time that he's elected in November 1860, until he is inaugurated on the 4th of March 1861, Lincoln is dealing with a crisis over which he doesn't have a whole lot of control. The Southern States are seceding from the Union. Seven of the Southern States, the Gulf States had seceded from the Union to form this new entity, the Confederate States of America. And yet all through the speeches he gives from the time that he's elected until the time he's inaugurated, he keeps downplaying it. This is a phony crisis. This is a crisis which even gotten up by a lot of hot heads. When I become President, we're going to sit down, we're going to reconstruct things and there's going to be peace again and the entire nation will move forward.

And I don't think he was talking simply for effect there. I think he really believed that all of the conversations about secession had really been contrived by a lot of hot heads who would soon enough run out of gas, and the sober people would, once again, regain control, discussion would take place and a peaceful city situation and resolution would be achieved. To do this, to show his own good faith as President of the United States, Lincoln goes out of his way to make offers to southerners to join his Cabinet. Especially he makes a very strong offer to John A. Gilmer, a North Carolinian, to join his Cabinet. And he feels out other people who are either border state people, or who are southerners, about participating in the government. He wants to show he's trying to reach out and make a government, or at least a Cabinet, that will include everybody, and therefore all the Southern hotheads really can be undercut by that kind of a decision.

So it's really not a surprise that he would feel inclined to turn to a Virginian, or at least someone who was born in Virginia, for Field Command. That would be another signal. I am not thinking in terms of vindictiveness. I really want to bring southerners back into the nation and here's the proof of it in the purity of my appointment. Why would Lee accept it? Well, there are a number of reasons why Lee would say yes to this invitation. One is he put 30 years in the army. His family were all connected to at first his father, the Federalists, and then the Whig Party. Federalists and Whigs had always had a very national rather than state or sectional orientation. And yet there were also forces that could push him the other way.

If for instance, he agreed to accept that command and the commands offered to him through Francis Preston Blair, one of the great political operatives in Washington, who is acting to represent Lincoln. If Lee accepts that command of Federal Forces, there's a strong probability that Virginia, which is just seceded from the Union, will occupy Arlington and confiscate it, because our Arlington's built on a bluff on the Potomac River, overlooking the national capital. People in Richmond said, "Put a couple of batteries of artillery up there and we'll have the Lincoln government in the bag." So he's aware that if he makes a wrong move that way, that could be the end of Arlington for his family.

On the other hand, if he agrees, if he resigns from the US army, turns down the offer; if he agrees to talk to the people at Richmond, and if he agrees well, perhaps to remain neutral or even to go to Richmond and accept what's being offered to him, well, there's liable not to be a war, and if there's no war, then Virginia's not going to confiscate Arlington. And if there no war the Union across the Potomac River is not going to confiscate Arlington. And he, there can be in Richmond working hard to promote reconciliation and some kind of peace agreement, which is exactly what people thought was going to happen in the middle of the April 1861.

Even Winfield Scott, the General whom he had served in Mexico and who was kind of a father figure for him, even Winfield Scott predicted that the country might break into two or three Confederacies, but only temporarily. They would come together. They would be a reconstruction of the Union. That, by the way, is the first time that word is used. There'd be a reconstruction of the Union, and there would be Robert E. Lee as one of the principal architects of this reconstructed Union. That seemed to be a perfectly likely and logical scenario. So he goes to Richmond, and in fact, in the month when he is commanding just the Virginia State Forces, all the orders he gives are, "Go on the defensive, stay on the defensive. Don't cross the Potomac river. Don't provoke anything."

When Stonewall Jackson... Who isn't nicknamed Stonewall yet, that won't happen until after the battle known as the First Bull Run, when Stonewall Jackson crosses the Potomac River into Maryland. Lee orders him back to Virginia because he doesn't want any provocation, because he's hoping that peace is actually going to be the result. Well, it doesn't turn out that way. And as I say, step by incremental step, Lee is drawn further and further and further into this secession situation, further and further into the arms of the Confederacy, and he ends up commanding the Army of Northern Virginia as the most famous of the Confederacy's Generals.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to change subjects to strategy for the war itself. My understanding is that when Lincoln first meets with Winfield Scott, Winfield Scott says, "I'm not the man to run this army. I'm too old, I'm too fat." And Lincoln says, "How is this thing going to play out?" And Scott says something like, "The weakness of the Southern river system. Defense is very easy to do because of the technology of the time. But the Southern weakness are these rivers that go in from Tennessee deep into the south. And that should be the way towards victory." And I want to contrast that with how Robert E. Lee thought about strategy from the Confederate side. It seems that according to your book, what Lee was thinking was in order to persuade the North to give up, the Southern States, the confederates would have to invade the Northern States and cause trouble, suggesting to the people of the North that they should just sue for peace. And hence Robert E. Lee's decision to invade Pennsylvania and go after Gettysburg.

So it's interesting that the first thing you should mention is Jackson's invasion of Maryland because this later would become the core of Robert E. Lee's strategy. How do you think about the strategy for both Lee and for Scott, then later Grant, thinking about how to win this war?

Allen Guelzo:

Well, in some sense both Scott and Lee were right. Scott looking at things from the Union point of view, understood two things about the Union cause and the Union Forces. One is that the Union had vast resources and that over a long period of time those vast resources would eventually be the controlling factor in the outcome of the war. But he also understood that the available military forces, the Army of the United States as it was in 1861, was in no shape whatsoever to undertake any kind of dramatic invasion of the Confederacy. And so the recommendation of Winfield Scott is what's sometimes called the Anaconda Plan. Instead of trying to mount a too hasty attack on the Confederacy, what you do is you secure the external rivers and the external borders of the Confederacy, and then very gradually, very slowly squeeze it to death.

Looked at in the long term that actually was the strategy that did win the war. Lee understood that, but he understood it from looking at it through the other side of the telescope. He understood that the Confederacy could not survive the kind of war that Scott was recommending in the Anaconda Plan. Sooner or later, the superior resources of the North would eventually squeeze the life out of the Confederacy. How do you respond to that? Lee's recommendation was this. The South cannot go what we today would call a 15 round heavyweight bout. If the South is going to win its independence, it's got to score a surprise knockout in the first round. The only way to do that is cross the Potomac, head through Maryland into Pennsylvania, and either have some kind of climactic battle on Pennsylvania soil or else simply occupy time in Pennsylvania.

Have a Confederate army run around Pennsylvania through the summer and the autumn without lead or hindrance and thereby, by either result, show to the Northern people that the Lincoln administration is hopelessly incompetent and the political disenchantment that would emerge from that strategy would force the Lincoln administration to open peace negotiations with the Confederacy. Once you open those negotiations, no one is going back to fighting. And that would result in the independence of the Confederacy. What Lee was looking at was, like Scott, the long game, and in this case, Lee was playing not just a military long game, but he was playing a political long game, because what he planned to do militarily was to take as its target, the political will and resolve of the Northern States. He believed that could be worn away by the kind of strategy that he would perform on Northern soil and especially in Pennsylvania. And the truth is, Larry, it almost worked. He came very close to success that way.

Larry Bernstein:

Yeah, let's go to the Battle of Gettysburg. There's a lot of confusion in war particularly where there's poor communications at that particular point of time. Orders were confused, but still that's part of the game and you got to make do. How do you think about the battle of Gettysburg?

According to what you were just saying, did Lee make the right decision after the loss at Gettysburg to hastily retreat. I know Meade didn't follow him and that was a catastrophe. Or should he have gone somewhere else in Pennsylvania and done what you said, just caused trouble all over Pennsylvania? How do you think about Lee's decisions at Gettysburg and then Lee's decisions after the loss of Gettysburg?

Allen Guelzo:

Lee's overall campaign plan for the summer of 1863 was to get loose in Pennsylvania and either fight that climactic battle, which beforehand he predicted would probably be fought somewhere in the vicinity of Gettysburg, because Gettysburg is this wonderful center where all these roads come together in lower south central Pennsylvania. Either there was going to be a climactic battle like that, which he is confident of winning. I mean, he has just beaten the Army of the Potomac at two major battles at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

This is an army, which is lacking, as far as Lee is able to understand it, is lacking in morale. It's lacking in good leadership and it might well be defeated in a climactic battle. If that happens, then there's nothing that stands in the way of a Confederate army that would move on Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, who knows, even New York City. But even if it doesn't fight such a great battle, his presence in Pennsylvania, he's going to depress the political situation so greatly that the Lincoln administration might not recover from it.

Think of it this way. In the fall of 1862, Lincoln issues his preliminary emancipation proclamation. He gets nothing politically for that. His party loses something like 35 seats in the

House of Representatives and it loses two key Northern governorships, New York and New Jersey, to anti Lincoln Democrats.

In the fall of 1863, there were two more governor elections up. Pennsylvania and Ohio. If Lee can embarrass the Union cause in the summer of 1863, those elections in Pennsylvania and Ohio will go to anti Lincoln Democrats. Then look at the map, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, that's the center core war of the Union, as it existed in 1863. If the governors of those states fold their arms and say, "We are not cooperating further with this war, because it's obviously going nowhere." There would've been no choice. Lincoln would've had to go to the negotiating table and the result of that would've been nothing to require Confederate independence.

Now, it doesn't turn out that way because Lee loses the Battle of Gettysburg. But bear in mind two things. One is, it was a pretty close run there. Lee came within an ace of success at Gettysburg and the thought of the consequences of a Confederate victory on the third day at Gettysburg are enough to make your eyes roll back. It's a dreadful thought on its own terms.

The other thing is Lee loses so much in the Gettysburg battle that he really doesn't have much choice afterwards but to withdraw back across the Potomac, back into Virginia. But, by the time we get to the plans for the campaign of 1864, Lee, once again, wants to launch an invasion of the north. And he's only thwarted from doing that by the fact that Ulysses Grant has now taken charge of things in the Eastern theater and Grant launches his own campaign across the Rappahannock River. And that's the over land campaign that will, in the long run, win the war in the east.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to change subjects to the relationship between the army and the President and its civilian government. Samuel Huntington wrote this great book called *The Soldier and the State*, which showed how the US Army has consistently delegated its authority directly to the President and has really never attempted a coup or tried to undermine the civilian government.

And what I thought was interesting was not only was that the case with the federal government, but it also appears to have been the case with the Confederacy as well. I mean, there are times where Robert E. Lee is very negative on Jefferson Davis' actions and decisions, but he, according to your book, seems to be very deferential to the democratic process and delegation authority to the President of the Confederacy.

How do you think about *The Soldier and the State* as it related to Robert E. Lee's decision making process? And maybe you contrast that with McClellan's bad behavior, his decision, for example, to go to sleep, instead of meeting with the President, when Lincoln is waiting in his home foyer. His decision to run against Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election.

So what are your thoughts on the military's delegation of authority to civilians?

Allen Guelzo:

Well, in large measure, you have that difference of result in Lee and McClellan because of the experiences of Lee and McClellan, which are radically different on that point. Robert E. Lee is the son of a famous revolutionary war general who makes the mistake of getting himself too deeply involved in politics, Federalist politics in Virginia, even in Maryland. Robert E. Lee's father not only loses the governorship of Virginia, because he makes that kind of mistake, but he actually gets beaten within an inch of his life by an anti-Federalist mob in Baltimore. That was one reason why his father simply decamps and leaves for the West Indies.

So, there's exhibit A. If you are a military leader, if you're someone with a military reputation, don't touch the political third rail. It will electrocute you. All right. That's exhibit A, his own father.

Exhibit B. His first surrogate father, which was the man who was the head of the Corps of Engineers when Lee was first commissioned and that was Charles Gratiot. Lee relied a great deal on Charles Gratiot. He looked up to Charles Gratiot a great deal, and Charles Gratiot showered a great deal of attention on Lee. But Charles Gratiot made the mistake of running afoul of Andrew Jackson's administration and Jackson, and his successor, Martin Van Buren, punished Gratiot for it. And Gratiot found himself dismissed from the army, disgraced. He actually ends his career as a mere clerk in the federal land office. What a humiliation.

And then exhibit C is Winfield Scott. Despite Winfield Scott's great campaign from Veracruz to Mexico City in 1847, nevertheless, even Winfield Scott runs afoul of the jealousy of President James Knox Polk. And Scott himself is made to suffer for it, not as severely as Gratiot, but he's made to suffer for it.

And these three exhibits taken together are a constant lesson to Robert E. Lee. No military man should ever put his foot in the political river, because if you do, it will wash you away. And he has his dad, and Charles Gratiot and Winfield Scott showing that.

When Lee becomes the principal General of the Confederacy, he is almost alarmingly deferential to Jefferson Davis, even when he believes that Davis and the Confederate Congress are screwing things up royally. And I think the reason he is not going to go after Jefferson Davis is he has seen what happens to soldiers like his father, like Gratiot, like Scott. He has seen what happens to soldiers who involve themselves politically.

Contrast that with George McClellan. George McClellan's born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He graduates from West Point, amid the praise and applause of everyone. Everyone assumes he's going to be a military genius. When he becomes General in Chief of the Union armies, he simply assumes that he knows more than anyone else how a war should be conducted, and that includes Abraham Lincoln.

In fact, the contrast between McClellan, McClellan who's born to this elite Philadelphia medical family, goes to the University of Pennsylvania, goes to West Point. Contrast that with Abraham

Lincoln. This country lawyer from Illinois who speaks in this upper border accent. McClellan looked at Lincoln and the only conclusion he could draw from Lincoln was at Lincoln was an ignorant gorilla. In fact, that's the word he uses for Lincoln, the ignorant gorilla.

So his reaction when Lincoln tries to assert control as constitutional Commander in Chief is to say, "What do you know about anything?" It's not helped by the fact that McClellan's politics are oriented in the direction of the Democratic party. He has no sympathy for emancipation, no sympathy for any form of anti-slavery. And when Lincoln takes a step to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, McClellan almost balks at issuing the Proclamation in turn to his army. His political advisors have to tell him, "No, you've got to do this. Otherwise, it would be treason."

Allen Guelzo:

And there are people in his army telling George McClellan, "General, march on Washington. We will follow you." McClellan had come to believe that Lincoln, not Robert E. Lee, was the real problem in the Civil War.

And I think it is safe to say that in that month between the Battle of Antietam and the time when Lincoln finally summons up the determination to dismiss McClellan from his command, in that window of time, we were probably about as close to some kind of military intervention or military coup as we have ever been in American history. Very different reactions, Lee's and McClellan's. And the irony is the reaction that I think we should admire, the reaction I think Huntington admired in his book, is the reaction of Robert E. Lee, rather than the reaction of the Union Commander, George Britain McClellan.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned Lincoln's delayed tactic of firing the disrespectful McClellan. And I think he was talking with Secretary of War Stanton who was demanding that McClellan be fired. And Lincoln said something like, "It's easy for you to say to fire the General, but I have the responsibility to decide who should replace him and I don't have that man. And give me the replacement and I'm happy to fire him. But until such time, I'm boxed."

How do you think about the problems Lincoln faced and not only with McClellan, but his first few generals who were terrible?

Why did it take Lincoln so long to find someone like Grant and Sherman to run this war?

Allen Guelzo:

The wonder is he ever did find Grant and Sherman to run everything. Understand, the pre-war United States Army was really much more than a frontier constabulary. At the outbreak of the Civil War, the United States Army was exactly 16,000 men and officers. It was not a formidable fighting force. And it had never been designed that way. The officers who go to West Point are

put through a course of study to make them engineers, not to make them combat leaders or great strategic thinkers. 90% of the time, a cadet with a stint at West Point, would've been in studies related to engineering. In other words, the construction of fortifications.

So when the Civil War breaks out, it presents Lincoln, it presents the nation with a military necessity that no one has ever really planned for. And there's no one who really knows what to do. I mean, it's a terrible thing to admit because the American Civil War is our great story. It is our great *Iliad*. Yet the truth of the matter is that when we found ourselves involved in this Civil War, we had no one to put in charge of it but amateurs. Amateurs who barely knew what they were doing.

And so, one after another, these generals are put up and one after another and then gets knocked down. And this is true on both sides. After a while, you scratch your head and you think, wait a minute, doesn't anybody here know, as Casey Stengel once said, "How to play this game?" And it really looked like the people did not. Because in large measure, the United States Army had never been designed to do that.

So you have an entire military culture, which is having to retool itself on the job under pressure. And the marvel is that it actually does find some genuine natural talents, like Ulysses Grant, like William Tecumseh Sherman. I must add, even a natural military talent like Robert E. Lee. Finding them was almost accidental because the people who would ordinarily have advanced into positions of leadership were by and large people who were almost totally unfitted for it.

Larry Bernstein:

I mean, the class size of West Point is ridiculously small. You mentioned in your book, I think, that Lee was in a class of 46 cadets.

Allen Guelzo:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

And yet, despite the class size being so small, you get Lee, you get Grant, you get Johnston. There were a ... All these guys were in this class. It's just ... They must have known each other so well. I just find it mind boggling how small the class size is. It's like one of these New York City private schools.

Allen Guelzo:

Well, there was an advantage, at least in that. I mean, Lee and Johnston were both classmates at West Point. Grant and Sherman almost overlap. But a lot of the West Pointers who become

Generals in the Civil War, yes, they did know each other as cadets. And sometimes, that knowledge came in handy.

To give you an example. When John Bell Hood becomes Commander of the Army of Tennessee in 1864, William Tecumseh Sherman is a little puzzled by this. And he asks among his own, "Does any of you know John Bell Hood?" And one of them pops up and says, "Oh, yeah. I used to play poker with him. This is a man who would bet \$1,000 dollars with hardly a pair in his hands." And that told Sherman everything he needed to know about Hood, that Hood would launch one reckless attack after another. And all that Sherman had to do was to let Hood bleed his army to death.

Yeah. They knew each other that way and sometimes that knowledge could come in very handy. Not the kind of thing, by the way, that anybody was teaching in one of those classrooms at West Point. But still, it's practical. And as I say, sometimes very useful knowledge.

Larry Bernstein:

Why did you decide to write a book on Robert E. Lee and now? And why is his historical reputation, maybe in the decades after the war and maybe ending a couple decades ago, he was a master general. And why does it appear that his historical reputation is in decline?

Allen Guelzo:

Well, I decided to write a book about Robert E. Lee after I'd finished my book *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*, in 2013. And there were really two things operative in my mind. Up to this point, I had written almost exclusively in what you could call Union subjects. I'm a Yankee from Yankee land. I'm from Philadelphia. And I've never been the sort who looked at the lost cause with anything but skepticism and certainly never was inclined to put a halo around the head of Robert E. Lee. But having written so much about Abraham Lincoln in particular and about the Union cause in general, I was really intrigued by the possibility of looking at the Civil War through the other end of the telescope. What did this war look like from the Confederate point of view, and what better set of eyes to look at it through than those of Robert E. Lee. The other question that intrigued me this way was a little bit more, shall we say, speculative. That is, how do you write the biography of someone who commits treason? I don't use that word carelessly, I don't throw that around just to be nasty and to try to say something snarky about Robert E. Lee and thus offend everybody living below them. Mason-Dixon line, I'm looking at this constitutionally, I'm looking at this legally.

Robert E. Lee took an oath upon his commissioning in 1829 to defend the United States and to obey the orders of the President of the United States. There is an oath today that we take. My son, who is a serving officer in the United States Army, took this oath. My father, who was an officer, took the oath. I took the oath when I became a member of the National Council of the Humanities. What did it say? It said you'll preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the

United States against all enemies, domestic and foreign. I took that oath seriously, so did my father, so does my son.

For someone to turn his back on that was to raise his hand against everything that I held dear. I've often said to people that if I had been a soldier in 1861 to 1865, and if on some battlefield, Robert E. Lee had galloped into my gun sights, I would have pulled the trigger.

For me, the question then becomes how do you write what I've called difficult biography? When you write a biography of someone like Abraham Lincoln, you can write about someone that you can unreservedly admire. You can look at Lincoln and say, "Here is a great man and I admire him for being a great man," but how do you write the biography of someone who committed treason? How do you write the biography of someone who made big mistakes? I mean, for instance, how do you write a biography of Neville Chamberlain? I mean, Neville Chamberlain, why didn't Neville Chamberlain see Adolph Hitler for what he was? Was he blind? No. You ask the question and what you're confronted with is what I'm calling difficult biography.

How would you write the biography of someone who has done that? How would you write a difficult biography? That's what I really plunged into. Now, mind you, that was in 2013, 2014, when Robert E. Lee was still by and large simply a Confederate general out of the history of the Civil War. All that began to change dramatically after Charlottesville in 2017, and certainly began to change again after 2020. Robert E. Lee's reputation sank like a stone.

Certainly one thing which involved Lee and the sinking of Lee's reputation was that the Charlottesville riot took place around a statue, an equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee, but the larger question was what do statues of Robert E. Lee mean and what did they mean when they were erected? Were these monuments to white supremacy? If so, then that raises the whole question, why do we have these monuments on the landscape? Certainly, speaking as a Yankee, there is a certain puzzlement in my mind. Why would anyone even think about putting up a monument to Robert E. Lee? I mean, if someone came to me today and said, "We would like to know if you would sign onto a petition endorsing a new statue of Robert E. Lee," I would tell them, as politely as I could, to get lost.

When I look at things like that, when look at things like the Confederate flag, these are things which I'm manifestly unhappy with, and that has greatly complicated the process of writing this book. If this started out as difficult biography, it got more difficult as time went by, and yet you can't ignore difficult biography. Plutarch and Suetonius wrote about difficult biographical subjects. Plutarch has to write about Caesar and Alexander, he's got to write about Demosthenes and Cicero. There are aspects of the characters of those classical figures which were not pleasant. Suetonius has to write about Tiberius Caesar, and Tiberius was a monster of the first order.

We can't shrink from writing difficult biography, or there simply will be large blank gaps in our understanding, but writing difficult biography is a real challenge. It's a species of biographical

writing which requires you to do something which is difficult for a biographer to do, and that is to exercise the biographer's empathy, because that's what a biographer needs, to understand the subject, without that tipping over into a wretched kind of sympathy. You want to find that middle path, the middle path of empathy. You don't fall off one side into rank sympathy. That was for me, as a historian and as a writer, and in large measure, those are the reasons why I stuck with writing this book and have brought it to publication today.

Larry Bernstein:

It's strange how the view of the Confederacy has changed over time, maybe particularly from the Southern perspective. Lee is lionized by Southern historians almost immediately after the war and almost to the present day, but not only just historians, you've got organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy, even the weekend warriors who do reenactments of the Civil War seem to not worry about these issues, but focus on other aspects of the Confederacy, which might also bring in the concepts of the theory of a lost cause.

I took my son to go visit UT Austin as a potential place to go to college, and I snuck away and walked around the State Capital building. There was this monument, a statue, to the Lost Cause and it was very similar to some of the ideas that you were mentioning about the North's strategy like a snake. The monument's plaque said, "The South was just trying to fight for the Constitution and the fight was unfair. There was two odd million Northerners against 600,000 Confederates and of course we lost, but we gave everything we had." Lee is part of that lost cause concept of this noble soldier making the best out of bad options.

How do you think about these three aspects? One is why was he lionized for so long, how did it play into the thesis of the Lost Cause, and what is driving the ideas of Southern history?

Allen Guelzo:

Well, let me try to answer them in this order. First of all, Lee himself did not have direct involvement with the development of the Lost Cause myth. The Lost Cause began very early as an idea. There's a book published by Edward Pollard as early as 1866 called *The Lost Cause* and Pollard articulates a number of the ideas that you've just mentioned. Lee did not show a whole lot in the way of enthusiasm for that. Lee actively discouraged putting up monuments. Lee encouraged former Confederate leaders like Jubal Early, even the wife of Jefferson Davis, Varina Davis, to say nothing that would cause dissension and bad feeling between the sections, stay as far away from that as possible.

Lee doesn't attend reunions. In 1869, there was a serious effort made here, Gettysburg, to have a reunion of the major leaders of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia. The idea was they were going to go over the battlefield and talk over the various perspectives from each side. Lee refused to come. His answer simply was, "I really don't say that this is going

to promote healthy national feeling. We have to move beyond the war and there are greater challenges lying before us."

Lee does not lend much encouragement to the makers of the lost cause, he leans even less encouragement to forms of Southern resistance after the war. He gives no countenance at all to the Ku Klux Klan and he cooperates as far as he believes he's obliged to cooperate with Union reconstruction forces. He doesn't like cooperating with them, well, they're an occupation force, there's a certain degree in which you can understand that, but at the same time, he also is not actively out there ginning up resistance to occupation either to reconstruction.

Lee does not have a large role to play in the creating of the Lost Cause. He becomes a feature of the Lost Cause really only after his death in 1870. It's after his death that people like Jubal Early, especially in Jubal's famous speech in 1872 in Lexington, Virginia, where he picks up the banner of Robert E. Lee and basically enlists Lee posthumously in the ranks of the Lost Cause.

I think that the Lost Cause for a long time served a number of goals. One goal was white supremacy, there was no question. The Lost Cause was a way of saying white people are still in charge here in the South and just because we got beaten to a pulp on the battlefield doesn't mean that we're not still in charge. That's one meaning of the Lost Cause. Another meaning of the Lost Cause is how do you salvage some kind of dignity out of defeat? I mean, in America, we live by the success ethic. Anyone who is successful is good, anyone who fails is bad. It's like what Vince Lombardi once said, that winning isn't just the most important thing, it's the only thing.

Robert Lee has, I think, the hold he has on people not so much because of the Lost Cause, that's part of it, not so much because even of Southern white supremacist resistance, although that's part of it too, I think the most important segment of what made Lee a compelling figure for generations, even into our own time, was that he pulls off this business of surrender with the most exquisite form of dignity, that he goes to Appomattox, he surrenders his army, he resists the blandishments of officers who wanted to say, "Don't surrender, let's take to the hills. Let's carry on a guerilla warfare for the next 30 years in the Appalachians." He refuses that. His argument is, "We have lost the war. Let's face up to that and honorably surrender this army and take the consequences." The dignity with which he does that was almost like someone who comes to the end of a very bad play, but whose performance has been so good that they give him a standing ovation anyway, even if the play is lousy.

I think that has a lot to do with the compelling image of Robert E. Lee, not just in the South, but in fact across the country. I mean, you don't have to limit yourself just to Southerners to find people who, frankly, admire Robert E. Lee. You can even see this a little bit even in the last five years of Lee's life. Lee, after the surrender to Appomattox, goes off to become the President of Washington College, which is now today Washington and Lee University. It was a very unlikely kind of job for him to take because he did not see himself as an educator and Washington College was almost without a pulse at the end of the war. But within five years, he picks the

place up, he dramatically increases the student body, increases the faculty, retools the curriculum in surprisingly progressive directions, and manages to turn into the most unlikely thing of all, and that is a great fundraiser. Where does he do the fundraising most successfully? Among the-

Larry Bernstein:

The North.

Allen Guelzo:

Yes, he gets Northerners sending him money, a quarter of a million dollars, Northern philanthropists like George Peabody in Massachusetts, Cyrus McCormick in Illinois. Robert E. Lee really knew how to shake the apples out of the tree. He would, today, have made a great development officer. He does this because, in large measure, people admire the dignity that he could wrap around defeat. Defeat, that ugly word in the American lexicon.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's expand on that critical meeting in Appomattox for a second and do a historical comparison. When the Japanese surrendered to MacArthur on the USS Missouri.

The Japanese sent a relatively junior guy, no one was willing to go. When the Germans gave up in World War I and World War II, I don't remember who they sent, but it was I think generally someone of very little importance. But here, I mean, the only person more senior than Robert E. Lee would've been Jefferson Davis himself, and there he goes, with an aide, to go visit General Grant.

I think what's amazing was Lee can't believe the good terms he's being offered.

Allen Guelzo:

Yes.

Larry Bernstein:

He's like, "Yeah." It's sort of like that episode of Seinfeld where they offer Kramer coffee for life, "I'll take it."

Allen Guelzo:

Right.

Larry Bernstein:

Grant thinks he's getting away with something as well. Both parties think they're getting a grand bargain.

Allen Guelzo:

Oh yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Both Jefferson Davis and Stanton and Lincoln were very worried about giving their officers the rights to negotiate the peace.

Allen Guelzo:

True.

Larry Bernstein:

Maybe you could talk a little bit about how that went down and what the political leadership was worried about and why we should glorify the result.

Allen Guelzo:

Well, the funny thing about Appomattox, although funny is probably the wrong word to use, the ironic thing about Appomattox is that both of these leaders, Lee and Grant, come to the Wilmer McLean's parlor at Appomattox courthouse, both of them with an ace up their sleeve that the other does not know about. Robert E. Lee comes to this meeting with his officers beseeching him to turn the Army of Northern Virginia loose. Now, he is not thrilled about that, but at the same time, Robert E. Lee also knows that Ulysses Grant is the general with the reputation as unconditional surrender Grant.

Well, what unconditional surrender means is you're surrendering without conditions and without terms. When you are surrendering the way Lee is surrendering, this is someone who has been conducting the army of a rebellion, not a legitimate government. The United States never recognized the legitimacy of the Confederate government. Abraham Lincoln never uses the term Confederate States of America. He'll always use some circumlocution or he'll say, "The Confederate States so-called." But he'll never even in correspondence recognize the legitimacy of the Confederate government. It's always an insurrection. It's always a rebellion.

Well, what do you do to the soldiers of a rebellion or insurrection when they surrender? If you're an unconditional surrender guy, you can put a lot of people up against a barn wall and shoot them. That's what you do. That's what you do with the rebels and traitors. You could take the army of Northern Virginia and parade it through the streets of Washington or the streets of New York City like some kind of Roman triumph with people throwing garbage at them. That

could happen because unconditional surrender means you have no conditions under which you're laying down your weapons.

Lee knows that Grant could do that. The ace that Lee has is if Grant is going to be an iron pants about this surrender, if he's going to insist on unconditional surrender, then Lee will go back to his army and he'll fight it out there. He'll tell his soldiers, "Do as you see fit." Grant, on the other hand, Grant's coming to this, apparently he's coming as the great Ulysses Grant, unconditional surrender Grant. He's got the army of the Potomac behind him and they've apparently got their hands around the neck of the Confederates. But what Grant was not telling them was why he turns up at Appomattox courthouse dressed in an old, dirty uniform, and mud splattered boots. I mean, that's a very famous story about Grant. Grant shows up to the surrendered Lees in his dress uniform. Grants just, he's in an ordinary soldier's jacket with the Lieutenant General shoulder straps sewn on.

Why? Was it because Grant was just preternaturally sloppy as a dresser? No. It was because Grant had left his baggage wagons and supply wagons so far to the rear. You see, when Grant captured Richmond, Lee immediately bolts west and Grant immediately bolts after him. He bolts after him so fast that after a week, Grant is so far ahead of his supply trains. He can't even feed his own army. Grant comes to Appomattox Courthouse, he doesn't even have a dress uniform to wear. He comes to the surrender ceremony knowing that, and this is what he admitted years later to the journalist John Russell Young. If he couldn't have gotten Lee to surrender there, he would have had to have broken off the pursuit because there were so far ahead of their supply lines.

So, Grant knows he has got to make Lee an offer he can't refuse. So he does. And instead of a demand for unconditional surrender, Grant instead proposes with a parole. All of the army of Northern Virginia from Lee on down, parole every one of them. Permit soldiers of the army of Northern Virginia to take, to claim, any mules or horses they want, take them home with them for spring planting. And even on top of that, officers of the army, instead of lining them up and shooting them, officers of Lee's army will be permitted to keep their side arms. That's a very symbolic gesture. But Lee looks at that and it's everything he could desire. They sit down, they trade their copies of their letters and acceptances, and the surrender is done. Each has gotten what they wanted and they've gotten it not quite understanding what the other had as a possible alternative.

It's a remarkable move, but it means that Lee's army dissolves. It does not take to the highways and byways like robbers and pilfers. It dissolves. It goes away and fades back into the civilian context. By the same token, those Confederate soldiers who were able to go home as Grant had specified, without fear of molestation by the federal government provided they observed the terms of the parole. And Grant is able to go back to Washington and say the entire army of Northern Virginia had surrendered. With that, that's the backbone of the Confederacy. Once that's gone, you're simply waiting and looking at your watch and waiting for the rest of the

Confederacy to fall into your lap. It's a great moment. It's a great moment, but also a moment for real nail-biting behind the scenes.

Larry Bernstein:

What seems bizarre about that story is Grant takes this authority, but it doesn't appear to have checked it with the President. If Lincoln knew he was meeting with him. He could have gotten some sort of guidance. He had conversations with the President. We know that Lincoln later is lenient to the confederates in his second inaugural. Do you think that Grant felt that he was following Lincoln's objectives? That he loosely understood what Lincoln wanted to do and this reflected not only his views, but reflected that of the administration?

Allen Guelzo:

Before Lincoln and Grant parted company at Petersburg, Lincoln told Grant pretty forthrightly, "We have to bring this war to an end and we have to bring it to this war to an end soon. Because we're running out of money. We're not going to be able to pay for much more of this war." Lincoln and Grant understand each other to a remarkable degree. It is a great partnership.

In fact, one of the projects I have in front of me, as something else coming right up on the road, is a project with Glenn LaFantasie, a Grant scholar. Glenn and I are going to sit down together and we're going to pull into a one volume all of the Grant-Lincoln correspondence in the years between 1862 and 1865. What emerges out of that correspondence and what people will be able to read in this book when we have this published, is a really tremendous partnership between two people who really came to trust each other implicitly. Lincoln tells Grant, "You've got to get the war over with. You got to get Lee to surrender." Lincoln for his part is willing to trust Grant to take that in execution.

After the surrender, Grant comes back to Washington. He sits down at a Cabinet meeting with Lincoln and the other members of the Cabinet. Lincoln never utters a syllable of rebuke to Grant for having obtained these terms. As far as Lincoln is concerned, this was the best possible way things could have been managed. So what Grant does is very much reading the mind of Abraham Lincoln.

The same cannot really be said about Lee and Jefferson Davis. Jefferson Davis was, I mean, the only word I can use is delusional. This war was lost beyond any hope of recall and yet Jefferson Davis was amusing himself with the prospect that we were going to continue. He was going to run away down into the south. Somehow they were going to keep on fighting and, no, Robert E. Lee must not surrender. Lee ignores it.

Finally, by the end of the war, Lee is finally going to do something to politicians he had never done before, and that is, disobey them. He surrenders his army to Grant. If we can be grateful to Robert E. Lee for nothing else, we can at least be grateful for the fact that he did surrender

the army intact. In that respect, what he did that point was probably the greatest service he could have done the country.

Larry Bernstein:

We end each session on a note of optimism. Can you speak about teaching the civil war to the next generation of Americans, what should they get out of it? What can we be optimistic about children learning about our country that'll serve us in the future?

Allen Guelzo:

I think three things. First of all, we can learn that the Constitution of the United States survived the severest test that any instrument of government can be put to. We can look back on 1861 to 1865 and see that our Constitution worked under the stress and under the pressure of the greatest cataclysm that this nation had ever experienced. And not only did it work before, but it worked through and it worked after. If it does nothing else, the Civil War should tell us that what we have in our Constitution is a remarkable and durable political document. Not to be thought of or described lightly. A document like that which could endure the Civil War intact, could guide this country during a crisis like that, is a genuinely remarkable piece of political literature, and we should prize it that way.

The second thing I think we could learn from it and teach the students is that at the moment of great crisis, which the Civil War was, the American democracy produced a great leader, and that was Abraham Lincoln. Actually, produced a number of great leaders, but greatest above them all, towering above them wall, Abraham Lincoln. It's often been said, and I'm afraid that even Samuel Huntington was inclined to say it, or at least some of his students were, that the great flaw of democracy is that it takes the common individual, the common citizen, and makes them the center of attention. Isn't that a big mistake because the common citizen is likely to be a very boring commonplace person? That's supposed to be an argument against democracy.

But when we look at what happened in the Civil War, what we see is that at this moment of life and death trial, they're steps forward almost without any precedent, almost without an expectation. A person who had no particular experience in bureaucracy or executive management or any of those things that we think consultants tell us people are supposed to have, this man who had been a lawyer, who had been a single term Congressman, steps forward and provides us with the greatest and most eloquent leadership we've ever had. If the American people can provide from their ranks that kind of leadership in that kind of crisis, then we have the best argument in favor of democracy that has ever been devised. I offer Abraham Lincoln as the best example and explanation of that.

The third thing is when we look at how this war was conducted. This was a war in which untrained masses of young Americans were thrown together in the most violent and bloody kinds of conflicts. Yet, they stood to it with a firmness and a resolution that takes the breath

away. Once again, we're confronted with this conundrum that ordinary people are just supposed to be ordinary. But when we look at the soldiers of the Civil War, and when we look at leaders like Grant, Sherman, Sheridan, these were people who were not walking around before the war with sterling resumes. Grant was clerking in his father's leather goods store in Galena, Illinois when the war broke out. In eight years, he's President of the United States.

Larry Bernstein:

It's unbelievable.

Allen Guelzo:

It really is. It's a greater story even. We think the rise of Abraham Lincoln is a great story. The rise of Ulysses Grant is actually an even greater one. But that kind of military leadership from out of the ranks of the ordinary citizens, it's like nothing that you see except, perhaps, Cincinnatus and his plow in the Roman Republic, walking away from his farm, taking command of the emergency, solving the emergency, and then walking back and picking up with his plow where he left off. Nothing like it since then. That is what we see in our military leadership in the Civil War.

Once again, what we have is a ratification of this idea of democracy that Lincoln gave such eloquent shape to it. Gettysburg in November of 1863. There are wonderful lessons to be learned from the teaching of our American Civil War. I've been teaching them now myself for many decades, and I probably am going to keep on teaching them for as long as I'm able. But it is a great story and it is a story that just never wears out.

Larry Bernstein:

Now, I thank you. That was really an extraordinary session. I was so happy I decided to get you to speak again for Robert E. Lee and I hope to have you again soon. Thank you so much.

Larry Bernstein:

Eliot Higgins is our next guest. He is the author and founder of the organization; Bellingcat. His book is entitled; We are Bellingcat: Global Crime, Online Sleuths, and the Bold Future of News. Eliot, please go ahead.

Eliot Higgins:

So what I'd like to talk to you about today is disinformation and my experiences with it working at Bellingcat. It's something that I've both been personally targeted with, and also encountered a lot during our work, because we work on a number of topics where there's a lot of discussion and debate, particularly online, and also where there's a lot of interest from state actors, in particular Russia. So

we've had kind of years of experience dealing with disinformation, both countering it and both having to live with it as well. But the kind of pattern of behavior behind it is often something that we see repeated time and time again. When we're talking about disinformation, it's usually in the context of how we see it through the lens of the 2016 US election, where there was all this Russian interference and bot networks and fake news and all kinds of things like that.

But really it's often what we're doing to ourselves as a society rather than an outside force acting on us, even if those outside forces often take advantage of it and still do try to do that. For example, when we've been working on the topic of Syria, in particular chemical attacks, it became very apparent that a community was forming, a kind of counterfactual community around the denial of chemical weapon use. They would look at these various attacks that were happening, starting from 2013 onwards and always find some kind of excuse. And these communities were made up of individuals, conspiracy websites. They, over time got networked and banded together to create this alternative media ecosystem that reinforced the viewpoints by basically drawing people into that and then telling them the same stories, but from a variety of different sites. So basically just sharing the same stories and recycling them time and time again.

And the reason those communities formed is something that I think is quite crucial for understanding why disinformation occurs in the way it does. It is because people, often, who are part of these communities feel they've been fundamentally and almost traumatically betrayed by the source of authority that's now telling them this thing that they have decided must be a lie because you can't trust this source of authority. In particular, in the context of Syria, it was the buildup to the Iraq war in 2003 and the lies told by the US and UK government to justify that. Many of the people now, who make up these communities, are people who see everything through that same lens. So when we're talking about Syria and chemical weapons, they're thinking in terms of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and how that turned out. And all their arguments and all their thinking is framed around that kind of thing.

And what happens is you can use the example of coronavirus, where you might be someone who's distrusting of the sources of authority who're telling you to get a vaccination, because you may have had a bad experience with a doctor. You might not really trust the government that isn't being particularly well led. And you decide that maybe you want to Google coronavirus concerns or vaccination problems. And you'll immediately be directed by the helpful search engines to websites and online communities and Facebook groups that also have these same concerns. Now that's not to say these groups are going to be people that are telling you that Bill Gates is putting microchips in vaccines, but that will be the first step on a journey that draws you into communities that might bring you to that point, because you'll find yourself then surrounded by people who have the same concerns and have those concerns reinforced by people who have become the kind of new sources of authority in those communities.

With the case of chemical weapons attacks for example in Syria, a lot of those were activists or long-term anti-war activists, or basically people who are their kind of most active and noisiest on social media. And they don't always make the best kind of experts. And as you've been drawn into these communities, in the example of coronavirus, you might be starting off with the question of, "are these vaccines safe?" And the answer may be from some people, "no, these vaccines aren't safe, they're quite dangerous. They can give your children autism, they have mercury in them." So you start reading more

and more stuff about that. And you find communities that discuss that topic in particular, and within that community, you'll find another kind of sub-community of people have even more extreme beliefs. You'd think, well, it's not just the mercury in the vaccines you have to worry about, but the microchips that Bill Gates has been putting in there.

Now not everyone's going to go on that journey, be gone all the way in, but some people will and they tend to become the kind who praise people who make the most noise.

But what we see in some circumstances is how those communities are then effectively weaponized by state actors. And we've seen that in particular with MH-17 team, for example, where we've seen Russia taking these kinds of communities and giving them a platform on their media networks. Taking them to things like UN committees and using them for their own purposes. So I think when you talk about disinformation, you always need to say it in the context of, not what an outside actor is doing to us, but what we're doing to ourselves. And until we address that issue, it's going to be very hard to realistically counter this disinformation that we're seeing.

Larry Bernstein:

Perfect.

You know, your description of disinformation by the state actor reminds me of something that you mentioned in the book about the Kremlin's disinformation plan. You called it a four D approach; dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay. Can you tell us a little bit about that methodology employed by the Kremlin?

Eliot Higgins:

Yes, so often we have these four Ds and it is how the Kremlin approaches their messaging. So for example, very recently we've had a development in this Skripal poisoning case in the UK where the UK government announced they were charging a third suspect that Bellingcat had actually identified two years ago. And the reaction from the head of the Russian intelligence services was to claim that, oh, this is actually just a distraction from the current situation in the UK with regards to our gas prices. And this is the kind of thing they say a lot. They try to point in another direction. "Oh, it's actually about this thing. It's not really about the thing they're talking about. It's about this other thing." So, that's kind of like the distracting. It's also another form, similar to dismay, where they say, "Oh, well, it's just the British again, making a noise about this Skripal case to try and kind of distract from the problems in the UK. Isn't it ridiculous?"

So they are kind of horrified that the British will dare do such a thing. This is such a terrible thing. You can see if it's straightforward lying, and we see that all the time with Russia, and I think with the cases I've described in my opening, you see that all the time. I mean, with MH17, three days after MH17 was shot down, they were presenting fake evidence. Photo-shopped satellite imagery lying about radar imagery after 298 people had been killed by one of their missiles.

And they will lie just at the drop of a hat. They'd lie as easy as they breathe. When you work on this topic, it's quite shocking to see the different levels of government, how this happens. And this is even something that has targeted myself and Bellingcat. The Russian government has previously described us

as part of the intelligence services and paid for by the UK government and all these other allegations against us that they've no evidence whatsoever to back up, but if they make it in a public statement, then they have lots of loyal media that will go ahead and report that.

Larry Bernstein:

Members of our audience aren't as familiar with Bellingcat. Could you tell us a little bit how you got started and how you use network effects and open source to gather information to uncover war crimes and other malfeasance?

Eliot Higgins:

With the introduction of smartphones and the launch of the iPhone, that then led to social media sharing apps and lots of information being shared all the time by people across the world. Basically, people are going around with a phone that was effectively a sensor for all kinds of information. They'd take photographs, film it, it would appear online.

But early on, I was just some ordinary guy on internet, and I was just interested in what was happening in Libya in 2011. And I realized you could use these videos coming from Libya to actually get a much greater understanding about the conflict, because rather than being a journalist on the ground with one point of view, you had lots of people putting videos online that you could then verify through various processes.

One which became key to the entire field is something called geo location, where you look at features in a video like mountains and buildings, and you can match that off to satellite imagery. And if you've watched the documentary, *Don't F with Cats*, then you'll see, they're basically doing open source investigation. But we basically turned it into a whole field of investigation and our first big story... And when I say we, it was at first a group of just volunteers and a little bit of money for a website, but we started looking into the downing of Malaysian Airline 17 and using publicly available information, be it social media posts or satellite imagery.

We started reconstructing what happened. First of all, by tracking the route of a missile launcher that was heading towards the site of a missile launch just before MH-17 was shut down and then using open source videos of people filming a military convoy in Russia along a very long route, which had the same missile launcher in it, to connect that missile launcher to Russia. Then using the social media pages of the military unit in question to identify every single officer, their rank and who was in the convoy in that military unit.

So we kind of built it up into a bigger and bigger thing, and that then expanded into a whole range of different investigations. And probably what we're best known for at the moment is our investigations into Russia's assassinations. So starting with the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018 using Novichok. We were able to identify the two suspects as DRU officers using leaked information from the Russian bureaucratic state.

Russia is so hopelessly corrupt that everyone in the bureaucracy is trying to make a bit of money on the side and they do that by selling data. We were able to access things like passport data, phone records that allowed us to identify, not only the real identity of two suspects, the two famous guys who were on

Russia Today saying they were sports nutrition salesmen, but then that led us to more suspects who were involved with it. We linked them to another assassination using a nerve agent in Bulgaria, an attempted assassination of Emilian Gebrev, an arms dealer. That then allowed us to connect that group to basically a scientific research center in Russia, which was populated by scientists from the Russian chemical weapons program. And then when Alexei Navalny was poisoned, the Russian opposition leader, we checked the phone records of these guys and it happened they'd been in contact with an FSB team, Russian domestic intelligence, who'd been following Navalny for a couple of years, including on the day he was poisoned. And there was a lot of communication between them on the day he was poisoned.

And then that led us to multiple other cases where Russian opposition figures, activists, and just quite minor dissidents had been followed by the same team and fell mysteriously ill and, in some cases, died. So that in one sentence has been a two and a half year investigation that's still in ongoing. And we literally have a backlog of assassinations we have to investigate because we found so much evidence of this stuff going on.

Larry Bernstein:

What I find amazing is what you're doing with just volunteers and it is comparable to the government agencies, but you seem to be even better than they are with just volunteers. What is it about using a loose combination of volunteers and some simple approaches that makes you more competitive than state actors?

Eliot Higgins:

I think it's because we have access to as many people as want to be involved with what we are doing. A big part of what we're doing is we network with a range of different people in different ways. We have like a social media community. You can get involved and have ideas and suggestions. We connect to human rights organizations and lawyers and activists and NGOs. So we are able to draw on their experience, but also share our knowledge and experience with them. And I think because we're able to build these large networks that allows us to look at these issues, in a way from multiple angles with multiple viewpoints and experience, and basically just raw manpower to actually be able to do a lot of this work. Because a lot of it is just looking for needles in haystacks, but if you've got 500 people looking for a needle in one haystack, it makes life a lot easier.

Larry Bernstein:

Going back to your story about the missile firing that took down the Malaysian airliner over the Ukraine. One of the things I found very interesting was you were able to use this Russian soldier's social media as a source of information. In World War II, there was a famous poster that loose lips sink ships, and here, we've exponentially increased the exposure of loose lips. How do you think about how in the future armies are going to have to behave given that they can't really control or keep information quiet?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, the reaction from Russia maybe clues us into that a bit. After we had been doing this for a while and got more well known for doing it, Russia started putting out a lot of information posts to its soldiers

saying, "Don't bring your mobile phones with you. Don't take photos of your activity." Then the State Duma in Russia passed a new law making it illegal for Russian soldiers to take any photographs or publish any photographs or videos of their service. And that would seem to be a direct response to what we'd been able to do.

One of the big clues we had with the missile launch through Russia were just ordinary people who saw this military convoy and thought, "Oh cool, I'll film this and put it on social media." And we were able to find that and then piece together the whole roots. So it's a hard one for them to address. And the thing is, tanks and planes and stuff are interesting and people are always going to take photographs of them. I think it's really down to militaries to, if they want to counter this, they really have to educate people.

Larry Bernstein:

I had a book club a few years back with Seymour Hersh and he discussed in his autobiography called, *The Reporter*, about what it's like to be an investigative journalist, but he acted as like a lone wolf. And you're sort of like the opposite. You're using, as you said, 500 people to go investigate matters. What Hersh said was that he had real difficulty acting as an investigative reporter within normal journalism. They were unwilling to make long term investments in evaluating or investigating certain situations, just like the amount of time that you put into some of these projects. How do you think about the future of investigative journalism or is it even journalism? How do you think about the future of investigations?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, I've actually encountered Seymour Hersh as work in relation to chemical weapons, attacking Syria and his work actually fueled a lot of conspiracy theories about these attacks. For example, on the August 21st attack, in 2013, where over a thousand people were killed, he wrote a very lengthy piece explaining how actually it was, I believe it was a Turkish supplying chemical weapons to Jihadis and he had this whole long piece. And it was absolute nonsense because you could see from the open source evidence that the munitions used had been used by the Syrian army forces before.

I think this idea of the lone wolf journalists being held back by his editors is it be something that Seymour Hersh should have maybe thought about a bit more carefully because certainly his work on Syria was an embarrassment because it was really trash, and he even had a supposed intercepted conversation between a US soldier and a US intelligence official, so it claimed, that read like badly translated Russian Tom Clancy fan fiction.

Looking at the future of journalism, certainly from our experience working with the likes of, for example, we have people now at the New York Times at the visual investigation team who are former Bellingcat members. We set up a team with the BBC who used open source investigation and collaborative networks to do really high quality, impactful, award winning journalism.

Larry Bernstein:

When I think about the founding principles of Bellingcat, which you haven't mentioned yet, which is identify, verify, and amplify, maybe with also a little bit of transparency throughout. Can you talk a little bit about the foundational principles that you have and why it leads to your success?

Eliot Higgins:

When I first started doing this, I was just some ordinary guy who had no background in journalism who just wanted to understand what these videos coming from Libya showed me. So I didn't want to put information out there that was untrue because that had no benefit to me, because I'd just be lying to myself. And really the blog I started was more for me to have a way to write down these interesting things I was finding, always for my own interest, and then if the people wanted to read it, it was fine.

But I always knew the limits of my own knowledge, so I never tried to make grand announcements about a video. I'd say here's a video, it has this bomb in it, I've just gone through all these different sites and sources to piece together what this bomb is, and therefore, I think, based off all these links I've just shared with you and all the evidence I've just shared with you, this is what I think it is.

Because I did that all the time, it started a level of transparency, meant people reading that started building a kind of trust in what I was doing, because I was always trying to be very, very clear about how I went from point A to point B to point C, when often when you are seeing blogs looking at conflicts, they were making huge leaps of logic and going, well, they wanted to make the conclusion that America was bad or something like that, so they fit everything around that evidence. And I was just saying, this video shows this bomb.

Then we developed and matured as an organization as Bellingcat. It came up to this principles of identify, verify, and amplify. So we identify information as part of the investigation process, we then verify it through various analytical techniques, like geolocation and chronolocation, and that allows us to understand what we're looking at and the situation. And then we have this kind of amplification stage, and that's about getting it out there, getting people to see it, but it's not about always doing it the same way. I mean, with MH17 our research has been turned into articles on week by week, day by day, longer reports, submissions to the European Corp of Human Rights podcast, and maybe even a TV series in the future, but it's the same kind of verified information that we identified earlier, it's just we're using it to amplify it in different ways to different types of audiences.

That's kind of always been the principle of how we work at Bellingcat, and that transparency of our sources and where it comes from is very important. And even when we did the work on Russia, which involved using what we would call closed sources, stuff that's not always publicly available, we are very transparent about how we came around to finding it and trying to share the much of that as possible with the audience. And that led actually to, in the case of the Skripal poisoning and the Navalny case, to Russian news reports is actually using those same sources to look into it. I think maybe some of them are trying to catch us out, but then having to say, "Actually, we've just found exactly the same thing Bellingcat says exists," and kind of confirming our findings.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to expand a little bit on the amplify part. In your book, you mentioned your very heavy use of Twitter. Can you talk a little bit about how much you use it, how it gets the ideas out there, who's listening to it, how successful is it in terms of just getting information to a whole lot of people?

Eliot Higgins:

Well, early on, I mean, I was just kind of your average Twitter user with a blog. But these communities start to form around certain topics, and there were lots of people interested in what was happening in Syria and they'd share my work and they'd send me videos saying, "Hey, do you know what this is?" And then I dig into it. And that became particularly useful around certain incidents, like the big chemical attacks, where, because of the kind of reputation I'd built for looking at this stuff really meticulously, everyone would send me any link related to this stuff.

By that point it wasn't even necessary for me to really search for stuff because people just found it for me and sent it over.

But what I found very important to do is you've, in a way, got to equip your side with useful information, because the other side of these counterfactual communities, who have endless blog posts and YouTube videos that will tell them they're right on coronavirus being Bill Gates' idea, or the earth being flat, or white helmets all being terrorists. And on the other side, unless they are equipped with that same level of information, it's very hard for them to actually make their point. And so it's not really about convincing those other people, but putting the information out there so anyone seeing those discussions doesn't just see one side with what appears to be all the information, and the other side kind of scrambling for bits and pieces.

Larry Bernstein:

Where do you see the future of Bellingcat going in terms of scaling up, expanding its mandate? What's your future?

Eliot Higgins:

A lot of our focus at the moment is split into three areas of justice and accountability, education, and tech development.

Education is very important because a big part of what we do is based on building networks. We literally train hundreds of journalists and activists every year to do this kind of work. We're now networking more with universities and local media collaborative, and working to train them how to do open-source investigations like we do so eventually they can take that over and do it themselves in their local area.

We're also then working a lot on justice and accountability. So there's been a lot of questions from bodies like the International Criminal Court about how open-source evidence can be used in those courts. And we've been doing a lot of work now working on things like investigating Saudi airstrikes in Yemen, using a process we've developed with lawyers that refines and improves the process we've used before, with the intent of that information then being able to be used in a courtroom. And we had quite a lot of success with that. We've had a mock trial on Yemen, with real lawyers and a real judge who went on to join the ICC, where we tested if whether open-source evidence can be submitted in court. Because that's still a question that needs to be answered and, fortunately, that was successful.

So we're going to continue building on that and trying to find more real-world examples where our investigative work has actually been used to bring people to account. And we've had success in the past. There was a case in Cameroon of soldiers shooting two women and two children in a video that was shared on social media. In fact, our collaborative work with the BBC and Amnesty International ...

Cameroon convicted those soldiers of those murders. So there is a way that this kind of work can have a real-world impact and bring accountability for terrible actions.

Larry Bernstein:

One of the great challenges that our society faces right now is to persuade the unvaccinated to get vaccinated. And you mentioned that there is this community out there that is harping on autism, and other problems and risks associated with the vaccine. How should NGOs and governments fight back against this sort of information that's out there, to persuade people that this is not the right way to go? How do you challenge communities online to try to get better at truth seeking?

Eliot Higgins:

I mean, it's really difficult because we've seen the reactions, what happened after the January 6th violence where QAnon was pushed off social media. But it basically pushes them off to the edges of the Internet. They don't go away; they just go somewhere else where they're less visible. And it might reduce the ability for people to be drawn into those communities, but those communities do still exist in different ways. I think with coronavirus, especially in the US, it's particularly dangerous. Because you not only have these fringe communities, but mainstream political figures who promote these ideas. And that's immensely dangerous.

If the media doesn't act responsibly in these cases, then you will have these problems occur time and time again. Because you're always going to have people who have fringe ideas, that are anti-science who will, especially in America, see that as a Democrat versus Republican thing. And for me, I think that's incredibly dangerous.

I think some people have suggested maybe we should just kick all these people off the Internet. That's just ridiculous. I like to think some of the work we've done with Bellingcat shows how you can engage with communities, rather than having people not trust the government and then go off and find other people who don't trust the government, and then just get really angry at the government about coronavirus or whatever it may be. Instead, you can get them engaged with communities where you say, "Okay, we think there's a problem, recognize there's a problem. What can we do about it in a positive way?"

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the sleuthing business?

Eliot Higgins:

Some of the stuff we've achieved at Bellingcat is almost a miracle.

I mean, when I started doing this back in 2011, I was working in an admin and finance role for a company that housed asylum seekers and I just did this in my spare time. And because of everything that's happened, we're now in a position where we're working with the International Criminal Court. We're getting people convicted for terrible crimes. We've helped police, for example, at Europol find victims of child abuse and find their abusers. And it's all part of being a community and actually seeing

the positive aspects of the Internet, and really going after those positive aspects. And it's something you have to be proactive about. You can't just sit back and hope you join the right Facebook group; you have to get involved.

But one thing I have discovered is there are people who do that. There are people who make incredible contributions, literally saving children from being abused because they took the time to look into something when someone else didn't. So I think if we can live in that world, then maybe the Internet isn't all conspiracy theories and angry people.

Larry Bernstein:

Eliot, thank you so much.

That ends today's session. I want to make a plug for next episode.

There will be no program next Sunday 10/10. But we will be back on 10/17

We will have Laura Walls who is a Professor of English at Notre Dame discuss her new biography of Henry David Thoreau as we will discuss the continued relevance of Walden and transcendentalism.

If you are interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes or wish to read a transcript, you can find them on our website Whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean and Spotify.

I would like to thank today's speakers for their insights. I would also like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues. Please stay tuned next Sunday to find out What Happens Next.