

RICHARD: Unlike the vast majority of journalists who cover American politics, Salena Zito lives far away from the centers of power and wealth. Some would argue she lives in the middle of nowhere. But Salena says, "This is America. Everywhere is the middle of somewhere." This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Twice a year, Salena Zito leaves her home in Western Pennsylvania and drives thousands of miles across the country on back roads visiting towns and rural communities often ignored by the national media.

RICHARD: In this episode, we learn more about those towns and communities as well as those who supported Donald Trump and the populous coalition that reshaped the Republican party.

ASHLEY: Salena writes columns on politics for The Washington Examiner and The New York Post. She's the author of The Great Revolt: Inside the Populist Coalition Reshaping American Politics. Richard, you get the first question.

RICHARD: Salena, you write commentary and report on politics from a different perspective than most journalists. What do you say is distinctive about your writing?

SALENA: Well, I think a couple things are distinctive. I don't live in the center of power and wealth. That's where the biggest newsrooms are in this country. I'm not inside the wire. I'm not inside the bubble. That doesn't make my reporting better. It just makes my perspective a little bit different in how I cover people. One of the things, I think, that makes my reporting different is that I try to treat each story that I write as though I'm from the locality. So I travel across the country.

I just got back from 7,000 miles across the country. I usually do a north/south one in the spring, and towards the end of the summer, east/west. I only take back roads. I don't fly. I don't take interstates. I try to really get a sense and a feeling of the places that I'm covering and the people I'm covering by acting like a local, by going to church there or going to a local high school football game or basketball game. People make fun of this. A lot of reporters in D.C. make fun of the fact that I go into diners. Well, first of all, that's the only restaurant that's out there, and, second of all, diner food is darn good food. The other thing that is different is that I grew up in this area, and I never left it.

RICHARD: That's the area around Pittsburgh in Western Pennsylvania. What's special about the city?

SALENA: It's sort of the Paris of Appalachia. However, it still has culturally connected to both Appalachia and the Midwest. So I have a general understanding of how people think and their behaviors, anywhere from religion being way more important to them and family connections way more important to them than political activism such as maybe climate change.

ASHLEY: When you report... You mentioned you've come back from this 7,000-mile road trip. How long do you spend in each place? Do you embed more than, you would say, the average journalist does from D.C. or New York?

SALENA: Yes, definitely. Well, first of all, there's a lot of times that a lot of areas, it's a repeat for me because I've been around, and I've gone to a lot of these areas throughout my career. I usually try to spend a few days there. I always dedicate a lot of research into the route I'm taking. A lot of reporting is just spontaneous. You see someone interesting or you strike up a conversation, and it turns into something interesting. So I make sure that I have really researched before I leave. But also, after I get back, I make sure that I understood what I saw.

ASHLEY: That sort of led on to this, Salena, something you wrote in a recent piece. This piece is called *The Restorative Power of the American People*, and you wrote, "Turn on social media, cable news, or the national news networks, and you would be inclined to believe that we loathe those who are different from us. You would also be inclined to believe that everyone who lives outside the urban centers is backward, stupid, and racist." I was so interested that you wrote "we" in there. Tell me about that.

SALENA: Well, I was talking collectively about how we view the American news product. If I had to reflect on what our biggest problem is right now in terms of the divide widening rather than coming back together, it's that the people that report on you and I and everyone across the country are also living in the same places that all of our cultural curators. I mean corporations, institutions, academia, but also sports entities. Most of their headquarters are in these super zip codes, and everyone that lives around them and works around them have the same shared values. They went to the same kind of school. Their kids go to the same kind of school. They shop at the same place, and they have shared values. There is nothing wrong with that.

However, what it is is completely different than the people they're covering, and a lot of these reporters don't sit at a pew every Sunday. They don't own a gun. They don't know how to operate a gun. They don't know how to shoot a gun. So they don't understand. They didn't go to a state school. They didn't go to a community college. So, when they're writing about the other people, the outsiders, they're writing it from their point of view and their experiences. I think that's what makes my experiences, my viewpoint a little different because I've done all of those things.

RICHARD: You mentioned community college. One statistic that jumped out at me recently is that over 40% of all undergraduates in America go to community colleges, but you'd never know that from the coverage of higher education in much of the media.

SALENA: Right, because the coverage isn't coming people that went to these elite schools, but you have a different perspective. Someone is going to feel completely foreign to you who went to a community college or a trade school, and there are a lot

of incredibly successful people out there that never stepped foot in the halls of higher education. I think we have been fed this ideal since our troops came back from World War II that the only way to be successful is to attend college, and that grew and grew and grew. Along the way, we started looking down at people who went to a trade school, at people who went to shop class. Well, we still need our washing machines fixed. We still, more importantly, need our air conditioning and furnaces fixed.

And then, what about the people that provide the energy for us to turn the light on? How much have we disparaged people that have worked in coal mines? But we wouldn't be able to pick up this phone if they weren't working in the coal mine. We wouldn't be able to turn our lights on. The same goes with natural gas. So I just think we need to do a better job with reporting on things rather than turning people into a villain.

RICHARD: Speaking of reporting, what prompted you to become a reporter?

SALENA: Well, I come from a long line of newspaper people. My great-great-grandfather, my great-grandfather, and my grandfather were all newsmen, and it was something that I always wanted to do. Along the way, having children got in the way, but once my kids were up and out, I pursued what I wanted to do, and now you all are stuck with me. And both of my grandparents, in particular grandmothers, were great storytellers. They come from that long tradition of handing down stories, and I think that's where my love of telling stories comes from.

My grandfather was an executive at the Pittsburgh Press. So he opened my eyes to newspapers and my love of newspapers, and he always brought newspapers from different parts of the country home, and I couldn't wait to dive into them. They were always fascinating to me. But the storytelling comes from my grandmothers, in particular my Italian grandmother who didn't have an education beyond fourth grade, but, boy, could she share stories.

ASHLEY: I'm curious. Do you think what you were just talking about, the divide between who does the coverage in America and who is covered, did that exist to the same extent in your mind, say, 30 years ago, or has it got progressively worse?

SALENA: Well, it's gotten progressively worse because we've lost so many local newspapers. So the only people turned on national news was at 6:00 to watch CBS, ABC, or NBC. When I was growing up, there were three newspapers in town. In fact, even 10 years ago when I was working in Pittsburgh at a Pittsburgh newspaper, there were two healthy, thriving, competing local newspapers. That's where people got their news. We have, now, thousands or hundreds of counties, I think even to the thousands of counties that don't have a local news. We have states where the state capitols aren't covered by local news. You need someone in a county to cover that school board, to cover the water authority. They need to be held accountable, and we just don't have the news organizations to make that happen. So that's why I think we didn't have this

problem before. Enter in cable news. That has hastened the divide, but I think more than anything what has made the divide on how journalists cover the rest of the country is social media, in particular Twitter, which, by the way, I left because it's a sewer. But the problem with Twitter is too many journalists look at it as a reliable way to understand the whole country. There is a Pew study-

RICHARD: This is from Pew Research Center.

SALENA: The Pew Research Center study concluded that just 10% of users produced an astounding 92% of all tweets. 69% of the highly prolific users are Democrats. Breaking down that number even further reveals that the Democrats on Twitter are predominantly Liberal, far more than Democrats who aren't Twitter users. In other words, anyone reading Twitter to get any sense of what even average Democrats think will get a skewed impression, and a lot of journalists use Twitter as their barometer of what's going on in the country, and it's just not.

RICHARD: That begs the question, and it's actually one of the big reasons why we invited you on to the podcast for Common Ground Committee, and that is: what misunderstandings are there on the part of metropolitan elites, including journalists, about the people you cover and live with, people who live in rural America, people who live in small towns and cities that don't get a fair shake when it comes to media coverage?

SALENA: The majority of them believe that anyone outside of the larger metropolitan areas don't believe in climate change. Of course, everyone believes that the climate has changed. Ever since we were in first grade and they showed us dinosaurs and told us the Ice Age wiped them out, we understood that the climate has changed. In fact, we were all in this together in the '70s, if anyone out there is old enough to remember this iconic ad with a Native American standing on the shoreline with all this pollution and smog and a tear running down his face. It wasn't a political ad. We all wanted to fight pollution so it didn't affect the earth. When it became a sort of battering ram that Democrats used, beginning with Al Gore, to divide people, that's when the assumption was made that Conservatives do not believe in climate change.

Some of the most thoughtful and careful conservationists of the earth who are almost all Republicans and/or Conservatives are farmers. Spend a day or a week or hours with a farmer, and the lengths that they go to to make sure that the water is safe, to make sure the soil is safe, and we're talking on small farms, is really unbelievable. Spend any time with people that work in the shale industry or the coal industry. The great lengths that people go to to make sure that that water is clear that goes anywhere near either of those bodies is very important.

ASHLEY: Salena Zito speaking with us on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley.

RICHARD: I'm Richard. Our podcast is produced for Common Ground Committee. This is our 40th episode.

ASHLEY: Some of our episodes are on the theme of depolarizing America, most recently with USA Today journalist and author Nathan Bomey. He wrote about bridge builders, people and campaigns that work to reach across rigid political divides and bring people together.

RICHARD: We've also recorded episodes on climate, race, and our partners, The Christian Science Monitor and Convergence Center for Policy Resolution.

ASHLEY: Hear more episodes at commongroundcommittee.org/podcasts.

RICHARD: Now more from our interview with Salena Zito.

ASHLEY: Moving from climate change to guns, there's polling research from the 2016 election about women who own guns who said that issue influenced their vote.

SALENA: Suburban, college-educated women cited the 2nd Amendment as one of the reasons that they chose Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Most of these women identified themselves as feminists. What does feminism mean? It's empowerment. That just completely went over the head of most journalists. They couldn't understand that a suburban woman that lives in Ashtabula County, Ohio... Why that woman would want a gun and they don't is just incredibly foreign to them.

The other really important thing is a lot of people believe that Donald Trump's election caused this Conservative/Populist coalition. No. He's the result of it. But he did not cause it, and it is not going away. One of the most consistent things I saw all across the country... In fact, I'm writing about this for The New York Post this week... was the Trump signs that were everywhere in every state. And everyone... A journalist from New York will say, "Oh, it's a call to Trump." No, it's a rejection of the status quo. They're letting people know, "Hey, y'all, I'm still out here, and I'm not going away." It's not about Trump. It's about them.

ASHLEY: Maybe this question is partially a follow-on to what you've just been talking about, but you've written that there's a crisis of mistrust in the parts of America that you cover. Can you talk about that a little bit? What's going on there?

SALENA: That's nothing new. I would argue that that began right around Watergate and the end of the Vietnam War. It has been slow and incremental, but however, it has been consistently growing. 70% of us trusted the media in 1968. Today, that number is completely flipped. Mistrust comes from a lot of things beginning with Watergate and beginning with the Vietnam War, and then the media problem has really escalated as cable news has become more dominant. Anybody can go on cable news and say whatever they want. There's also a mistrust around our corporations.

If everyone's familiar with a Hoover vacuum cleaner, a Hoover vacuum cleaner made in America, Mr. Hoover lived four blocks from his factory. He not only knew everyone that worked for him, he also knew who his consumers were. He went to church with them every Sunday. His wife sat on the school board. He knew his company, and he knew the values of the people that bought his product. Today, we don't know anybody that owns a company. It's owned by a bunch of venture capitalists that are either located in Los Angeles and/or New York or Chicago or D.C., and they have no connectivity to the people that are buying their product. Hollywood, the same thing. Hollywood has the exact same problem because they're so out of touch with the people that want to just sit down in front of their television with their family and be entertained.

RICHARD: Many listeners, especially from the liberal side, are going to say, "Oh, you're just speaking as a Conservative." But I know that one of the many Democrats who've you've interviewed is Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia who is a Centrist, who leans Left on some matters and leans more Conservative on others. What did you learn from him when you interviewed the senator?

SALENA: Well, I've been covering him for decades. One of the most consistent things that I can tell you about Joe Manchin, he is the same guy who was a state senator in the '90s that he is today. And I will tell you there are plenty of local Democrats out there that are the same as Joe Manchin, that have a buffet of issues that tend to be very rooted and grounded in the areas that they're from, and they reflect that with their votes. You see those kinds of Democrats in state legislative bodies, state Senate, state House, some governors, where they more have the freedom to be reflective of the area they represent. But when it comes to federal office, whether Congress or Senate, those kinds of candidates traditionally lose these races to the more Progressive candidates in primaries because many of our primaries are closed. So only Democrats can vote in those primaries, and the most excited Democrats and/or Republicans in a primary are always to the Left of their party.

RICHARD: Let's talk about the COVID pandemic. Many Red states, especially in the South, currently have lower vaccination rates with the highest numbers of hospitalizations and deaths. What's your view of this? What's your view of the push for vaccinations and the differing views about the pandemic around the country?

SALENA: Depends what time of the day it is what my point of view is. I was one of the first people to sign up for a vaccine. I was anxious to get it. I wanted the ability to get on with my life, to be able to hug people, to be with my parents, to be with my grandchildren. There was a profound sense of loss for me when I was unable to do any of that. However, I can see both points of view. I understand why people believe everyone should be vaccinated. I understand why people don't have a trust in the system. I can see their point of view.

I think that's what makes me a good reporter, is I can put myself in the shoes of someone who does or doesn't want to do it and clearly see why. I think we go down a slippery slope, a dangerous one with mandates. I don't think it's a good idea. But do I wish everyone was vaccinated? Sure. I respect people's decision. In particular, in the Black population, it's a real problem. They have, and justifiably so, a reason to completely mistrust the government in terms of a vaccine, and so I understand that hesitancy. I understand the hesitancy of anyone that doesn't want to do it. It's not the decision I made, but I respect and understand that decision.

RICHARD: What do we do with this, Salena? How do we try and narrow the gap, improve the understanding, not find agreement but at least find some common ground, some more trust?

SALENA: Turn off social media. I saw it everywhere, common ground, helping each other out, not carding someone for their political party before you had a conversation with them. That happens everywhere in this country. It just doesn't happen on cable news and on social media. Both of them were designed to divide us. And if you look at a cable news rating, an average cable news show gets anywhere from one to three million people watching it. Well, there's a whole heck of a lot more other people out there. The majority is not what you see on television. The majority is not what you see on Twitter, and I think those ratings speak to that.

RICHARD: Do you think most of that majority are good people?

SALENA: Absolutely, absolutely. I was at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. It was right before Sturgis. So there was a lot of people on motorcycles.

RICHARD: Could you just tell us what Sturgis is?

SALENA: Sturgis is an annual rally that's held in Sturgis, South Dakota, usually attracts about a half a million bikers for the week long that it goes. It's fun, and it's festive, sometimes edgy, sometimes alcohol-fueled, but it is a very happy place. So I'm in Mount Rushmore, and I'm by myself. So I'm trying to take a selfie, which is something I never do, and all of a sudden, I'm surrounded by about 30 bikers. And they said, "Girl, you cannot be in a picture by yourself at Mount Rushmore." They all stood around me and hugged me, and then one of the guys stepped out and took a photo. And that, to me, is very reflective of the spirit of the American people. When you get out there, it is energizing. It is wonderful. That doesn't mean there's not sadness or despair or problems. However, that American spirit of wanting to be part of something bigger than themselves is evident in everything that you see.

ASHLEY: On your travels, do you see people with different perspectives actually physically getting together? Because that is something I wonder about, whether many people's pulling back to a screen is a big part of the problem and that

actual in-person gatherings be it at church or fairs or whatever is part of what helps keep us glued.

SALENA: Yeah. Where was I? Somewhere outside of St. Louis, and I had gotten gas, and I saw this big family barbecue, big family picnic. The kids were playing dodgeball, and the adults were having beers, and one was cooking. So I went over and just started talking to them, and they all introduced themselves. And the one guy said, "Yeah, this is my brother-in-law. He's like our token Conservative, but we still love him." And they were laughing, and then they went on to something else. So I don't think... He seemed to be alive and healthy, and I think he's going to be fine. I think the family still loves him, and I've seen examples of that. I saw a group of older gentlemen talking in Gettysburg. Three of them voted for Biden. Two of them voted for Trump. They meet every morning for coffee. So I think we're fine.

RICHARD: Political journalist Salena Zito.

ASHLEY: Thanks for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. We produce new episodes every two weeks.

ASHLEY: Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.