

## **Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party**

In a *Democracy Now!* exclusive, award-winning journalist Max Blumenthal joins us for the first extended interview about his debut book, *Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*. The book traces the rise of the radical right in the US and how it used the concept of personal crisis to grow as a movement and eventually capture control of the GOP to transform it from the party of Dwight Eisenhower to the party of Sarah Palin.

**Max Blumenthal**, award-winning journalist and author of *Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*. He is a Puffin Foundation writing fellow at the Nation Institute.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Fifty years ago, Republican President Dwight Eisenhower issued a warning against the rise of extremist movements within his own party. During his presidency, Eisenhower had endured attacks by Senator Joseph McCarthy, the radical right John Birch Society and others. In a 1959 letter to a World War II veteran, Eisenhower wrote, quote, “Many prominent officials, possessing no standing or expertness as they themselves claim it, attempt to further their own ideas or interests by resorting to statements more distinguished by stridency than by accuracy.”

Half a century later, in a summer of town hall disruptions and birth certificate controversies, what Eisenhower had warned against has come true: that the Republican Party has been captured by its extremist wing. At least that’s what award-winning journalist Max Blumenthal argues in his new book, *Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*.

The book examines the transformation of the GOP from the party of Dwight Eisenhower to the party of Sarah Palin and how this sets the stage for the future of American politics. Max Blumenthal is a Puffin Foundation writing fellow at the Nation Institute. He joins us today for his first extended interview about his book, *Republican Gomorrah*.

Welcome to *Democracy Now!*

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Thanks for having me on.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Well, you had an op-ed piece in the *Times* this week citing that Eisenhower quote. Can you talk about that warning of Eisenhower and your sense of how true it rings today?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Yeah. I actually discovered that Eisenhower letter while doing some research for my book, *Republican Gomorrah*. You know, for the past six years I’ve covered the radical right. I’ve gone to their conventions. I’ve interviewed their leaders. I’ve gone to their houses of worship. And I’ve gotten a sense of what conservatism has become, how radical it’s become, and the extent to which the Christian right has taken

over the Republican Party. So when I found this letter by Eisenhower to a military veteran who was dying at the time—and he didn't really have to respond to his letter—I was really riveted by it, by this prophecy, and I found it even a little bit eerie. I think that his warning about the rise of extremist movements should be as memorable in history as his warning about the military-industrial complex, because he saw what was happening to his Republican Party.

Eisenhower really believed in the big tent philosophy of the Republican Party, that in order to be a national party, you had to have a broad constituency. Today, the Republican Party is a one-ring circus, and it's controlled by people like Sarah Palin, who are warning of death panels, that Barack Obama's healthcare plan will decide who lives and who dies. It's controlled by people like Representative Paul Broun, this born-again Christian who was recently elected, who's comparing Barack Obama simultaneously to Hitler and Stalin. It's controlled by—it actually has no leadership. It's controlled by the movement that I say shattered the party, which is substantially the Christian right.

And the conservatism that defines it is not an ideology or a set of ideas; it's really a sensibility. It's a social psychology that I think is best summarized by a quote by Newt Gingrich, who's also supported Sarah Palin's claim about death panels. Newt Gingrich said, "I think you can write a psychological profile of me that says I found a way to immerse my insecurities in a cause large enough to justify whatever I wanted it to."

And so, in Eisenhower's letter, he actually recommended a really fascinating book by Eric Hoffer, who was a self-educated dockworker, to this military veteran. And the central thesis of Hoffer's book, *The True Believer*, is that faith in a holy cause is really a substitute for lost faith in ourselves. And that's sort of the thesis of my book and how—and what I've discovered from the true believer of the Republican Party that I've been around for the past six years.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Well, what I found riveting in your book was the—most people associate the rise of the modern radical right in the Republican Party with Barry Goldwater and the elections of 1964. But you actually trace it much further back to a bunch of people that few Americans have ever heard of: Francis Schaeffer or R.J. Rushdoony, R.H. Ahmanson. Could you talk about these individuals and their enormous impact on the current crop of radical right leaders?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Yeah, and I don't want to go too far back in the past; I want to try to keep it present.

But I talk about R.J. Rushdoony, because this theologian, who's almost unheard of, influenced the Christian right and provided them with their blueprint for what they saw as the promised land, which is a actually theocratic dystopia. He advocated substituting theocracy for the Constitution, wrote, you know, thousand-word tomes explaining how this would work out during the 1960s, during the battles for desegregation, and influenced people like Jerry Falwell. And, you know, under Rushdoony's plan, disobedient children, witches, blasphemers, adulterers, abortion doctors would all be

executed, according to, you know, Leviticus case law. As extreme as it sounds, it had an enormous impact on the right-wing evangelical movement as it moved from the pews into the political realm, because it gave them something to campaign for, even if what they were going to get was going to be more along the lines of a Republican Gomorrah than what they saw as, you know, a theocratic Canaan.

Francis Schaeffer is the guy who really gave them the tactics to make this happen. During the '70s, people like Jerry Falwell were still preoccupied with segregation. They were still upset that their Christian schools had to accept African American children. And Francis Schaeffer told them, "No, we have to campaign on abortion. Abortion is the issue."

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Yeah, but who was Schaeffer? What was—

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** And Schaeffer is a really fascinating and tragic character. He was an iconoclastic theologian who set up a hippy—Christian hippy commune in the Swiss Alps. And I write about, you know, how this commune—in my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, I write about how this commune accepted lesbians and African Americans and all kinds of people, as long as they, you know, believed in Christ. Timothy Leary visited this commune. Jimmy Page, the guitarist for Led Zeppelin, carried in his back pocket one of Francis Schaeffer's books. So he was sort of a tolerant character.

But when *Roe v. Wade* happened, something snapped inside Francis Schaeffer, and he became concerned that the United States government would eventually legalize infanticide and inspired this evangelical movement to take up the cause of abortion, when they were preoccupied with segregation, and eventually helped create the moral majority with Jerry Falwell. He helped convince Jack Kemp and Gerald Ford that abortion was an important issue. And, you know, from the Swiss Alps to Washington, he became an evangelist in the truest sense of the word.

The tragic part is that Francis Schaeffer despised so many of the evangelical, you know, Southern Baptists who had converged around him. He thought Pat Robertson was a pathological lunatic after Pat Robertson told him at dinner, as I write in my book, that he burned a Modigliani painting in his fireplace. He thought Jerry Falwell was a charlatan. He thought James Dobson, who was studying him very closely, was power mad. But at the same time, Francis Schaeffer was giving—creating tactics and urging evangelicals to get out in the streets and fight even a violent war to stop abortion. And he wound up inspiring the group Operation Rescue, that's responsible for the assassination of several abortion doctors, including Dr. Tiller recently in Kansas.

And, you know, what's sad is Francis Schaeffer died, you know, prematurely, and the movement went on beyond him. And his son is out there, and his son Frank Schaeffer has been on your show. And his son says, you know, "My father would have been so upset to see what the Christian right and the Republican Party has become today. He despised the homophobia of the movement."

And what Frank Schaeffer told me, which is most interesting, is that “This movement, we were like oncologists. We needed a crisis to keep occurring in American society in order for us to stay in business.” And that’s what we’re seeing with the healthcare debate, too. I mean, we’re seeing a movement that’s terrified that the government will start to be able to solve people’s crises, because they survive and thrive on manipulating people’s personal crises.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** We’re talking with Max Blumenthal. The book is *Republican Gomorrah: Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*. And I’d like to continue with some of these lesser-known figures that have been so influential. R.H. Ahmanson, he, as you point out in the book, is the angel of much of the conservative causes, a financial angel. Talk about his influence.

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Well, I was the first journalist in fifteen years to get an interview with Howard F. Ahmanson, Jr. And, you know, your listeners and viewers in California might recognize the name Ahmanson, because of so many philanthropic entities that have been donated by his father, who was the great man of California.

Howard F. Ahmanson, Jr. has Tourette syndrome and largely speaks through his wife, shuns the media, and for some reason decided to speak to me in 2004. He was the man behind Proposition 8 in California, which banned same-sex marriage. Proposition 22 in California, before that, the intelligent design movement, he’s donated \$2.8 million to that. Countless right-wing Christian right causes across the country that have been successful have been funded by Howard F. Ahmanson, Jr.

And the reason that I was interested in him is because he embodies the sensibility of the movement that I’m writing about in my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, that controls the Republican Party. At age eighteen, Howard F. Ahmanson, Jr. inherited \$300 million from his father, who had just dropped dead. His mother died soon after. And he basically went crazy. He literally went crazy and wound up in a mental institution. When he came out of the mental institution, he found, as so many people do who have had a personal crisis and are seeking some kind of means of transcending it, evangelical religion.

And he found R.J. Rushdoony, who I talked about earlier. He became Rushdoony’s financial angel, and Rushdoony became his surrogate father. And he helped—and he declared, Howard F. Ahmanson, Jr., in 1985, that “My goal for this country is the literal application of biblical law and its integration into our daily lives,” which was the goal of Rushdoony. And he’s doing this through mainstream mechanisms through the Christian right. He’s able to still succeed, even with the Democrats in power, through ballot measures in California. And what it really is about is about creating this, what they see as this theocratic utopia, which is actually becoming a Republican Gomorrah.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** You have a whole chapter on James Dobson, and calling him perhaps the most influential and respected member of the radical Christian right in America today. Talk about Dobson’s influence, his—how he was shaped by some of these other figures you’ve talked about, and his relationship to Sarah Palin.

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Right. And Dobson was, you know, a key acolyte of Francis Schaeffer. But Dobson's a central figure in my book. And, you know, a lot of commentators now—Frank Rich, for example—say that Dobson's influence is on the wane. But I credit Dobson, who has the third largest radio show in America, whose organization Focus on the Family has \$150 million in its coffers and thirty-six policy councils in the States and is widely credited for electing George W. Bush and the Republican Congress in 2004, with cultivating the sensibility of the movement that I'm writing about in my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, that controls the Republican Party.

Dobson is a fascinating figure, because although he's leading what is widely considered a religious movement, he's not a religious leader. He has no theological credentials. He's not a preacher. What is he? He's a child psychologist. And the way that he's won so many followers is by, you know, doing radio shows about common, mundane problems, like bedwetting, for example, or dealing with a child that has, you know, issues with their sexuality, something like that. And he has a correspondence department in Focus on the Family that's so large it occupies an entire zip code in Colorado Springs. People write in with their personal problems. He sends them—his workers send them Dobson-approved advice. After they get into the database that Dobson maintains, he bombards them with political mailings and slowly cultivates them into Republican shock troops. So Dobson has, you know, turned personal crisis into political resentment.

Where did Dobson's fortune come from? How did he erect this empire? It came mainly from one book, which I quote from extensively in my book, *Republican Gomorrah—Dare to Discipline*, which is essentially a manual for corporal punishment, for beating your child. In this book, he says pain is a marvelous purifier that a child should be—that pain goes a long way with a child, that pain should be dispensed sufficiently enough to make a child cry, but then the child will crumple to your breast, and you should welcome the child with warm, open arms. This is a recipe for sadomasochism. And sadomasochism, as I discovered in—

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And he saw himself originally as the antithesis to Benjamin—Dr. Benjamin Spock.

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Dr. Benjamin Spock, who tells you to basically pick your child up and cradle it. And, you know, I mean, I was—you know, for whatever it's worth, I was raised along those guidelines. When your child's crying, you pick up the child.

By creating a belt-wielding army of millions, Dobson created the next generation of Republican shock troops, who are more radical than before. And sadomasochism—I know this sounds a little strange—is what defines the essential character, you know, that—this is what—at least what I've discovered—of the Republican follower of today. They're sadistic in that they want to lash out at deviants, at people who are weaker than them, homosexuals, immigrants, foreigners, socialists. At the same time, they're masochistic. They are followers of a higher cause, of a strong leader, a magic helper like Dobson or George W. Bush or the macho Jesus archetype that they worship. And this is what defines this movement.

So many of the people that Dobson has been able to get close to and work with in the Republican Congress and in American culture have been viciously abused as children. And he understood that by advocating violence against children, deliberate violence, he was creating this sensibility, which would produce a radical generation of political followers.

Tom DeLay, for example, who Dobson converted from Hot Tub Tommy, a dallying, philandering, no-name legislator in Texas, you know, who lived in a house that was nicknamed “Macho Manor,” Dobson converted him into this hardcore—you know, into “The Hammer,” the man who whipped the Republican Congress into shape and turned it into one of the most radical congresses in history.

Ted Bundy, who I write about extensively in my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, who is the most notorious serial killer in American history, Dobson helped convert Ted Bundy on death row into a born-again Christian and then got the final interview before Ted Bundy was executed and sold tapes of this interview to raise a million dollars for his political empire and to generate national renown.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And Dobson has also become sort of like the counselor of choice for politicians who fall by the wayside, in certain ways, hasn't he?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Well, Newt Gingrich, for example, another person who was viciously abused as a child, Dobson led the coup against Gingrich that helped remove him as Speaker of House—as Speaker of the House when a lot of Republicans were concerned that his leadership was weakening when they were trying to impeach Clinton, because Gingrich was carrying on an affair with a woman twenty years younger than him who was on the congressional payroll at the same time. She's his wife now.

When Gingrich decided to resurrect his political career, he decided—the Republican Party is controlled by the Christian right. He's not a stupid man. “What do I do? I have to confess all of my sins by going on James Dobson's radio show,” catering to the culture of personal crisis that lurks behind the right's politics of resentment. And so, that's exactly what he did. He basically prostrated himself before Dobson, who has, you know, no political—supposedly has no political standing. And the next thing you know, he's back on the national stage. He's welcomed at the Christian right gatherings. You can see him on Fox News now. So, that shows, you know, how powerful Dobson is. But it's not just Dobson; it's a mentality that defines conservatism.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And the connection between Dobson and Sarah Palin?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Well, Dobson, you know, and a lot of his allies, many of his allies, had known about Sarah Palin before any of us did. And it didn't surprise me when Sarah Palin was selected, even though many people compared her to Dan Quayle and said she was a huge liability, that she was selected, because I knew from listening to Dobson's radio show every day that they—you know, Dobson talked about his correspondence with her and how he had been writing her letters congratulating her on

not aborting her child, who had Down's syndrome. And so, when John McCain won the nomination, he knew that he needed to bring the Christian right around. I mean, there was no way, other way, that he was going to win the Republican base, considering how loathed he was for denouncing Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson as agents of intolerance. So his advisers realized that Dobson was very favorable to Sarah Palin, because whatever her qualifications were, however experienced she was, however articulate or inarticulate she was, she embodied the culture of personal crisis that I talk about in my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, that so many, you know, people in the Christian right identify with.

Now, she's also—I also describe her as the archetype of the right-wing woman. You know, in 2005 I was able to meet someone named Leslee Unruh, who helped craft the Bush administration's abstinence agenda. She was given millions in federal funding to create textbooks for public schools that warned children that you could spread AIDS through sweat and tears. Henry Waxman reviewed these textbooks and found that 80 percent of the information was inaccurate. But I started to understand, through my research, what the right-wing archetypal woman was like. This is someone who had had an abortion, who had had a personal crisis, and became one of the leading anti-abortion activists in South Dakota. And so, I started to understand this mentality. This is someone who wound up promoting Sarah Palin to the right-wing base, because she saw in Sarah Palin someone who also advocated abstinence, but at the same time her family was not practicing it.

And then that's something that's happening in evangelical communities across the country. In Lubbock, Texas, for example, where abstinence has been mandated, you know, I mention in my book that the rate of gonorrhea there is twice the national rate. And so, the process of, you know, crisis and confession, and what a lot of people refer to as hypocrisy, was essential to the rise of Sarah Palin, because people could identify with her who are going through these struggles themselves.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Let me ask you—obviously, the subtitle of the book is *Inside the Movement that Shattered the Party*. How did it shatter the party? And how do you see, bringing it up to date right now, the healthcare debate, all these town hall meetings where we've seen this enormous antagonism toward the Obama administration, and Senator David Vitter, for instance, in Louisiana talking about resuscitating states' rights. How did this movement shatter the party? And how is it involved in this enormous discontent that we're seeing at so many of these town hall meetings?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Well, I mean, I just mentioned Sarah Palin. Sarah Palin's selection as vice president, while it was necessary for the Republican Party, was also a complete disaster. She wasn't qualified. Most Americans saw that. But the Republican base had been winnowed out and was so heavily evangelical, so Southern, that they had no other choice but to pick this person, who the patrician former Republican senator from Rhode Island, Lincoln Chafee, described as a "cocky wacko." Peggy Noonan, I think, the Reagan speechwriter, you know, called her, I think, a "lunatic." But that's what the Republican Party had become, the party of Palin. So what happened was, John McCain

won three percent more of the conservative vote than George W. Bush, who was a hardcore conservative, and lost 20 percent of the moderate votes that George W. Bush had, even though McCain was seen as a moderate. That's because of selecting Palin, because he had to cater to what the Republican Party had become.

Out of power, the Republican Party relies on its grassroots. It has no leadership. It also has—and so—and we're seeing that at town halls. We're seeing the Republican Party with, you know, no brakes, completely out of control, relying on the movement that controls it. And, you know, it's a very ugly spectacle.

The problem is, it has no capacity for bipartisanship. Everyone knows—well, it's clear from reading my book, *Republican Gomorrah*, that—you know, and the picture that I provide of the Republican Party, through my, you know, research on it and my reporting on it, that they're not going to compromise on healthcare. And so, the idea that, you know, producing a bipartisan healthcare bill is going to be a better bill is a delusion. They won't produce a bill at all. And Barack Obama's tendency towards bipartisanship, I think, disregards the lessons of my book and will essentially damage the Democrats and especially the progressive agenda, because the people who I describe in my book, the movement I describe, knows that any government solution to the common personal crises that are happening every day in America—and a lot of them are related to healthcare problems—will mean the death of the empire of James Dobson and his allies.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** And finally, the title, *Republican Gomorrah*, what did you mean by that?

**MAX BLUMENTHAL:** Well, I talk in my book, you know, extensively about all of the bizarre scandals that have happened with Ted Haggard, with Mark Foley, with Larry Craig, which a lot of people attribute to hypocrisy and which have produced a sort of a Gomorrah-like image of a party that had once been seen as a family values party. And these scandals have damaged the party, you know, incredibly, but I wanted to get beyond the hypocrisy and try to understand the mentality and the sensibility of the movement and what defines conservatism today, because that's what defines the Republican Party out of power. And it's a party that I consider to be still extremely dangerous to the agenda of Barack Obama, and the progressive agenda, as well. Even though they control—they have no control over government, they can still affect the environment massively.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Well, Max Blumenthal, thank you very much for being with us. Max is a Puffin Foundation writing fellow at the Nation Institute. His new book, just out, *Republican Gomorrah*.