Zephyr Teachout

Nevertheless, she persisted.

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Zephyr Teachout doesn’t quit. I sat down with her for a chat on what was probably the worst day of her political life—November 8, 2016. She was about to lose a race in New York’s 19th Congressional District against John Faso, a former lobbyist. She’d run a good campaign in a part of the state where she’d polled well ahead of Andrew Cuomo in 2014. But having billionaires Paul Singer and Robert Mercer donate over $1 million to her opponent’s PAC didn’t help. Though the numbers weren’t encouraging, she kept up a feverish pace of speaking until the polls closed, confident that whatever happened in her own race, Hillary Clinton was about to make history.

Teachout has been at it ever since, as lead plaintiff in the lawsuit accusing Trump of violating the Constitution’s emoluments clause, meant to prevent federal officials from accepting gifts from foreign governments. In the press, she’s explained why the founding fathers worried such corruption would be the death of the Republic. Though the suit has dropped off the media radar, it’s still very much alive in the courts. If allowed to proceed, Teachout says, it could eventually lead to “discovery of [Trump’s] tax returns so we can figure out the full scope of the payments.”

She’s also been a critic of the way Google used its muscle as a funder of the New America Foundation to try to silence the anti-monopoly voice of its own Open Markets program. And she even found time to make a nifty video explaining why New York isn’t really a blue state. Most recently, she’s been a leader in the fight to prevent the Federal Communications Commission from abandoning net neutrality—a term coined by her 2014 running mate, Tim Wu—tweeting a call for protesters to “take to the streets!!!”

Teachout calls herself a “Brandeisian”—a fan of the late Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis, known for his opposition to corporate power and his robust defense of free speech—and her own politics reflect an equally profound skepticism toward both economic oligarchy and an overly intrusive state bureaucracy. She says, “I believe that it is politically incredibly important to tell people the truth about power in society.” Which is that, if we don’t want to be “little serfs coming to beg to work” in “a global regime run by big corporations,” we have to organize and fight.

abolishing most formal barriers to gender equality on the job. Maybe, we’re learning, it’s basically because too many men—#NotAllMen, to be sure—don’t want them there, except as underlings and sex objects. We talk all the time about the men who are losing their careers (though I still think the most profitable and well-connected will return after a much-publicized stint in therapy), but the subject remains haunted by the women who never got to have theirs, the brilliant women who were driven out of careers they’d worked for years to enter, or who found themselves mysteriously sidelined, little by little, and have ended up, at age 50, eking out a freelance living while the men they started out with are running the world. When it comes to educated women’s stagnation at work, the underlying story line has always been that women are the problem: They’re either doing their careers wrong and need to negotiate/dress/network better; or they don’t have the right stuff for success, whether it’s as scientists or chefs or game designers or senators; or they do have the right stuff—girls can do anything, as Barbie says—but opt to stay at home with their kids and raise chickens in the backyard, because capitalism sucks. Now it turns out that those women may have never had a real chance. They never enjoyed the same opportunities that the men had at work; or they were worn to a frazzle trying to deal with the small daily humiliations of working for a handsy manipulator like Leon Wieseltier; or they were quietly blackballed in their industry if they made a fuss about it; or they came to doubt their abilities because they were constantly being undermined, both professionally and psychologically.

Meanwhile, their male co-workers—who didn’t have to deal with any of this—sailed on. Louis CK didn’t force them to watch him masturbate as the price of mentorship. Mark Halperin didn’t rub his penis on their shoulders. Matt Lauer didn’t summon them to his office and push a secret button to lock the door. That must have been nice. But the corollary is that the men we see around us today, with the big careers and the confidence to match, may have taken spaces that were pre-cleared for them by harassment—which is, legally, let’s not forget, a form of sex discrimination.

If one of 2017’s lessons is that the rage of women is truly a marvel to behold, another is that it’s important not to speak of “women” as if they were all white, educated, middle-class professionals. Black women are the ones making the difference at election time: They went 91 percent for Northam, 94 percent for Murphy, and 98 percent for Jones. Indeed, the failure to reach out early and energetically to the black community was one of the problems with Ossoff’s campaign: In a segregated district, neighbor to neighbor and PTA mom to PTA mom have their limits. A party or movement that doesn’t acknowledge the centrality of black women is missing everything about this moment.

It’s also important not to think of “women” as if they were all feminists—or to assume they would be if only feminists weren’t so urban, elitist, irreligious, and bent on killing babies. There are millions of conservative women: rich Republicans whose first priority is lower taxes and less regulation; racists and xenophobes who think people of color are ruining America; conservative Catholics and evangelical Protestants who think that abortion is murder.