Breaking Free of Left and Right
Guest: Keith Preston
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Keith Preston is the author of *Attack the System: A New Anarchist Perspective for the 21st Century*.

WOODS: I'd like you to explain what you believe, what your background is in a nutshell. When I look at your website, when I look at attackthesystem.com, I find all different kind of links there. I find links that I would associate with the left. I find links I would associate with the right. I find links that I would associate with all sorts of libertarians—libertarians who don't like each other. They all are sitting there in happy concord at attackthesystem.com. So it makes me want to ask: who are you?

PRESTON: Well, I have been an anarchist for about 30 years, 25-30 years, and I was early on a left-wing anarchist—they really didn't have this back then, but the kind of person who would be out today as part of this Occupy Wall Street or the anti-globalization movement. I was in that vein, and over time I started expanding my horizons a bit. I started checking out more libertarian literature and more literature from the right as well as all of the different strands on the left, and I started developing a perspective that more or less says that no one really has the ideal political system, no one really has the absolute truth as to how the world absolutely works. However, I did retain my basic anarchist principles, and that was the idea that the state is a parasite on society, that political power should be dissolved and decentralized to the greatest degree possible, that individual liberty is a paramount political good. I have also been an antiwar activist for all of my adult life, and opposition to aggressive war has always been one of my core issues. So over time I started developing this project—Attack the System—whose purpose was to explore all these different philosophies that people hold to with an emphasis on opposing concentrated and centralized power, and that certainly includes all the different strands of libertarianism or anarchism with that overlap of each other that are also hostile to each other in many ways. And then there's also strands of anti-state or decentralized leftism that we bring into the mix as well as similar strands on the right, and that's really what Attack the System is about. It's about providing a venue for exploring all of these kinds of options and all these kinds of ideas.

WOODS: Normally I start with general question and then I hone in on the specific, but I am too curious about this particular specific question to wait. I would like to know your thoughts on Noam Chomsky.

PRESTON: Well, Noam Chomsky was an influence on me, very early on, and of course today he's probably the most prominent intellectual of the left. I continue to agree with his general critique of American foreign policy, of the relationship between the state and the plutocracy of the great corporations. I think libertarians call it crony capitalism. And also the role of the media as essentially being the propaganda arm of the ruling class and of the political class. So I think Chomsky is spot on with most of that. Now, I don't agree with Chomsky on every issue. He's a little bit more of a conventional leftist than I am. He's a little bit more state-centric in a lot of his ideas than I am. He also encourages people to vote for the Democrats, which I have a problem with.

WOODS: Wow! I guess I am really out of it. I didn't realize that he did that.

PRESTON: Well, he has—it's the standard point of view that, you know, the lesser of the evils.

WOODS: Right.

PRESTON: Like, I know when Ralph Nader was running for president a few years back, Chomsky was saying that he personally voted for Nader because he lived in a safe state, Massachusetts, which was going to go Democratic anyway, so he would have voted Democratic if he had lived in a border state. Yeah, so it's the same idea that many on the left have, of defeat the Republicans or defeat the right at all costs. And of course, there are parallels to that on the right as well.

WOODS: Yeah, there are. Maybe it's just the circle I travel in, but certainly in my circles I see an awful lot of people who are more inclined to believe that the two parties are just part of the same racket and that there's no way they're going to vote for the Republicans because they are so bad on so many other things. I don't know. Maybe that's just the circles I travel in. I know there are people who hold their nose and vote for the Republicans. I am not looking forward to 2016 when I hear all those 25-year-olds who run *National Review* these days telling me I have got to hold my nose *just this once* and vote for Jeb Bush—but just this once, you understand, because then next time we'll get somebody better, right? Yeah.

PRESTON: Yeah. Well, the electoral system continues to become a parody of itself as we go along to an ever greater degree, and it looks like we might have yet another Bush/Clinton election in 2016.

WOODS: It really is something that makes you want to emigrate, really. But on Chomsky, I remember when he was asked about Ron Paul, he doesn't like him, and it's partly because Ron doesn't like the welfare state. I guess I am having trouble understanding why somebody who is an anarchist—which would mean, I would think, that you don't favor coercive authority—

would rush to the aid of the welfare state, because that is based on coercive authority. Maybe I understand him too simplistically?

PRESTON: Well, actually, when Ron Paul was running for the presidency for the first time. I guess that would have been 2007, 2008, I wrote a series of pieces for LewRockwell.com in favor of Ron Paul, generally giving Ron Paul a qualified endorsement, and I actually came across a piece that Chomsky had written criticizing Ron Paul. Essentially he wasn't ranking Ron Paul any higher than someone like Hillary Clinton. And I actually wrote a piece where I called out Chomsky on that, and Chomsky and I had a private email exchange after that.

WOODS: Oh!

PRESTON: Yeah, but Chomsky's basic point of view on someone like Ron Paul is not only is there opposition to the welfare state; the kind of anarchist that Chomsky is, is someone who sees capitalism really at the root of the problem, and then the state is an outgrowth of capitalism. The libertarian tradition that you and I'm sure many of your listeners hold to generally argues that it's really the state that's the root of the problem, and you need to get the state out of the way and let the market function and things like that. The kind of left-wing, socialist-influenced anarchist that Chomsky is argues more the reverse, that the oppressive state is really an outgrowth of economic power and economic elites that have the power to create a state to keep the people down and that kind of thing. So I have seen libertarian writing that explores this kind of issue, you know, where does power really come from? There's the plutocratic theory that it comes from economic power. There's the statocratic theory that it comes from the state itself, from the political class itself. There's the populist point of view that says it's really a question of elites versus the people. You know, there's other points of view that say, well, it's really the people that are the problem. It's the mass democracy. Someone like Hans Hoppe, for example, might make an argument like that. But someone like Chomsky would argue that the regulatory welfare state is a necessary check and balance or counterbalance to the power of business elites and corporate power and things like that. He'll describe corporations as private tyranny that are top-down, centralized hierarchical institutions with no pretense of democracy, and then they have the wealth that allows them to influence political policy through the state in their interest, not to mention influencing the media on their behalf.

Chomsky was also critical of Ron Paul's opposition to the United Nations. Chomsky—I find this bizarre as well—is actually a big fan of international law as a means of restraining the power of individual nations to wage war and things like that. Now, I don't think it really happens that way in the real world.

WOODS: No, I don't either, and I think—

PRESTON: But that's the perspective that he holds to. We need to strengthen the rule of law at the international level to prevent aggressive warfare. We need the power of the welfare state,

however regrettable it may be, to restrain the power of big business. Until we can get something better like an anarcho-syndicalism or something like that.

WOODS: I am interested in your ideas about liberal democracy. When the U.S. government is involved in some overseas adventure, it will claim that it's trying to spread freedom around the world, and it takes liberal democracy and freedom as being, in effect, synonymous, but you don't think so. Why is that?

PRESTON: Political thinkers as far as back as the ancient times—Plato, Aristotle, some of those—recognized that oppression can come from a democratic state just as easily it can from an elitist state. I have heard it said that democracy is really when five wolves and a sheep vote on what to have for lunch, and certainly I think democracy, the way it's practiced in modern Western societies like our own, resembles that in many ways. Democracy is really just a system where shifting coalitions of political interest groups really work to try to plunder each other. And if you look at mainstream politics in our own society we see that the two major parties, each of them reflects a coalition of political factions that is essentially trying to get over on the other. They are trying to get some kind of law passed to repress their competitors in business or their cultural competitors or one set of cultural groups are trying to impose their own cultural values on some other set of cultural groups, and that's really what democracy is. It's really just watered-down mob rule. A lot of thinkers historically have criticized democracy fairly extensively, not only in ancient times, but also some of the classical liberal thinkers—John Stuart Mill and others, some of the early anarchists; certainly Kropotkin and Proudhon were skeptical of mass democracy as it's practiced nowadays in most modern societies, understanding that it had the potential to become this.

WOODS: We do have the idea, though, of political representation. We don't have direct democracy, but you democratically elect your representative, and your representative will represent you. I take this as another example of how the state takes some common concept, in this case representation, and deforms it in a way that benefits itself. When we think of representation in normal, non-political life, it's a harmless, beneficial institution. I have an agent. My agent represents me to book publishers, for example. That agent is acting on my direct instructions. In the political world representation is nothing like this. My agent doesn't even know me. My agent represents many, many people of diverse backgrounds, and my agent does whatever he wants to do, and they call that representation. And I suggest, along with a previous guest, Gerard Casey, that what's actually going on here is they use a concept like liberal democracy or representation to conceal the brute fact that some people rule and others are ruled, and that sounds very much like what you were saying.

PRESTON: Yeah, yeah, I would agree with everything that you said. All state systems have some means of self-legitimation, whether it's in the ancient world, where they said the pharaoh rules because he's a descendent of the sun god or something like that, or there was a divine right of kings from the pre-modern era, and we have the same kind of thing in modern societies. We have these coronation rituals we call elections. We have this ideology of liberal democracy that

says, well, the rulers are legitimate because the people elected them, and the theory of representation fits into that as well. The idea, for example, that the way representation is supposedly taking place in our own system is ridiculous when you consider that there are 535 members of Congress, and they are supposed to be representing 300 million people. You gave the analogy of a book agent earlier, or literary agent. How many literary agents represent 10, 20, 30 million people? That's impossible.

WOODS: I was reading a review of *Attack the System* not long before we spoke this morning, and the phrase *totalitarian humanists* was used. Can you elaborate on what that might mean?

PRESTON: Yeah, well, it's a term that I use. Totalitarian humanism is a term that I picked up from an underground British writer years ago, but it's a term to describe what is more commonly called political correctness, and that is the idea that in the name of ostensibly progressive values that the systems of authority have to become ever more concentrated and ever more controlling. For example, families can't be trusted to run their own affairs because somebody might be abusing somebody. Religion can't be trusted to run its own affairs because it might be brainwashing someone. The competing institutions to the state have to be increasingly regulated by the state in order to prevent all sorts of social ills from happening—racial discrimination, sexism, homophobia, animal abuse—things like that. Local political institutions can't be trusted to run their own affairs. Political power has to become increasingly centralized over the lower or more localized political units. That's true even at the level of foreign policy. Other nations can't simply be left alone to mind their own business. We've got to bring gay rights to Russia or feminism to Saudi Arabia, or gay marriage to Afghanistan, or something like that. This is the kind of thinking that's becoming ever more prominent among the progressive wing of Western politics among the political class, among the intellectual class, and among the cultural elites, and I also think it's finding its way into a lot of institutions that are normally thought of as being somewhat conservative. The military is one example. I have friends who are in the military, or who have been in the military, who talk about all kinds of rather odd aspects of p.c. programming that goes on there. I have even seen this kind of stuff finding its way into the police. I have seen it in the corporate world, the business world, you know, not merely in academia or in the left-leaning churches or things like that, or in the mass media, where it's obvious. So totalitarian humanism is really this idea that individual freedom, the sovereignty of competing institutions to the state, intermediary institutions, the sovereignty of local communities, of regions, of even nations, must be violated in order to enforce ostensibly progressive values.

WOODS: What would you say to people who are perpetrating this who innocently protest that they are just trying to help previously marginalized groups, that there are still examples of local oppression, and yeah, it may be a blunt instrument that we're using, but we're trying to get people to think in new ways, in ways that will show greater respect for these previously marginalized groups, and then Keith Preston comes along and just rains on our parade belligerently for no good reason.

PRESTON: Well, here's the problem with that kind of argument. I am a sociologist by training and a historian, and one of the branches of sociology is conflict theory. One of the core insights of conflict theory is that when previously marginalized or previously persecuted out-groups become powerful, they often become just as abusive, just as authoritarian as any group that they replace. Among a lot of people, particularly people on the left—although I have seen some of this on strands of the right, or what passes for the right, as well—there's this idea that has been called the myth of the virtue of the oppressed, and that is that just because someone belongs to an ostensibly oppressed group or has been personally oppressed, or had bad things happen to them, that they are automatically a virtuous person. For example, you see that even among neocons who think that John McCain is a virtuous person simply because he was a POW and suffered horribly because of that, even though he's obviously not a virtuous person.

WOODS: Yeah, right.

PRESTON: And on the left you see similar thinking. You see, well, because someone has been oppressed or belongs to a group that's been oppressed or allegedly oppressed, they must be a virtuous person, and people who are out there acting on behalf of people that are supposedly oppressed or marginalized or victimized—well, they must have good motivations and good intentions and things like that. But it doesn't really work that way in real life. You can be someone driven by power lust and have all sorts of malevolent intentions in the name of trying to help the oppressed just as much as you can being an apologist for the oppressor. Bolshevism is an example of that. If you go back and you read Bolshevik propaganda from the pre-Russian Revolution era, you see that. They are the ones that are against war, and they are for peace, and land, and bread, and all these other slogans. They are for the peasants, and the workers, and the feudal landlords and that kind of thing, and against the oppressions of the tsar, secret police, and of course we all know how that turned out. I see a similar pattern happening in the West. I see something where you have a wide assortment of people who have state power, political power, institutional power, or who are seeking it, who are using these kinds of things towards that kind of end. And I also see the system absorbing a lot of this. As these kinds of ideas become more prevalent in the wider society, I see the traditional political class, the traditional plutocracy, incorporating a lot of this stuff into its own ideological framework. One thing I agree with the Marxists on is that political classes, or ruling classes, or whatever you want to call them, maintain an ideological superstructure that is meant to convey legitimacy on themselves whether it's divine right of kings, or the emperor is a god, or something like that, and I see the political class incorporating these ideas into its own ideological paradigm as well, where they are basically saying, hey, we are here to promote equal rights and democratic multiculturalism and assist the previously marginalized and oppressed, all these kinds of things that we hear nowadays.

WOODS: Now it's one thing to say the system stinks. Attack the system. But what about somebody who says, where else in the world would you want to live, though? Even though you hate this regime, and you hate political correctness, and you hate the cultural elites and all

that—what's the competing system that exists in the real world that you would prefer? How do you answer an objection like that, that somebody would consider to be a pragmatic objection?

PRESTON: Well, it's certainly true that there's a wide variety of systems around the world. There are something like 200 different nations. They have a wide mixture of political systems. Some of them are horrible, like North Korea. Some of them function fairly well most of the time whatever their limitations are. But in terms of my own ideals or whatever or what my own ideal system would be, I am a radical decentralist. I am what I call an anarcho-pluralist or a pan-anarchist, and that is I am for the traditional anarchist idea of decentralized societies—villages, towns, city-states, institutions like that, localized communities, but in a way that doesn't mandate any one specific set of cultural values or ideological values. I am okay with the coexistence of a lot of different kinds of value systems and belief systems and things like that—different kinds of religious communities, different kinds of political communities that some people want to have voluntary socialism or some kind of decentralized or localized socialism in their community, that's fine. If somebody else somewhere wants to have capitalism, that's fine. In Spain there's a federation of worker cooperatives called Mondragon. It's modeled somewhat on the old anarcho-syndicalist idea that someone like Noam Chomsky would be into. On the other hand, in South Africa there's a conservative Christian white nationalist community called Orania, which obviously comes from the opposite end of the political spectrum. I am okay with all these kinds of ideas. I am libertarian in the sense that I think that individual liberty is a paramount value. I am skeptical of the state. I generally agree with libertarians on civil liberties issues, on drug legalization, on antiwar issues, and the same with the anarchists. I think political and economic power should be decentralized to the lowest level possible. I am against imperialism. I am against military aggression. I don't advocate oppression of anyone. But I think that all of that kind of thing can work in a lot of different directions, and I am for maximizing everyone's individual liberty as much as possible as well as self-determination for divergent cultures.

WOODS: Well, here's the million-dollar question then, and this is the one that I think is difficult for everybody to answer. How do you go from here to there if we're going to say that politics isn't going to get you from here to there? Now, that's not to say, by the way, that politics can't occasionally give you incremental improvements. In Utah, for example, I have a friend who runs a think tank there, more like a legislative institution that tries to promote good legislation, and he's hated by all the other so-called conservative, free market, libertarian organizations because he actually does something as opposed to just collecting donations and doing nothing. They actually have introduced some marginal areas of improvement, but in terms of the overall goal that we have it's probably not going to be brought about through politics. So a lot of people say well, we have to just educate people. But I don't understand the theory of social change that holds that if we educate enough people, somehow things will get fixed. What is your view of social change by which we can get from A to B?

PRESTON: I could answer that question on a lot of different levels. On a more abstract level I tend to have what I call a trickle-down, trickle-up theory of social change. What I mean by that is I think that social change really begins with people who are dissident thinkers developing new ideas. I think Friedrich von Hayek had a similar theory, where it would really be the class of philosophical dissidents, if you will, that get the ball rolling as far as social change, and then these ideas tend to trickle down into other areas, you know, intellectuals, students, academics, journalists, and then they start finding their way out into the wider population, particularly population groups that are under attack by an existing system, by an existing paradigm, and that could be anyone. I think, for example, the New Left in the 1960s became popular with young people in part I think because young people were subject to the military draft and being sent to Vietnam and things like that, and socialism, welfare state ideas, Marxism became popular—to some degree it became popular among workers because of the conditions that workers were often subjected to in the earlier times, but I also think it was more popular among middle-class intellectuals who lived in societies where their own upward mobility wasn't impeded by an existing system, usually a more traditional, feudal-type system. I think that's why Marxism had so much influence in Third World countries, for example, in the twentieth century. But ideas tend to be formed that trickle down into other areas of society, and then they start to trickle up in the sense that they start finding their way into actual institutions and into the mainstream society. They become embedded in the wider culture, and eventually they become the norm in their own right, and at that point you've had a type of social revolution.

Now that's how I see social change on a more abstract level. On a more practical level, I developed a theory some years ago called pan-secessionism, and that's the idea that while if they really want to get rid of these overarching massive state systems and these corrupt political classes that we have in our modern societies, the way to do that is to simply secede. We don't have to have agreement about much else. We don't have to have—you mentioned all the different types of libertarians and then how that overlaps with left and right and things like that. There's a whole lot of issues in that that no one is ever going to agree on, and I am okay with that. I don't really try to convert other people to my view on most things, but I am interested in the strategic concept that I call pan-secessionism, where it's about creating mass secessionist movements that aren't necessarily about ideology but are more about tactics where different groups, different communities, different institutions, different organizations, different movements simply secede from centralized authority and go about their own direction and practice whatever they want to practice. For instance, a friend of mine has this project he calls the All Nations Party, and it's been somewhat influenced by some of my own ideas, which is the idea of creating a federation of political parties that is really just a meta-party that has a lot of constituent parties representing different interests and different ideas, but it's all about developing secession movements, independence movements at the local and regional level within the context of these Leviathan states that we have in the modern world. And again, the ideologies could span at the wide spectrum of belief systems—religious, ethnic, cultural, left, right, whatever, different economic preferences. But it's all about creating

sovereign communities, sovereign institutions where people with like-minded values can practice some level of self-determination and where individual liberty is enhanced because individuals have a much wider variety of options in terms of what kind of communities they want to be associated with, and then there's a certain amount of civil harmony that's achieved because people that don't like each other, that can't get along, don't have to be under the same political roof. The red states and the blue states don't have to be under the same political roof. The religious right and gay rights don't have to be under the same political roof.

WOODS: Yeah, that to me seems so obviously the correct way to go. At least in the context of a political system. Why should people of irreconcilable backgrounds be forced to just duke it out constantly instead of just living separately? Partly it's that there are members of each one of those groups that have imperial ambitions. It's not enough for them to leave people alone and just lead their own lives. They have to lead everybody else's lives. Even if you think your life is objectively superior to somebody else's, well, you might persuade them of that by leading by really great example, but if you're constantly badgering them and propagandizing their kids, or whatever, this is not going to win you points. It's not going to advance. It's only going to retard your own program—much less bring about reconciliation between the two groups.