

CBS Sunday Morning

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7 minutes and 4 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Michael Lewis]

JANE PAULEY: In his new book, author Michael Lewis turns his attention to Washington, D.C. Center stage? Those career civil servants who stood up to Elon Musk, DOGE and the Trump administration not all that long ago. Michael Lewis is in conversation with Robert Costa.

MICHAEL LEWIS: I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I'm about to enter. So help me, God. Civil Service Oath of Office, U.S. Code 3331.

ROBERT COSTA [TO LEWIS]: Do you believe most Americans know that civil servants in the federal government take this oath?

LEWIS: No. No. I didn't know. I don't think I knew even after I'd written a whole book about them. So, I assume not.

COSTA: For author Michael Lewis, pursuing knowledge is a calling. He has conjured up bestsellers and box-office hits out of deep-dives into data, from Wall Street, to the NFL, to baseball.

[SCENE FROM *MONEYBALL*]

COSTA: Challenging assumptions is a running theme for Lewis, including those about the occupants of Washington's federal buildings — government workers, sometimes derided as faceless bureaucrats.

LEWIS: That's the stereotype.

ROBERT COSTA [TO LEWIS]: Many Americans think like that.

MICHAEL LEWIS: That's right, faceless bureaucrats.

COSTA [TO LEWIS]: They don't like the government.

LEWIS: Right. They don't like the government, or they think they don't like the government. They think they don't trust the government, but in fact they just don't know how much they trust the government. They take the trust for granted. Every time they drink water out of the tap, or fly on an airplane, or eat food, or put dollars in their bank account, they're trusting the government, and I thought, who are these people? And we live in a society that is largely focused on personal ambition. It's a — it's a free market capitalist society and people are really interested in money and fame.

COSTA [TO LEWIS]: You've chronicled it more the most.

LEWIS: I've chronicled a lot of it. To find these people who are some of the most valuable people on the planet, who are interested in neither money nor fame, but have found some other purpose, who have a sense of public spirit, who are not — who basically not selfish — and the government is a place where you can really do stuff that makes a difference, and it attracts these people. And thank God for them.

COSTA: Lewis's latest book, *Blockers*, profiles workers confronted by DOGE — the Department of Government Efficiency, championed by President Trump and his mega-donor, billionaire Elon Musk.

MUSK [on 10/27/24]: [ROARS]

COSTA: Musk promised massive savings.

ELON MUSK [on 10/27/24]: Well, I — I think we — we can do, at least, \$2 trillion.

HOWARD LUTNICK [on 10/27/24]: Yeah!

COSTA [TO LEWIS]: What is a blocker? It's not meant as a compliment.

LEWIS: No. It's an insult. But a "blocker" is a — it's a phrase that Elon Musk — a word that Elon Musk likes to toss around. He told all the 20-year-olds who came to work for him in DOGE to go find the "blockers," the people who would get in the way of doing what he wanted to do, and get rid of them.

COSTA [TO WALTERS]: Are you a blocker?

KATHLEEN WALTERS: I mean, if you want to say I was blocking people from violating the law, then I guess that's a fair term.

ROBERT COSTA: A central character in *Blockers* is Kathleen Walters. Once a top executive in the Internal Revenue Service, she was responsible for protecting taxpayers' personal information.

WILL SCHARF [TO TRUMP] [on 01/20/25]: This is an order creating and implementing the Department of Governmental Efficiency, known as DOGE.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP [on 01/20/25]: Okay, that's a big one.

KATHLEEN WALTERS: Executive orders are normal. And as long as they're lawful, our job is to administer them.

COSTA [TO WALTERS]: So, you weren't trying to block executive orders?

WALTERS: No, no, no. I've been in the government for every administration since Bush, so I've worked for them all, and that's normal.

COSTA: But after DOGE's arrival, nothing seemed normal to Walters.

ELON MUSK [on 02/20/25]: Rar! This is the chainsaw for bureaucracy.

COSTA: Walters says Immigration and Customs Enforcement, ICE, began asking for information on undocumented workers who had been paying taxes to the U.S. Treasury. ICE would later specify in a memo they were only seeking information on individuals under criminal investigation.

WALTERS: They came out and said, "Well, we're thinking of approximately, probably seven million."

COSTA [TO WALTERS]: Seven million?

WALTERS: I — I was questioning —

COSTA: They wanted to tax information for seven million people?

WALTERS: — that's right, and I questioned in my head, I — I did not believe there could be seven million active criminal investigations going on.

COSTA: Walters says she resisted for months, and ultimately she resigned.

WALTERS: After I left, the IRS handed over the data.

COSTA: The Treasury Department's Inspector General has since found that ICE did not meet "safeguarding standards"; and federal courts have ruled that privacy rights were violated. The Trump administration continues to argue it has acted within the law. [TO WALTERS] So, you tried to stop the law from being broken in your view. And when you couldn't stop it, you left.

WALTERS: I did.

COSTA [TO WALTERS]: How tough of a choice was that for you?

WALTERS: In one respect, it was a simple choice. But simple isn't easy always, and it was challenging, because I'd been there almost 20 years. I was 23 days shy of qualifying for early retirement. And I'm a mom to an elementary-aged child.

COSTA [TO WALTERS]: When your daughter saw her mom struggling, what did you tell her?

WALTERS: Well, she's a smart little kid, and I told her high-level that I was asked to violate the law, and I couldn't do it, so I left. And then later that week, I went into my bedroom, and there

was a \$10 bill on my shelf. And she said, “Mom, I just want to help out at home.” And she wouldn’t let me give it back, so I had to sneak it — hopefully she doesn’t see this — had to sneak it into her piggy bank again. And — and so, I know she’s proud, and she understands why I did what I did. And — and so again, I — I can sleep at night well knowing that my decision was the right one even though it was hard.

MUSK [on 02/20/25]: Chainsaw.

COSTA: As for DOGE, there is intense debate over its impact. The Government Accountability Office, an independent nonpartisan federal watchdog, found in an audit that DOGE overstated its savings or could not verify them, and fell far short of its goals. The Trump administration’s Office of Personnel Management, OPM, which manages the federal workforce, praised DOGE in a statement to *Sunday Morning*, calling it “a catalyst for...reforms...now being institutionalized throughout the government.” But for author Michael Lewis, this story is about more than numbers or budgets; it’s about people. [TO LEWIS] Do you want someone who’s skeptical of government to read this book?

LEWIS: Oh, my God, yes. That’s my favorite — it would be my favorite reader.

COSTA [TO LEWIS]: Why do so many people not see government the way you see the government?

LEWIS: Because they don’t think — they haven’t spent the time to get to know it. I mean, this isn’t something I — this isn’t knowledge I was born with. If we don’t see that these people who don’t make any money, and aren’t famous, and don’t like to talk about what they do, but are working their tails off for us have value for our society, we’re in trouble, and that’s the message that I’m trying to get across.