



★ FORTRESS ON A HILL

Ep 65 transcript

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SPEAKERS

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Danny Sjursen

All right, everybody. Listeners we have another great pod today. And another awesome guests. We've we've really been on fire. As you may have noticed, just been sitting scheduling awesome people and we're so thankful that they've been coming on today we have Mr. Gareth Porter, who many of you may know may have followed or read his stuff if if you haven't hopefully, this pod kind of, you know, opens that up to you. And you know, Gareth, I just want to say that I think it's standard practice in any like interviewing community to tell all your guests that that you're a fan, but but I actually am a longtime fan and that and that's true. And I we met for the first time at the tablet in my you remember, which I don't even remember what year that was. I mean, time stops. Right. It was an event with our mutual friend fritzi at the tabloid in in DC, of all things, I was there giving today. sort of talk on the American Revolution, you know, and it's 18th century relevance to today and you showed up and it was it was pretty cool and, and exciting. And, you know, ever since then, obviously, I've still been doing the history as analogy thing, although cautiously but I have been a longtime follower. You know, I think that you're one of those figures and there are so many in in the media space today, who should be daily, you should be a daily face, you know, on CNN, or MSNBC. And, and that's difficult to do. And, and it's not common, and yet, you know, we don't often get those voices like yours in that sort of mainstream press. I mean, obviously, you've broken through on slits. And just to give the very briefest of BIOS, for the listeners who don't know, Gareth Porter is an independent investigative journalist. He's covered

national security policy for decades, really, and was The recipient of the 2012 Gellhorn prize for journalism specifically for his coverage of the US war in Afghanistan. He is a graduate of the University of Illinois, Chicago and Cornell. Is that right?

Gareth Porter

That's right. Yeah. No, yeah.

Danny Sjursen

Right PhD at Cornell in Southeast Asian Studies, which is interesting and relevant. Much of his early work as a scholar, and dare I say activists surrounded the American war in Vietnam and the region. He was in fact a chairman of the committee of concerned Asian scholars at Cornell, then a Saigon bureau chief within the country in 1970-71, I believe, especially since 2005, though, he's regularly reported on political, diplomatic and military developments in the Middle East. For a variety of mainstream and alternative publications. He's written several books. Some previous highlights include the perils of dominance in balance. have power in the roads war in Vietnam, and manufactured crisis The Untold Story of the Iran nuclear scare, among many others, his most recent is the CIA Insider's Guide to the Iran crisis, co authored with John Kerry Cow. Currently, he has a column that you absolutely must follow at the gray zone, which I think is one of the best alternative outlets available for readers today. I've been in Max Blumenthal fan for a long time, and I've really been enjoying your columns there. So, Gareth, just once again, we're super excited to have you and thanks for taking the time in these crazy moments.

Gareth Porter

Well, thanks so much, Danny. I'm really happy to be on your show and glad to have the connection with Keegan as well and, you know, look forward to a great, great discussion with you guys. I know this is a this is a good place to to get into a much more well grounded and complete discussion of the problem of American the American national security state, the military, industrial, congressional complex, whatever you wish to call it, and, and we share that, that deep interest in this problem, and I think this could be a great opportunity to compare notes and, and, you know, learn from one another.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely. You know, we hear on, you know, Fortress On A Hill, you know that the three of us are veterans. You know, Kagan was a Navy intelligence with some work and with, you know, the NSA had Henry was military police did Iraq. And of course, I did Iraq and Afghanistan with, you know, caveats. And the point is that, you know, we were sort of water carriers for the Empire, right tools of the national security state that we're going to talk about for quite some time and, and so we do have a lot of listeners who are veterans, although not exclusively, but it typically The system right, the systemic part, you know, not acting like history began yesterday is really important to us, I think because we were part of that. So, before digging into, you know, any specifics in your recent columns and books, which I'm sure you talk about a lot. And some of the subjects you perhaps best known for covering, we'd like to talk, especially, but not exclusively in the midst of this COVID pandemic, about the broader subject that you mentioned of American national security strategy or lack thereof. In our scheduling messages. You know, you mentioned that you're working on a forthcoming project or book, eventually that you're

thinking of titling national security as a racket. Obviously, that's a play on my longtime, you know, soulmate Smedley Butler's short book from the 1930s Wars racket right about his 30 or so years in the banana wars etc. You also said in our conversation, I think rather correctly that the old deputy The mission of national security as practice since World War Two is now dead in the water, and demands kind of a completely new concept or replace it. So perhaps as a broad opening for discussion today, you can start with, you know, three things, but I can review them after each part. But essentially, if you can review the old national security consensus, such as it was, and then, you know, explain why you think it's obsolete and what evidence you're seeing. And then finally, maybe give us a brief initial crack at what a more appropriate conceptual replacement might be. And I know that's a lot, but we'll sort of know, I'll project along.

Gareth Porter

That's a very big order. But before I before I try to get into that, I do want to add something that I didn't get to in my opening remarks, which is that I have been a great admirer of your writing. From the time that I first encountered it. You are a very distinct, distinctive figure in the movement to criticize and to bring about change in the whole US military sphere, military intelligence fear. And I just can't tell you how much I admire your determination. I mean, the degree to which you work so hard at churning stuff out I couldn't possibly match your, your output and the intensity of your work I don't think and and that that causes me to really, to really set step back and admire you in very in the most most admiring terms as I can say. So I just want to say to tell you that keep it up. This is this is what we need. You are You are definitely part of what has to be happening in this country and and to build on that is really the name of the game. So

Danny Sjursen

I appreciate that. I mean, it's it. I'm just so happy to be part of the conversation and in the same movement as folks like you, and it's really nice to hear that. Thank you.

Gareth Porter

You're welcome, indeed. And so just to come to the question of the definition of national security, the, the way in which it's been defined, I presume that you mean, essentially, since the beginning of the Cold War, since the the present system actually began to unfurl began to, to form right. I mean, it's how the national security state has defined its mission. And, you know, I think that there are two sides to this, to this coin, one side is the public side that is, you know, the the propaganda themes that are used by the national security state, which are that, you know, emphasizing that this is a dangerous world that the United States is always facing threats to our security to the security American people, as well as to the international order that the United States founded at the outset after World War Two, and and which has kept the peace. I'm now using, you know, in quotes, the kinds of the kinds of language that have been put forward by the national security state over the years, that that this this us sponsored piece has been the one that has kept order throughout the world, and is under threat now from our major adversaries, particularly China and Russia, but also, you know, the smaller adversaries of Iran and North Korea. So I mean, I think that kind of summarizes The formal presentation, if you will, of the concept of national security. But behind that, I think, is a very different reality in terms of how the national security state has defined the interests of the US government and bye bye once we remove

then the interest of the American people. In other words, they the assumption is that the American people have the same interest that they do, which of course is not true. But the way I think they understand this is that they must continue to maintain the the system of bureaucratic power and control over resources that they have, that they have been developing over several decades now. In order to be able to carry out The policies and programs that that they regard as necessary to defend those interests that that they've presented publicly to the American people. And so that that gets us into I think, closer to the, to the heart of what the interests of the national security state really are. And and I think the the essence of my approach, which which I hope to translate into a new, a new book that will really present a very different understanding of the US national security bureaucracy national security state, is that that the this contraries of national security bureaucracies, the armed services, the Pentagon's civilian offices, of course, the Secretary, Secretary of Defense on top of it, and the intelligence community led by the CIA, but including National Security Agency And also the newest entrance, the Department of Homeland Security, all these bureaucracies have their own interests at heart at the center of their function and their primary duty, in effect, although not formally, not publicly is to ensure that they can do to maintain or to increase their, their resource base, the that which they get through congressional appropriations by by making sure that there aren't any serious cuts in their appropriations and if possible to increase that to increase their their resource base. And this basically is the primary motor if you will, of the operations of the national security state because that really is the is the motivation For them, to make sure that they push for policies, programs that will have the result that they will get will continue to be regarded as necessary that they'll have more legitimacy. And they'll have more power over these public resources. And so throughout the, you know, the Cold War and since the Cold War, they have been putting forward strong recommendations putting pressure on presidents to adopt policies that have resulted in a series of, of major wars and of course, a lot of minor wars and some continuing that are not intended to end anytime soon. And I would argue and I will argue in my in my book, that this is all the result of this, this dynamic that I've described of the the this, this coalition of bureaucracies, really being determined to maintain their control over resources and doing whatever is necessary to ensure that that continues. And in the process, what that causes them to do is to get the United States into conflicts that are, continue the the need or maintain the alleged need for more resources going to the military and the intelligence community. And more again, more recently, the Department of Homeland Security Of course, and and thus, it's a self perpetuating dynamic and I think that's the essence of the idea that I want to get across and I'll stop there and we can discuss that a bit.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely, I think that the the idea of this is a self perpetuating machine or as soldiers in the bureaucracy of the military always called a self licking ice cream cone. Right Kagan and Henry. But but that I mean that people say that and yet I think what you're doing is complicating it and contextualizing it, you know, it's more than a platitude. It's a way of life, it seems. And so, you know, before we get to, you know, initial thoughts and predictions and prescriptions are way more difficult than identifying problems in some cases. Although, people often do it without thinking about the problem the first place, but before we kind of get into that, you know, what are you seeing recently, both before and after, you know, the, the moment of pandemic, right, that is showing fractures or obsolescence in this system and potential that it might be ready to move forward or change or be meaningfully challenged.

Gareth Porter

Yeah, this is this is absolutely the crucial issue of the moment. I agree with you on that, Danny, we really need to dig into it as deeply as possible. And, you know, my observation, first of all, is that that the coronavirus pandemic is clearly the the biggest potential moment of crisis for the national security state that they've they've seen thus far. It hasn't happened yet. It has not matured into a full fledged crisis. But But as you suggested in your question, there there are signs that they're dangerous times for that, let's put it that way. And and the first one is really what happened with regard to the Theodore Roosevelt affair when a major US ship in the Pacific or you know, headed to the Pacific. It happens gone out yet was stricken by the Coronavirus and they went ahead with their plans to to go ahead and launch a to begin their mission. Um, and instead of of, you know, pulling back and saying okay, you know we were going to put taking care of the, of the pandemic and its impact on the sailors First, the Pentagon, the Navy specifically tried to maintain the schedule and essentially was resistant to to pulling back. And as a result every I think all your listeners are very well aware of the storyline that the the captain of the ship had his his plea for really taking at least 1000 sailors off Most of the sailors off the boat as soon as possible, and getting them to a safe place where they can be treated and avoid a calamity of major proportions. And that of course blew up in the face of the Navy and we've now seen the result of that. I think one of the results that that is very important to to understand is that the families of the sailors were not happy with the way the Navy dealt with this crisis on board the Theodore Roosevelt. And it happened again with regard to the to another ship, the name of which now is escaping me they do remember the there's another ship which which was having a coronavirus cases.

Danny Sjurson

Right. I think it was like a destroyer cruiser rather than an aircraft carrier, but I can't remember the name but there was a follow on case.

Gareth Porter

Absolutely. I forgot At the moment, but but any case, again, the families of sailors were upset with the way it was being handled, because they were not testing the crew. On they were testing only those who had shown basically coronavirus symptoms. And it was not being handled in a way that was suggesting that they really cared about the health of the sailors first. And so I mean, this is one of those fracture points, as I think you mentioned, that has the potential certainly over time to mature into a bigger movement to to demand that the obvious primacy of the corona virus pandemic be given appropriate weight by the Pentagon and the services. And I think there have been changes of course since since the Theodore Roosevelt crisis occurred, and I think they've been forced to To somewhat pull back from the sort of all out commitment to meeting their schedule for deployment and so forth. But nevertheless, I think that the Pentagon in the armed services, priorities have been very clear that that they did not give prior primary primary service to the health of their own soldiers and sailors. And and I think that this is one of the things that should be taken into account by the public in terms of their understanding that things need to be changed fundamentally. And this this happens against the background of the object. The point that is obvious to I think just about everybody in the United States. I mean, there are exceptions, of course, but I think the overwhelming majority of Americans now understand that the only real threat to the security of America does not come from the Chinese or the Russians or the Iranians

or the North Koreans, or for that matter from even al Qaeda. Um, those are they all pale into insignificance in comparison with this pandemic? And and, you know, this is a pandemic, which people who were familiar with the problem have been warning about for years and years. And you know, less people forget in 2015 and 2016. Beginning in 2009, actually, the United States has experienced a whole series of pandemics. And so they have not It's not the first time that this has happened. And and they've been told that there's going to be a much worse one on the way for years and years, and they were supposed to have had a a very detailed plan at hand in order to deal with it. And of course, it didn't happen because of neoliberal sort of approach to this whole problem that was taken over not just under Trump, but under Obama, that that basically the idea was that well, we'll wait until we see the pandemic arise, and then we'll, then we'll go out and get the necessary tools for the doctors, the nurses, the fit the ventilators, and the N 95, masks and so forth. And of course, that was stupid. I mean, because that's not the way it works. You have to have, you have to be prepared ahead of time. And that's precisely the notion that obviously informs the Pentagon and the rest of the national security state, they they prepare for wars that might happen 2025 years in the future, right. And which are very unlikely that whereas in the case of a pandemic, they really didn't do anything. Anything to prepare for what they should have known was a very strong likelihood at some point in the near future. And so I think the lesson of this is one that should penetrate the political system and the society. So far it really hasn't happened yet. And I'm waiting for, for that to be the the real test of whether we're going to get a fundamental change not only in the political system in general, about this, this whole issue of what national security is about, but but change in the structure and functioning of the military and the Pentagon and the intelligence community. And so far, I have to say, My hopes that fundamental change would begin to be felt have not been met. And and this brings us to another aspect of the problem which is just how few resources We seem to have in this society for bringing about change. And I'm sure that's something that you are very familiar with. And you know, you'd be interested in having something to say about as well.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely. I mean, I think the persistence in the face of pandemic of militarism, escalation in certain places like Somalia and potentially Iran, Iraq, at least in terms of plans, has been really disturbing. So, like you I think, I would describe myself as as hopeful if not optimistic about the, the chance here or the or the potential, you know, what was striking about the Crozier incident, the captain of the aircraft carrier with COVID, as well as so the response to that, and then the responses in general, has been both a public one and a philosophical one. And I'd be interested to know what you think about this. So it has struck me in two ways. First, that The public, whether it be the sailors themselves, their families or just readers of mainstream newspapers, you know, it seemed that, you know, two to one or more, they were favorable towards the captain and really disturbed by the Navy response or even the whole Pentagon response. And and, and even though that may seem like a small thing or a one off incident, I think that it, it has potential in the sense that, you know, if we can show we being the broader movement and just folks who care in general, that look, not just the pandemic, but the forever wars in general are not in the interest of your sons and daughters and the distant American soldiers that you, you know, purport to adore, you know, that could have an effect. And then the philosophical one was more, you know, maybe less common, you know, people who are just focused on their jobs and living paycheck to paycheck and don't think about these things as much as you and I do, but For a lot of us,

what seems more apparent than ever, is that no amount of aircraft carriers, or missiles or tanks, in our current Pentagon structure, is really going to be able to have any meaningful effect against the only two real existential, national security threats being either a pandemic or a new worst one, or the just climate crisis in general. I mean, the only the only use it seems of the aircraft carrier at the moment of climate catastrophe is that they may be some of the last folks alive in their floating city, but I think so from the public and the philosophical perspective, I think there's been an exposure for Corona and then I guess what I would be interested in is just in a general sense, what you make of my assertions, and then also, you know, what steps could be, could be taken in order to reframe this to something more logical in terms of a national security posture

Gareth Porter

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, you, you made a couple of at least a couple of points which which were coming down in a way on both sides of the issue some of it more, you know, logically suggesting that, that this, this could and should be the beginning of a broader movement and secondly, that, you know, that there has been thus far, still still no, no major major outcropping of protest, that, that that shows us that there's something that is underway already, to bring about change. And I think that we are in a situation where there this is an enormous set of contradictions between on one side the the obvious nature of the crisis, that the society and therefore the online The institutions that are part of the society are going through and inevitably, must cause a, a kind of crisis which we still cannot define the nature of and but on the other side, you have a society that has been so subject to a concatenation of power structures that have gained traction have gained control over all the major levers of power in the society for a number of decades now, you have, of course, the you know, the major elites, the financial elite, the healthcare elite and the industry, the military industrial elite, all have gained control over the levers of power, meaning that the both the executive branch and the Legislative Branch have been essentially colonized by these interests because they dispose of so much money that they essentially buy off the the certainly buy off the Congress, that's obvious, but but in a sense, they also own the executive branch as well. And, and so that that degree of power has been building steadily over the last four or five, six decades and has accelerated really in the last two or two or three decades. On. The second point I would make is that that you know, what, what everybody listening to your podcast already knows that the corporate media are fully part of that power structure. You know, they are owned by people who are directly connected with the financial elite. They are tied in fully with the, the other corporate elites, the healthcare elite and the military industrial complex elite, to the point where, you know, they are ready to carry their water, consciously and unconsciously, so that any message that goes against the the interest that we're talking about here is not going to get through. And then the third point is that, I think And in a way, this is perhaps the most devastating that, you know, you you've had an atomization of the society in social and political terms that, you know, you had during the Vietnam War, and even at the outset of the Iraq War, a major anti war movement that, you know, had millions of people in the streets, ready to protest and They represented a kind of Moral Majority in the country in a way. Now that's gone that's dissipated that's that's been swallowed up by the social and economic trends of the past few decades. You know, the younger people who were part of the anti war movement have moved on to the suburbia, they've gotten jobs they've gotten involved in other issues that become part of the Democratic Party. They supported brock obama, when he was, you know, going to war all over the world. And and they've lost their fervor against war. And at the same time, you know, you

you've had the, the sort of strong opposition to the wars be broken up into tiny fragments of ideological points of view, that involve lots of people who are subscribing to all kinds of weird theories, theories about you know various people and institutions and what they can accomplish secretly and the theories that have been somehow used against a lot of people who are against the war, right. I mean, you know, the left has been broken up and fragmented. The right is on the rise and and this is all, setting the stage, it seems to me for a period during which there is simply no way to move forward politically, without some new factor that we have not been able to identify arising whether that's people desperate for for food, rioting, breaking into stores, creating a major civil crisis. That's, that's the only thing that comes to mind that I can think of. And I'm just talking off the top of my head here. But, but that's those are my thoughts about what the problem that we face here, and just how serious it is.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely, and the fracturing of the left and the squelching purposely really by Nixon, by getting rid of the draft of the anti war movement, although it was more complex than just that has been disturbing. And so as I pivot over to to Henry and and forced myself to shut up for a while, I think that though I don't subscribe to the conspiratorial thinking per se that this was planned in any way. It is convenient, of course for any power structure, that in the midst of pandemics and and the social control that follows it's increasingly difficult, if not impossible to organize If the will were even there And clearly, as you pointed out most disturbing, as he called it, the will has not been or at least the mass will, which really bothers me. So, yeah, so I think we're going to build on a couple more thoughts on the pandemics relationship to this and then, you know, feel free to jump in on on anything, of course that that interests you as well. Sure.

Chris 'Henri' Henrikson

So, um, I wanted to talk a little bit about one of the responses to the pandemic from President Trump and the Trump administration. In June this year, the President is scheduled to give the commencement speech at West Point, despite other military academies doing a remote graduation or maintaining strict social distancing. And while we don't know if families or other guests will be permitted, what we do know for sure is that at least 1000 cadets will return from isolation and Potentially expose themselves to the pandemic along with the staff at West Point and the families, the communities in the surrounding area. Um, Gareth, would you share with us a bit on the pandemic of 1918? And how the military was central to its spread? And do you think an event like this, like this commencement could create a huge new spike in infections, similar to what happened in Philadelphia with the Liberty bond parade in 1918?

Gareth Porter

No, that's a very interesting question. Indeed. And, you know, the, to the degree that the White House is serious about this, it is totally bizarre and just beyond belief, I, you know, it's hard to even imagine that somebody is so stupid as to do that, but we'll just hold off on that, on that aspect of it. To go back to 1918 you know, this this way. was a pandemic that did indeed, as you suggested, underline the Even then, before the Cold War and decades before the Cold War, the degree to which the military had become an interest group, which was set apart from the interests of society and really privileged its own interests over those of the society. Now, you know, to some extent, you could argue there are extenuating circumstances that they didn't fully understand or didn't understand sufficiently. The the

degree to which this pandemic could take could could have such devastating effects so quickly, but I I don't really buy that because of a quote that that I used in my story, which I'm sure you remember. The Chief of Staff of the Army Me, who was dealing with the general in, in Europe and in sort of supplying the, the bodies that that were supposed to be sent by the 10s of thousands across the sea to be chewed up and lost in the in the war. So, um, the chief of staff was basically saying that, that he was going to deliver as many troops as was were necessary, as were demanded by the, the command in Europe. But he was saying, you know, we do have a problem here at home. We have like, already, I believe it was 20,000 20,000 people stricken by this and it's getting worse. So so they understood perfectly well, what the cost of containers During the war, without regard to its effect on the home front was they knew that they were playing with fire and that that's a that's a very key point to underline here about the military bureaucracy because even then, uh, during World War One, you had a situation where the military was was privileging its own bureaucratic interests to fight that war. And and to do so in a way that satisfied its own version of what it was after. And even though, you know, there were more American soldiers actually killed by the virus, then were killed by the war in World War One. I mean, you know, this is an amazing fact that people are not generally aware of, and, and it just shows that that the US military then was was ready to start have its own interest, despite the fact that it was harming. You know, it was doing harm to the soldiers in a way that was just just far beyond any reasonable sacrifice. And and so there was a, there was a real problem here that that the military was what was seizing a degree of power that it shouldn't have had and which in a way it forecasts what we've seen during and since the Cold War started.

Chris 'Henri' Henrikson

It was also thinking about the the fact that so many leaders on our end of the war, didn't want to share too much information about how the pandemic was affecting the military, because of the nature of the war that I want to say. Comment in your piece about the German High Command would would not be you know, they wouldn't be sitting down. at the table to negotiate a surrender if they knew how many how much the flu was going around.

Gareth Porter

Well, right. That's true. That's a good point. Yes. It was. It was a matter of they knew how bad it was hoping to keep it from the Germans. That's right. Yeah. So so they had to, they had to play a very nasty game with the American people just for the purpose of, as you say, essentially, leaving the Germans. Yeah.

Chris 'Henri' Henrikson

So following up on that a bit, how, how do you see this boding for the future of the military, US forces in general, but especially the Navy have shown their vulnerability to an outbreak of this kind, but because military units and operations are so compartmentalised, will American forces truly embrace any existential change here? Yeah, it's hard to it's hard to know exactly how this is gonna play out. I mean, the US Military bureaucracy is is certainly they started out with the intention of trying to, to go ahead without regard to the immediate human cost of the Coronavirus. But I think they've had to make some changes, obviously in their in their schedule, in order to deal with what had become a pretty serious crisis and to head off much more serious problems with their own families, the families of their own

sailors, and that that may have caused them to at least make some, some change in their expectations about how fast they can move. But even now, I believe that they are still trying to meet a schedule of four deployments, which is really quite unrealistic. And so there is still I think, a lot of tension here between the bureaucratic interests of this Military Industrial Complex and the the interests of the health of the soldiers and sailors. Um, and and i think that's still we still have to see how that's gonna play out. But But I do hope that that there will be more protests against what has happened already and what may continue to happen in the near future. I think that's one of the salient here that offers some promise of raising issues which must be discussed, as a matter of high intensity, extreme, extreme need at this moment for American society. Because of the power that the military direct crises have in the society and the fact that they have had their way so completely it's a it's an uphill battle. But I think we have to hope that there will be some disturbance of the peace, if you will, that will raise issues that will force a major debate. Now, I should add here that there was an article published a few weeks ago in which a former high Army General, who was who was the commander of us, a retired Army General, who was head of US forces or international forces in Afghanistan and a co author. we're arguing that that this coronavirus is in fact going to force major changes in the way in which the Pentagon does business. And, and they were suggesting that that they're going to have to be some cuts in the military budget some serious cuts in the military. budget as a result of this, because of the major spending that has already been done, it still remains to be seen whether that's going to be the case, but they were raising the possibility that there was going to be a serious conflict between the emergency spending that has had to be put forward. Already with regard to the Coronavirus and the desire of the Pentagon to keep full funding, more or less full funding for its next year's financial next year's fiscal year budget. I'm so we have to see how that's gonna play out. But I think some people are actually expecting that there's going to be a real crunch here that the present administration is going to be forced to consider serious cuts and military budget for the next fiscal year. Is there any hope that you see of infectious disease or disease outbreaks becoming an enemy that the military treats more dangerously than terrorism or major power conflicts? And just like exactly like what you were saying is that might that change the enough to help shift some of our massive spending towards a genuine and legitimately dangerous target?

Gareth Porter

Well, I mean, the short answer is no, I don't see any hope of that. I mean, the military industrial complex is of course devoted to continuing to to have resources be funneled into their coffers, which are for war and preparation for war. Whereas, you know, this would require a major diversion of resources away from their own programs to somebody else is programs because Nobody's going to give the Pentagon or the armed services or the contractors, you know, the money to play with in order to do something about, you know, pandemics. So so there's a direct contradiction there between the interests of those who, who have had their way in the United States for so many decades and today still dominate completely the capture of the sources politically in this country. And the interests of those who care about pandemics problem. It's going to have to come from somewhere else. And the question is, what what interest groups are powerful enough to essentially compete or the kind of influence that is required to to force that kind of change in spending priorities. I mean, it's not inconceivable that something like That could happen. But at this moment, at least, there's no there's been no real movement in that direction. And and you just ask yourself, where is it going to come from? What is the interest group that

has the ability to shift public opinion in a massive way quickly, um, through propaganda, through, you know, basically getting messages out in an urgent way that are that are heard by billions of people. And I think the, you know, the question is, you know, question answers itself. I mean, there's nobody on the horizon that can do that, in a way that gives you any confidence that it can happen. I mean, I hope I'm wrong. But you know, that's, that's my very pessimistic reading for the moment at least. But I'd be interested in how you guys see that as well. I mean, what what's your take on it?

Chris 'Henri' Henrikson

I, I was very surprised in doing research on the coronavirus when the pandemic first started, that the military didn't have any ships, where their medical capabilities leaned at all towards infectious disease, the two, the two Navy ships, the hospital ships, we have the comfort and I can't think of the name of the other one. They're both designed for your standard kind of trauma wounds, you know, Combat Zone type things, right. They're not designed at all for a pandemic and the fact that following what happened with Ebola, that the Obama administration didn't attempt to do some kind of change, and that is very exemplary of what we're all experiencing with this because they, they they were the ones that had the team, they were the ones that actually made some preparation for the Trump administration took a why wasn't more done then.

Gareth Porter

Well, I just I would just point out that although the Obama administration did have those plans. You're absolutely right. They also let the ball drop in the last years or the last couple of years of the Obama administration, when they had the strongest reason, the strongest motivation, if you will, to, to actually purchase the goods that were needed to refill the coffers. For these, these emergency goods that we would be needed in the event of a pandemic like this, right? They didn't do it. And that's because they were captured by this. This neoliberal notion that you rely on the rely on the market. You do it through the Marketplace. Yep. And that was a that was a huge turning point and one that is that has drastic consequences has had and we'll have drastic consequences. I'm sorry, sir. So we are really up against it. In terms of major underlying movements of power in this society that have taken place, kind of under the the radar as it were, for most people, certainly, including myself, I admit it, I didn't see this until, you know, it was already a full blown crisis. And then I had to catch up with the reality. I didn't know that this has happened. And and now we have a much clearer picture that that these things have changed so dramatically, so radically over a couple of two to three decades, that we are in serious trouble, the most serious trouble that society could be in, in regard to getting out of this situation in the path out is simply not clear at this moment, to my mind, and I I'm glad to have the chime in and suggest that there's something that I'm missing here.

Keagan Miller

Well, I like to, I was living what reading one of your recent articles where you were talking about the privatization of the military, and specifically when it comes to drones, and that's something that's kind of near and dear to my heart, having been involved in, like operations, including drugs, and it's just like I love in the article you pointed out, you know, the, the dramatic increase of contractors over the last, you know, 15 years. And it just, it was everything you said just reminded me of like being at work. And, you know, I worked at an NSA building and so there's, you know, multi service environments, different

contractors, everything like that. And most, if not, most of the kids that I was in the Navy with, I would, you know, I would see them get out of uniform and then like, Two weeks to a month later, they would be working in the building, like wearing business casual. Of course they are because they're making twice to three times as much doing the exact same job. If you like doing what you're doing, then of course, you're going to move on to that because that's a better option. But it was just so frustrating to me because those people are not held to the same accountability standards as we are. And when it comes to even working within the like agency, when you're like assigned to an NSA shop or you they don't have the same guidelines that that we have as like being a part of the military or even being a part of the agency like what the agency folks have to follow. So it like in this age of the fact that we doing person to person operations are going to be so limited. I'm like, What is the next Best thing, of course, is drones. And we've already seen a crazy big increase over the fact of the Trump administration. But it just I mean, that's what scares me the most is the fact that we're just going to continue to push. We're going to continue to push warfighting capability off of the military and to these private companies. And we're gonna think in the neoliberal sense that, Oh, this is better for us because blah, blah, blah. It's, I just frustrates me so much, because it's, it's, it's clearly not true. It's not working and the fact that when they aren't held accountable to the same standards as us to the same reporting requirements, to you know, even just acknowledging the, like, effectiveness of their work, I think that is really damaging. And I think that might be one of those things that really gets people to start thinking about how we can change Our perspective on this on this military industrial complex, like when we have people who are doing the job of soldiers, but they're not actually soldiers or sailors. Yeah, you know, are we gonna is that gonna help shift maybe our mentality as far as like hero worship? I don't know.

Gareth Porter

Well, you're absolutely right that that the neoliberals have have been able to basically get their get their way in regard to the whole question the Pentagon's operations the it's it's the people who are working for contractors who filled more and more of the positions there. And to the point where, you know, the Secretary of Defense didn't even know how many contractors were in his own office. It was it was an insidious process that had taken had gone so far, so fast that You know, the the people who are not part of the private contractor aspect of this didn't even really know what it hit them. It had moved that fast. And and the outcome is that, again, you know, private interests are much more powerful than ever before. And, you know, the line between private interests and public interest has now been muffled and and you know, is no longer clear. And as a result of you know, I think we have a situation where you can't even say that the Pentagon represents anything but a coalition in which private interests are the dominant dominant factor. And that's really going to be a central point in the book that I hope to write about this, which I intend to write about this. Starting starting right now, I think that it's it's not well understood and it really does need to be understood by many more people, just how far the military industrial complex has been taken over by and is defined by private interests to the point where, you know, one person who was quoted some years back, you know, he was a retired general he was he was quoted as saying that you know, the, if if we knew just how how much influence the private sector has has gained as gained over this, people would be very upset. And, you know, he had only recently come to realize just how, how much the Pentagon was defined by by process. That interests. Um, and and that I think is, is a major weakness politically that has to be exploited and brought out in a much, much more forceful way.

Danny Sjursen

Yeah, absolutely. I think that the the privatization aspect and the distancing of the United States from or the American people in particular from war in its operations, right. The the new American way of war, which is really sort of a Back to the Future aspect is really, you know, it's disturbing but it's of a peace with the strategy to maintain endless war as you mentioned in the in the URL, Sort of rejoinder about Vietnam as compared to the anti war movement today. You know, it's, it's kind of more invisible. And, and it seems and and I'd be interested in your thoughts on this, you know, obviously, the most seemingly farcical but I also think foreboding aspect of this or recent aspects has been, of course, this coup attempt by mercenaries in Venezuela. But I would argue and be interesting your thoughts, of course, that this is sort of, you know, indicative of a new age of proxy war, which could, you know, only grow as a pandemic proxy strategy. But, you know, are we are we seeing that the elites, Democrat and Republican, neoliberal and neoconservative are pulling back from even the Iraq style occupation which didn't garner the answer. War vehemence of Vietnam but but was costly and did cause a little bit of public turmoil or are they pulling away from that? And is drones and privatization? A core aspect of that? And will we see more of it?

Gareth Porter

Yeah, I think I think that the Iraq experience on top of the Vietnam experience, but obviously much more recent and much more relevant to the, to the calculations of the present generation in the Pentagon and and the armed services. I think that it's extremely important in understanding the way in which the people in the Pentagon think about the future of the military. And I think that that it is indeed aimed at fighting wars in ways that reduce the the human footprint relative to technology and insure against any future any war movement arising. I think there's no doubt that there's a connection between those between those earlier experiences. And the the new way of war that is, has been taking shape now for years.

Danny Sjursen

So to try to drill down a bit, then to a region or a case study that you've covered a lot, and, you know, I'll ask sort of some specific questions, but I would encourage you in the tone and theme of this station to, of course, where you see fit, build it into or threaded into this larger national security state. I'm interested in Iran, which obviously you've done a ton of work on in some cases you're probably tired of talking about but it does seem that American military policy towards Iran both plans and executed because there's a gap It seems there it is, again, relevant to this larger conversation so specifically, you know, your recent work on the collusion between my buddy, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who I admit I have a Nemesis blind spot for so take everything I say with a grain of salt. But between him and the somehow still Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu to you know, gin up a war, it seems with Iran that your work on it has been striking. Even though I'm probably more familiar with the broad strokes of this relationship and relevant history the most. It still shocks me. And I truly think it should be front page news, like on the daily and of course it's not. So with that, I guess, you know, what are the just brief realities of the pump eo BB Nexus that make it so troubling and so indicative or reflective if that's the case of the system we're discussing.

Gareth Porter

Right? I mean, pompeyo, pompeyo. And Netanyahu are indeed the the dangerous combination that lurks behind the issue of of US policy toward Iran. And the reason is that Tom payoh, you know, as Secretary of State, has been the, the figure that has moved the policy consistently over the past year and a half, um, toward the crisis between the United States and Iran, if not outright war, he has, in fact, carried out a couple of maneuvers that have, in fact, risked carry the risk of war between the United States and Iran. I mean, fortunately, we have a president who is not very bright But instinctively does not like the idea of going to war against Iran. He has no feeling that there's real there's a necessary a necessary cause a casus belli if you will, between the United States and Iran, Trump does or does not. And and therefore, in the two instances that that have occurred, one, I've stopped and think now, the specific timing of this, but the first was in was was last year. Approximately. Let's see now, I think it was the summer. And, you know, it was a case where the United States had to make a decision where the President had made a decision about whether he was going to basically drop bombs on Iran. Over the shoot down of a US drone, and that was one where you had recommendation from, from, you know, his advisor to go ahead and go to war and Trump almost did it, but then pulled back at the last minute to to pump ayios dissatisfaction. then more recently, you had a case where, you know, in January, you you had the, the recommendation by pompeyo for essentially bombing and Iranian targets, you know, in in Iraq, and basically the President went along with it but the Iranians were able to situation with Without essentially triggering or so, you have here, a very dangerous combination of pompeyo, who is really doing his best to try to provoke an armed conflict between the United States and Iran, working closely with Bibi Netanyahu and we know how close they have been colluding with one another over the past year and a half more. And, you know, you have a situation where the President has thus far been able to avoid war, but it is, you know, he is subject to being manipulated, we know that he can be deceived. On occasion, if a clever enough setup is maneuvered set up, you know, that seems to involve a situation that that most people in the United States might regard as casus belli. Then he is tempted to listen to what Pompeo was telling him. And that's the real danger that we're up against here. I do think in fact that Trump would like to avoid war. And I'm hopeful that that's going to be the case. But But I'm payoh is pump eo is definitely somebody who is very clever, knows how to whisper in Trump's ear. I think he's very effective in that regard. And that's what makes him so dangerous. On the Iranian side, I have to say that, you know, I have no doubt that the Iranians would like to avoid war with the United States. But if there is an attack on Iran, per se, of course, they will respond and there will be war between the United States and Iran. I have no doubt.

Danny Sjursen

I think what you brought up is super interesting regarding You know, it seems to me and you have to be careful whenever you say this because of course the reflexive responses that you you know, you love Trump, or you love the Islamic Republic. And but but I think that the record shows and you've written about this, that Trump has shown restraint, a few, you know, obviously, assassinating the top general and political figure in Iran was tantamount to war. So this was a porn unforgiveable because he is the decider as bush would have said George W. Bush. But in many cases, Trump has shown a degree of restraint on the Iran issue, despite being pushed in a number of directions, and even some what could be called provocations, although there's a lot of backstory to them. So you've got Trump showing some restraint. And then I think you've got Iran showing enormous restraint, sort of time. And again, you

know, even though even the missile response it Ballade and all this was, I mean, it's difficult to know exactly what they're aiming for, but the Iraqi government was kind of in on it. I mean, There was enough warning and they're they've really shown it seems to me that Trump doesn't really want war, Iran is doing all it can to avoid it largely. And yet we have pompeyo and Yahoo who won't take no for an answer. And so, you know, thoughts on that. But also, what's the endgame for a Pompei or Netanyahu? I mean, what are these folks really after? What's the endgame? Yes. Okay. War. But why and to what end?

Gareth Porter

Well, you know, we know for one thing that Netanyahu personally, has for years, been arguing both privately and publicly that Iran is is not strong enough to to be able to threaten or to consider seriously a retaliation of that would would bring about a counter retaliation from the United In states that could basically devastate its economy and its its entire military capability. He's been arguing that consistently for years, and it seems that he does believe in that. At least there's there's a reasonable chance that that's the case. And I would hesitate to to make the argument against against that assumption. I think it's it's much more prudent to assume that he does. He does believe and I think falsely that he could get away with in conjunction with the United States, with with impale getting the United States to take a poke at Iran without suffering, you know, the serious risk of wider war. And I think that's at the root of this situation that you've been describing that that it's it's Netanyahu is overconfident. That he can mess around with Iran and pump hose willingness to to do whatever Bibi suggests. Because apparently, you know, he feels that alignment with the pro Israeli faction in American politics is his ticket to a future president presidential bid of I assume that that's the case. I think there's a lot of evidence to that effect. Um, and and so I think we have that situation that that holds out. serious risk of a miscalculation here. Now. The hopeful part of this situation I would say is that I'm not sure that Trump is willing to keep on Pay along beyond his current term in office. I have a feeling that on pay or may be gone, that he's not really very happy with him. at all, to say the least, and that he would like to see him replaced. I don't think he wants to do it during a presidential year. But once that's finished, and assuming that he would be reelected for the moment, I think there's a very strong chance that he'll be replaced.

Danny Sjursen

That's interesting. You know, I hadn't thought enough about a post administration pump. How do you know what role he would play outside the administration whether he would stick around, you know, I'm often I'm not a pump peyote expert, although I'm dabbling. And I know that you're not, I'm often left wondering if pump eo is, is really, you know, eschatological, believes in the rapture, like he says in many of his earlier speeches at these evangelical churches about supporting Israel and the world ending there is a more you know, rapture guy or is he more Machiavelli, Mike, I'm on the fence about that. And we can discuss it. You know, but as we sort of Wrap up or come full circle, I think you raised some things that tied in with an article I wrote and that I'd like to hear your comments on too specific to this. So, okay. pompeyo is the top diplomat, even though the State Department has been utterly militarized for a long time, and especially under him, and he went to West Point and graduated 1986, and Mark Esper is in charge of war, right, the defense as we call it, and he went to West Point class of 1986. And I and I found out through some research that so did a few dozen folks who are deep in the military industrial complex, but what strikes me more than just the details of what I uncovered, which I

won't recount is, as we use the Iran case study, and as we look at who these folks are at the top and infuse throughout the system, you know, I think some of the things you've brought up that I'd be interested in, your thoughts on are coming to fruition here where we have this really disturbing and nefarious situation where, you know, Mark Esper, the classmate of Mike Pompeo, who was a lobbyist for Raytheon, which of course makes the Patriot missile system as well as a few of their classmates who are lower ranking who left in one case, the Air Defense Artillery community and and moved over to Raytheon. Another guy who also left the Air Defense Artillery community which isn't responsible for the Patriot system, and then once worked for Lockheed on the fattened system, right the theater, air defense systems similar sort of thing. And so what you have it seems in back to that self licking ice cream cone but in a dangerous way is you have pompeyo ginning up the war, that Esper will execute and probably in the end support all of which is to the profound No pecuniary benefit of espers former employer, several of their classmates who worked for Lockheed and Raytheon. And what's the output? Well, even if there's no war, the output already has been the fad and the Patriot flowing into the Gulf to the Emiratis. And the Saudis in these massive contracts and then physically actually being transferred over over the course of the last year. So, you know, what do you make of this and we've covered it, but this to me with the Iran scenario and these figures, these human figures making history turn, something's going on there that is just worthy of well of this whole conversation.

Gareth Porter

Well, it is it is an important question that you're raising. And by the way, I did have a chance to read your piece. I loved it. I took I took copious notes from it. I found a lot of interesting stuff that I tend to consider carefully in my own writing, for sure. Because this is this is very good data. About the entire complex and how it operates and and the increasing, you know, revolution of the revolving door syndrome, if you will. But But what I do think is worth considering here is that, that obviously these people, although they're all class of 86 and they all belong to a system which is headed in the same broad direction, nevertheless each individual of course, is after his own interests. And and you know, the interests of Lockheed and Raytheon and so on and so forth, are one set of interests and compare was on another trajectory, which, you know, is is obviously indirectly related to that, but his trajectory involves, obviously making a whole new set of connections That are not directly related to the contractor interests per se, but rather to major political interests that have political constituencies broad political constituencies, including, you know, very specifically the pro Israeli community in the United States. That's one that he has, you know, he hopes to have a lock on as a basis for future presidential politics and for good reason. And I think you're right to question and know how serious his commitment is to, you know, the rapture and all that sort of thing. I think he's a, he's a political calculator, and this is undoubtedly primarily if not exclusively political, rather than religious. Um, but having said that, I mean, you know, I think the key thing is that he's on a trajectory that involves preparing for a bid for presidential election efforts. Whereas the other members of the class of 86, at West Point, are hoping to get jobs in the private sector or in the Pentagon or going back and forth between the two. So, you know, I think you've got two sides of that, of that complex. represented. And and, you know, I think pompeyo being the much more powerful one at this point is is attuned to a broader set of interests that are not necessarily obviously not in conflict with but are, are more allied with with the religious community rather than with the business community, in terms of the ones that that the class of 86 has primarily been involved with. So I would just differentiate between those two sets of interests.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely, I think That one of the things that's important in the work that you're doing and that and that on some level I'm doing in all my discussions of the MC, which seems you know, inevitably comes up in anything I write about, is that, you know, we have to be careful. And I know that your work well to be clear about what we're saying, and to not fall into this idea that there is a vast centrally led conspiracy. Would that it were almost right, it seems almost as though it would be easier to fight. If there was, you know, a single head or a single series of colluding figures a cabal in a smoke filled room that was making all this happen when, like I sort of tried to make clear in the piece because I was getting ready for the for the attacks, is look this. This truly is systemic as much as that word is overused and has built ad hoc over a long period of time and involves a lot of overlapping interests that in many cases, you know, complement one another, and, and create layers that are difficult to get through. And so, while there is a system, there is such a structure as the military industrial complex, it happens, if not accidentally, it happened in sequence and in phases and involves human beings, right actors who are part of the human condition, motivated by their own sort of things. But, you know, I think what you're describing is so important, because we are we meaning folks who raise the alarm about this are too easily dismissed. If we come off as saying that this is simple and it's just the conspiracy and, you know, yeah, like Alex Jones about it or something, you know, when

Gareth Porter

in reality, I couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more. It's very different. To understand this as a, as a market phenomenon, essentially, I mean, it's neoliberalism as applied to, you know, the, to the military industrial sector. And and that means that it does operate as a market and is not centrally controlled. It's and you're right. It's it's even more dangerous precisely because of that. It's more dangerous in the sense that it's more effective and harder to cope with in political terms.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely.

Keagan Miller

That's what bothers me about neoliberalism is that it always tries to make us think that people are selfish and greedy, and they just want whatever they want, right? So in order to for people to get any kind of thing that they want, they have to act in that same way. And it's patently false. Like everything we know about social science. Psychology, neuroscience, we know that people are inherently social creatures. And they are inherently generous, like, yes, people exhibit selfish traits at times. But most of the time, we work cooperatively because that's how humans got to where we are. Right? And it just it's been so frustrating to see neoliberalism like, be like wheedle its way into everything. And now we have this, this idea where we feel like, oh, what do we do about it? And we always we always initially start with the individual, like, what can I do? And, like, I like that to an extent I like the idea of like, yes, we need to be responsible for ourselves, and we need to like take initiative, but we as individual people can only do so much. And when you're trying to go against these big systems. We can't do that by ourselves. We have to do it as a group as a movement. As an organized thing, and it just it gets like, it's nice that we continue to poke these out to point these out and to show like, hey, look at what's

happening here. But it's like, I'm hoping that this virus will really push us. I mean, the people who are stuck in the right wing media vacuum, it's hard to reach them, but I feel like everybody else, you know, we can, we can push them and we could be like, no, the only way we can move forward past this is by doing it together instead of hunkering down and trying all this austerity crap, like trying spending some money in like on people, what is the price?

Gareth Porter

Well, absolutely. This this coronavirus crisis is the ultimate test, if you will, of you know the possibility of moving beyond the sort of selfish, sort of selfish model for how things should work and do work. And you know, I think we are all really riveted to this drama to see how this does in fact play out because it's all important that this does lead to a cooperative mentality, a cooperative spirit in American society and politics, that's the only way out.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely, if, if there's a gift of Corona, for lack of a better term, it does seem to be a degree of exposure of the system that's been in place that's been operating as designed and failing according to its operations as designed which applies to of course our primary focus foreign policy but the always related always connected and never easily dismissed their bifurcated domestic component. And and what I've really enjoyed about our company As the degree to which we've transcended those sort of boundaries and even been a little interdisciplinary writer throughout the academic terminology. So this has been great. we've, we've kept you now for a half hour longer than I promised, which is typical if you've ever listened to our podcast. So with that, Gareth, is there, is there something we're missing? Or is there somewhere you'd like to end or was there somewhere you'd like to direct our listeners for your work and things to sort of check out and be paying attention to?

Gareth Porter

Well, I'm happy to let your listeners know that I have a new home, if you will, in terms of publishing regularly, I'm now going to be contributing on a regular basis to the gray zone, which is a up and coming rapidly rising site that deals with national security policy foreign policy issues. And is has a very strong investigative orientation. And so it's very much the kind of site that is perfect for what I want to write about. And I'm very happy to have this relationship with the gray zone and Max Blumenthal. Who is the one who's started it and is the moving spirit spirit behind it.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely, I mean, I'm a big fan of Max's of the site when you've been there a little longer. Perhaps you can shuffle one of my better articles and Max's direction. But no, it's it's a great site and everyone who hasn't already started reading it needs to check it out as well as so your columns there, some of the other writers and then your books past and present, and then, you know, future because I think that the project you're working on has such potential and couldn't be more timely. So So Gary, thank you again for the generosity with your time and your ideas. And and having what I think was one of our really cooler and more comprehensive conversations about maybe the most important topic and national security today.

Gareth Porter

Well, it's a very great privilege for me to be on your show, I think Thanks so much to both of you for having me on. I appreciate it and look forward to doing again sometime.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely. We will do it again. And at the very least, when that book is coming to fruition, we're going to, we're going to say we talked about it first, and we're going to have you back off of that, if not sooner. So thanks again, Gareth. And we'll talk soon. Thank you. Great.

Keagan Miller

Thank you.

Gareth Porter

All right, please correct my complete no sort of lapse there in the middle.

Danny Sjursen

No worries. No worries, Henry is our Henry actually jumped off a few minutes back for an appointment. So our front loaded is a series of questions, but he's our he's our tech guy. He's the he's the real brains behind the, the operation. So he's pretty good at editing and we'll we'll get that out. No problem.

Gareth Porter

Yeah. Good. Good to have the chance to chat.

Danny Sjursen

Absolutely. Keep doing what you're doing and stay in touch, Gareth thing and we'll we'll be in touch. All right. Good luck.