

Do you want more drums of war?

Ross [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. It was the respected U.S. Army General, George S. Patton Junior who famously said, "If everyone is thinking alike, then somebody isn't thinking". His extensive experience of war gives gravity to his insight. Today even after so many official lies when we speak about reasons to go to war it seems that there must be total public compliance. It's now apparently unpatriotic to ever question official narratives so, all dissenting voices must be totally crushed. But where does this absolutism logically lead? And how do we resist a militarised, herd mentality that will lead to bigger geopolitical conflicts that could end in mutually assured destruction.

Ross [00:01:26] Joining me to discuss war propaganda and crushing dissent are the co-director of the Organization for Propaganda Studies, Dr. Piers Robinson and lecturer in international politics at the University of Leicester, Tara McCormack. Welcome to you both. Tara, when we look at the U.K. today and we look at the political scene and we look at society, where is the anti-war movement as you see it?

Tara McCormack [00:01:48] Well I think today there isn't really an anti-war movement. And I think that's a real problem. If you look back 60s/70s/80s to be anti-war, anti-Western militarism, was an understood political position...

Ross [00:02:03] Right.

Tara McCormack [00:02:03] In the mainstream media you would have people like John Pilger, you'd have papers like The Guardian - before they became fully bought out by the security services, you know, but it would be a respected position in academia, you know, think about the sort of anti war movement LSE, people like Tariq Ali, so it might not have been the biggest movement but it was a respected, understood political position and you had a criticism of Western foreign policy that was made in a broader political framework, a criticism of Western power, you know, imperialism and so on. So you absolutely did have as well as at the same time governments smears, all sorts of things going on, but nonetheless you still had that kind of backdrop that to be critical of Western foreign policy was an understood political position and I think what happens in the early 90s -end of the Soviet Union of course and the rise of humanitarian intervention, reframing of conflicts such as the break-up on wars as a new holocaust, you have the kind of end of that political understanding of Western war as problematic. You know in the 90s many people on the left entirely move away from any kind of criticism of Western war, you know, there's an embrace of NATO, you know, our bombs are good, our bombs can liberate and bring human rights. And I think that's a real problem. I think there was still something left in the late 90s but also even in the 90s you had politicians in parliaments such as Tony Benn, Tam Dalyell, you know, who for example when it came to Kosovo in 1999 stood up and said - and were very supportive of the anti... small, very small anti-war movement I was involved - who stood up and said, you know, this is wrong and we just don't have that anymore. So now all that we are left with are kind of, you know, government attacks, smears in the media for example and whilst you certainly had that during the Cold War you also had that kind of core political argument, you had colleagues and comrades and people who'd understand that that was a legitimate political argument, you know, agree or disagree, it was a legitimate political position and that's gone.

So now all we're left with... the... you know, people who do want to argue against Western foreign policy it's a kind of very complacent and compliant media.

Ross [00:04:30] And some would argue a corporate media who clearly have an agenda because what's happened - as you pointed out - Communism was defeated and then there's been this sort of triumphalism with capitalism and that's sort of taken us to here which means that you vanquish any voice that doesn't agree with you.

Tara McCormack [00:04:45] Yeah, I mean I think that's probably a more complicated discussion about what happened there in terms of media. I'm not sure I kind of quite have the straightforward answer to why we've just had that. In a way the ruling establishment I think is actually weaker and more incoherent than it was, that's a very broad brush, you know, kind of account for the narrowing.

Ross [00:05:09] The narrowing of the political discourse, the narrowing of the political space, the attacks and the smears, you know a little bit about this. Why is there such a ferocity when people are smeared like that as you have been? And what is the effect of the narrowing of the discourse?

Piers Robinson [00:05:24] What are the effects of the smearing? I mean these are tactics ultimately which are employed in order to discredit the reputation of the messenger, it's about destroying their credibility so that what they're saying will not be listened to. That's the purpose of this. Now I don't think that everyone who engages in smearing people necessarily know exactly what they're up to in that respect but some people do and know this is a kind of dirty PR tactic and so on. And so these things are designed to destroy someone's credibility to stop other people from listening to them and they're also designed to intimidate that individual. Do you really want to be trolled, smeared, and have nasty newspaper articles written about you? And what might your employer think about that even if it's a good university which has a robust defence of freedom of speech? You know, it's not necessarily the kind of thing that is going to get people popping the champagne in the PR department. So all of those things create a huge amount of pressure and that's what they're designed to do. They're designed to undermine people. It's obviously not a rational process, it's not logical, there's no reason debate going on here.

Ross [00:06:27] But it's age old isn't it, the ad hominem, play the man not the ball?

Piers Robinson [00:06:30] IYeah sure. It's age old but it's probably intensify...

Ross [00:06:34] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:06:34] In recent years.

Ross [00:06:34] Why?

Piers Robinson [00:06:35] Why? I think the politics in a sense has become more extreme but also the circumstances of the conflicts that we're talking about have become more extreme. If we see the West as being at a particular historical juncture where it's ? in the international system in relations for example China, India and so on. The West as we know has been

engaging in a very belligerent war fighting strategy for many years now. That's an extreme policy, right?

Ross [00:07:03] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:07:03] OK. Engaging in an invasion of Iraq for example. If you were to talk to myself or you in the 90s or 80s and say well actually we're going to be invading Iraq with tanks and soldiers in 2003, we would have been taken aback. So these are extreme policies which are being pushed through, highly destructive. And in that situation how do you control dissent?

Ross [00:07:25] And the narrative...

Piers Robinson [00:07:26] You can't do it any more through reasoned discussion...

Ross [00:07:28] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:07:29] Because... and so what you do instead is you then try and take people out effectively, Don't listen to Piers, don't listen to Tara because they're the sad apologists or they're anti-semites or they're Islamophobic etc... because that's the reality, you're talking about the facts of what's going on and people don't want those facts to surface and people to realize what's going on and so you have to take people out and you had to employ nasty tactics to do it. Tobacco industry engaged in that kind of stuff in the 70s and 80s trying to close down the emerging scientific consensus on tobacco's harmful effects and lung cancer links. And there were some pretty dirty tactics being employed then against scientists.

Ross [00:08:06] And can you sort of transpose what happened then on what's happening now to academics, people, dissenting journalists and alternative media?

Piers Robinson [00:08:13] Yeah, I mean these tactics, this attempt to control debate and control the information environment in some ways, I mean, I think there are multiple sources of say the attacks and smears against us as academics and we could possibly talk for quite some time about where we think that's coming from.

Ross [00:08:27] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:08:27] But you know from a fairly straightforward public relations there's nice, positive, fluffy, public relations persuading people and then there's the kind of nastier side of it and so on taking people out, discrediting people, looking for dirt - digging for dirt.

Ross [00:08:42] And of course that has a chilling effect on the wider community...

Piers Robinson [00:08:44] Absolutely.

Ross [00:08:45] Because you are called for instance a conspiracy theorist or Assad apologist or Putin's puppet... whatever it is and people are embarrassed to associate with that.

Piers Robinson [00:08:52] Yeah. This is about demonising and marginalising people who are often telling the truth and who are often telling uncomfortable truths. Chomsky's familiar with this, this happened to him in the 1970s he was accused I think of things such as, you know, holocaust/genocide denial etc, being pro communist and so on, this has all been used before. But these things do work unless you put yourself in a position of somebody who's attack where you realized that well this is what this is, this is just to try and close you down.

Ross [00:09:23] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:09:23] John Pilger has said these attacks in the short term, you know, they're not very pleasant but in the long term you tend to find you've vindicated and people realize that because, you know, you are there staying with a factual truthful discussion and over time, you know, when things have moved on and you haven't got those forces geared towards smearing you, they're gone, then people realize that, ok, well, you know, Tara was correct and Piers was correct and that working group was correct on Syria. So, you know, you get vindicated in the long run and if you realize that...

Ross [00:09:52] You can stay the course...

Piers Robinson [00:09:53] You ride through it. It becomes a badge of honour, okay. We can always say if you're not being attacked like this as an academic then you're not doing your job as an academic.

Ross [00:10:01] But that is the point, isn't it? And same for the media that, you know, once you're over the target the flack increases, you take more flack and it's very obvious that that could be the case.

Tara McCormack [00:10:10] I just want to jump in but then to go back to what I was saying earlier and that... but the real difference is now there isn't that... you know even though it was small, there isn't that kind of back drop of an alternative political argument.

Ross [00:10:22] Right.

Tara McCormack [00:10:22] And that's I think the real difference. So in the 70s and 80s, you know, attacks on Chomsky but you had a strong anti-war movement, you know, we don't... and that's the real problem, it's just a few people and that's the kind of real difference.

Piers Robinson [00:10:36] I think you're absolutely right and, you know, if you think about it it's absolutely incredibly when you look at the war in Syria this is, you know, 7/8 years long war with massive involvement from Western countries, Gulf state allies and so on and look at a number of academics who even have the faintest idea of what's actually going on, it's remarkable.

Tara McCormack [00:10:55] Yeah.

Piers Robinson [00:10:55] And that tells you... is a strong indication of how weak, as you say, we are in terms of robust, intellectual thinking which provides not just access to the truth but also just a challenge...

Tara McCormack [00:11:05] Yeah

Piers Robinson [00:11:06] To the political drive we've had towards war.

Tara McCormack [00:11:09] And literally, you know, I have found... you know even to sort of talk about well Western funding of groups that, you know, we would declare a national emergency if they turned up in Birmingham or London.

Ross [00:11:21] Right.

Tara McCormack [00:11:21] One is called all sorts of names - pro Assadist, et cetera - just for pointing out, actually an established fact that is established in papers of record which obviously are problematic but, you know, you can read in The New York Times about what... the groups that America has sponsored that we have helped... The BBC even on occasion. So it's a quite incredible thing whereby actual reality is almost denied.

Ross [00:11:49] If we carry on down this track where does it logically lead?

Tara McCormack [00:11:51] I don't know. I don't know. I like to be optimistic.

Piers Robinson [00:11:55] These things can be made complicated or they can be described in fairly simple terms.

Ross [00:11:59] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:11:59] We've been involved in a number of war, you know, over the last 18 years. We know that there are people who want to push us into a war with Iran, ok. And there are clearly elements in the Western establishment across the West who are quite happy to go up against China and Russia in the long term. So where this can all lead if there isn't some kind of rational debate and some kind of sort of proper check it can lead us to simply more war and this isn't speculative, right. We've been involved in wars, we are involved, we're on a war footing, we have been since 9/11 and where we can go with this is that we just get into worse and worse conflicts. At the moment, you know, we seem to be checked towards this drive forward checked and it seems that Iran is not likely to be attacked. That's not, you know, that could still happen. We get to that point attacking Iran and we get into a confrontation with Russia or China then we're into... do I need to say it... we're into a potential major global conflict, that's where we can end up with this vacuum that we have at this point in time.

Ross [00:13:13] Welcome back to Renegade Inc. Before we talk more about the need for a new anti-war movement with Piers Robinson and Tara McCormack, let's have a look at what you've been tweeting about in this week's Renegade Inc. index. First up we've got a tweet from Rania Khalek In 2003 these people would have called us pro Saddam. In the 60s they would have called us pro Vietcong. The pro war narrative dominates the entire establishment.

Anyone who digresses from that narrative is smeared and ostracized. Piers, know anything about that?

Piers Robinson [00:13:44] Yeah, that's vaguely familiar to me actually when you do raise questions and so on, that's what ends up happening to you.

Ross [00:13:50] Next up from Mark Curtis. "Britain's indirect involvement in Yemen", says Guardian! Lord in heaven, please stop the disinformation.

Tara McCormack [00:13:59] This really is one of the most astonishing achievements I think of the British media of late which is to whole heartedly ignore the established fact that Britain is an absolutely central player in the war against Yemen. And it's not just about selling weapons but we support the weapons. We have special forces in the British soldiers that are actually training Saudi military. I mean this is literally a war that without us could not happen.

Ross [00:14:35] Next from Ian Cobain. Journalist banned from Europe's biggest arms fair. Why? What don't they want us to see? This is the article from Middle East Eye which is detailing that journalists have been blocked from the DSEI arms fair.

Tara McCormack [00:14:49] Middle East Eye is a really good publication because it genuinely does publish articles reflecting different political viewpoints and it's one of the few places that will kind of publish critical articles as well. Ian Cobain writes them for example.

Ross [00:15:03] And finally from Malinka Tanya P. "There was no independent confirmation of the chlorine attack on Idlib at the time" Pompeo: "US is providing a new \$4.5 million to the OPCW." Pompeo couldn't present any plausible proof of this alleged attack so now US buy the answers they want from the "independent" OPCW. What's your view on this, the politicization or the donation and potential politicization of an organization like the OPCW?

Piers Robinson [00:15:36] Well if you were a cynical person you might think there's a bit of bribery going on but there's certainly an element of incentivisation going on there in order to encourage the OPCW to find and reach conclusions which are going to be compatible with what they want and claim that they want to stand up so. Bribery, if you want to call it bribery, if you want to be objective and neutral, it's incentivisation. That's incentivisation going on there.

Ross [00:16:00] When we think of what's gone on in Syria, you were very quick to raise fundamental questions specifically about the Douma incident. Why did that stand out to you as to ask independent and critical questions about what was going on?

Piers Robinson [00:16:14] Well in terms of the working group a number of us had been looking at chemical weapon allegations in Syria prior to Douma and there was already plenty of reasons to question the dominant narrative that the Syrian government was carrying out chemical weapons attacks...

Ross [00:16:29] On its own people?

Piers Robinson [00:16:30] On its own people. So there's already questions in our mind and evidence that there were problems and then of course Douma happened and immediately with Douma of course West France, US and UK were pushing a narrative that it was the Syrian government who were responsible. The usual voices, the Eliot Higgins and Bellingcat and so on were pushing the idea that it was the Syrian government. And of course, you know, at the time the position was that, "well we need this to be looked at properly, objectively, it needs to be a proper investigation rather than to jump the gun".

Ross [00:16:59] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:16:59] But of course they jumped the gun and they bombed within seven days and then attacked us relentlessly for having raised questions and in a sense that just made it even more suspicious that there's something going on here, they didn't even want to wait for the OPCW report etc.

Ross [00:17:14] When the OPCW then get involved in this specific case, what was that process? How does that process look?

Piers Robinson [00:17:22] Well from what we know now of course Douma happened, the famous yellow cylinders and a significant number of civilians were killed in Douma followed by the air attacks from France, UK and America. The investigation, the OPCW did get in and they investigated and what we found when the final OPCW report was published in 2019 was a report which clearly had significant anomalies in it.

Ross [00:17:50] What were those anomalies?

Piers Robinson [00:17:51] The key anomalies was first and foremost the ideal or the kind of explanation of how the cylinders had arrived at their locations was unpersuasive - to put it mildly.

Ross [00:18:02] Just clarify that for me. How did they arrive? And how was it claimed that they arrived?

Piers Robinson [00:18:05] Well the OPCW report clearly indicated -implied - that the cylinders had been dropped by helicopters and that they had fallen into apartments and that's where the chlorine gas had leaked from. Number two anomaly was that the deceased civilians at location two - in the apartment block - the OPCW investigation found only the chlorine was present, okay, so therefore implying that these people were killed by chlorine but the report also noted that they appeared to have died due to some kind of fast acting nerve agent, ok, because chlorine doesn't kill rapidly. So you had a stark inconsistency in the report in terms of how the people had died. The third big problem were the hospital scenes, I mean, we knew because Riam Dalati from the BBC has claimed and still continues to claim the hospital scenes were staged. And you look at the Douma Report and there are indications even there of staging the hospital scenes. So you add all those things together and you've got a lot of very serious questions about what really happened and increasing ultimately the probability that it was a staged event.

Ross [00:19:08] Wow. And that's a big claim.

Piers Robinson [00:19:09] And that's a big claim. And then of course the key thing is that you have the OPCW report coming out and then within a few weeks of that you have the leaking of an internal engineering report carried out by people who were the team in Douma and that was leaked and it was obviously leaked to us and we published it. But that report was essentially the opposite conclusion of the OPCW report. The conclusion was that the cylinders were most probably put there by hand not drop by helicopters. The problem that we have identified in the OPCW and the problem that we have identified both through obviously leaked material et cetera but also looking at earlier cases is that you have an organization which has been set up in terms of the Syrian investigations in a way which allows them to rely upon opposition groups for information and that has ultimately fed through to reports which wouldn't stand up in a normal criminal court...

Ross [00:20:05] Right.

Piers Robinson [00:20:05] Okay, because that information which is being relied upon. So you have some kind of pressure going on. You also have the placement of officials into key positions it would appear which mean that the interests of France, the UK and the US are being reflected by essentially the organization itself. And we all know anybody who works in a big organization you put the right people, you get the right people in key positions, they can ensure that things go in a particular direction and this is what we understand has... is exactly what happened with Douma is that there was an engineering report carried out by the people who were sent in which clearly concluded that you have some kind of staged event most likely to have occurred there and that documentation gets suppressed, it gets sort of ruled out of the final report and that's why there's the controversy now, that's why there's ongoing controversy and questions. But this is what happens, you have essentially a corruption of the independence of the OPCW. The real danger... this is not really to do with Syria in a sense, okay, because of course we get smeared as being pro Assad and Russian propaganda et cetera in relation to Syria but there's a much bigger issue at stake.

Ross [00:21:11] And what is that Issue?

Piers Robinson [00:21:11] And that bigger issue is if you have an organization such as the OPCW which is effectively corrupted by major powers in the international system they can then use the OPCW to create a justification for attacking another country and for war.

Ross [00:21:28] Who's going to stand up and say actually the OPCW needs to be fit for purpose again and not have this corrupted process that he's talking about?

Tara McCormack [00:21:36] I mean, I don't know because I think you always have this problem with international institutions effectively that the powerful states can to some extent push the agenda. I mean I'm just thinking about, say, Iraq, you know, the weapons inspectors when an Iraq turfed them out saying, "no, you know, the weapons inspectors are also spying for Israel" of course great denial but, you know, 3 years after the Iraq war that was established as a fact so it's not new to have these kind of international organizations and mechanisms that essentially do... can be corrupted and follow a Western agenda rather than actually try and find out what has happened but I don't really know the answer to that.

Piers Robinson [00:22:23] People need to speak out and this clearly has already happened, okay, with documents being leaked from the OPCW. And frankly, you know, in terms of OPCW, the Non-Aligned Movement, Russia, China, India, they as states and actors they can put pressure to get the OPCW reformed and rather than just going, well ok, we all know that the Syria stuff was, you know, manipulated et cetera. They can say, well no, we need to properly confront this in the organization. So there is a responsibility not just for us and publics when we realize the truth, there's a responsibility for other states in the international system to, say, right the OPCW. And my understanding is the Non-Aligned Movement et cetera and then of course Russia but also India, China, there is widespread scepticism.

Tara McCormack [00:23:05] Just a couple of things just as we were talking about... you know thinking again about Iraq and Chilcot - obviously Piers has written at length about - here was an absolute astonishing report produced by the government itself, you know, and you see this sometimes, you know, but it's always way after the fact. Think the House of Commons report on Libya which is pretty critical, it's a pretty astonishing report and what... and Chilcot himself says, "this has to be something that we take with us going into the future" And what is it treated as? It is treated as a historical accident. I guess that's why I feel more pessimistic because I worry, you know, well... but whatever comes out about the OPCW it will come out and it will be a scandal but just as with Chilcot and then we move on and then because of the way in which the media currently functions, I mean, you would literally think when you look at the reports about Syria, Iraq didn't happen. As part of Chilcot there are e-mails released between... or memos - I can't remember - released between Blair and Bush... you know, you can find it on... the BBC publish it. Blair literally saying, "we need to establish an al-Qaeda connection with Saddam Hussein otherwise the European and British public will not buy the war". Last April when Britain, America and France bombed Syria that was in the faith in Britain of public opposition to the bombing. Now that wasn't public opposition to the bombing saying well okay if it was the Syrian government we support... that was public opposition saying, no, whatever the case we do not agree with the bombing. The same in America the public are consistently far less belligerent than the political establishment. The problem is, you know, there's a huge gap between public attitudes... so there isn't a coherent, vocal anti-war movement but generally people don't think war is a good idea.

Ross [00:25:01] Right. So as we conclude... what we've identified. If you're going to pick a sort of working surface, if you like, the gap between the political class, the public, and within that gap all manner of the stuff that we don't want to happen whether it be imperialism, Western exceptionalism, military adventurism, they can get away with it and until we shine a light there, this is going to go on and on?

Piers Robinson [00:25:24] Yeah, it will go on and on but these things only go on for a certain period of time. War, fighting, imperialism, can exist for a certain period of time and at some point the establishment forces at be become exhausted with this. And I think that's probably the point we're at the moment. I guess what I'm saying here is I think circumstances are going to force things and circumstances are going to force the voices such as myself and Tara and others to actually come to the fore ultimately and we'll start to cohere and then will provide sort of a more robust analysis and a check on what's going on. The awareness of the scepticism about the mass media now is at record level...

Tara McCormack [00:26:05] Yeah.

Piers Robinson [00:26:06] Right. The institution here is really collapsed in many ways.

Tara McCormack [00:26:09] Yeah.

Piers Robinson [00:26:10] And that's the first step in, as it were, people liberating themselves and political change ultimately.

Tara McCormack [00:26:16] I think that is true. The media... sometimes you do... often, you know, I do sort of see headlines now I think, you know, the media must know as well that they are more and more just talking to that what's called, you know, "the Westminster bubble" especially around foreign policy. There is much greater scepticism. There's a lot of indifference, you know, as well.

Ross [00:26:36] But people feel generally powerless that's the indifference?

Tara McCormack [00:26:40] Yeah.

Ross [00:26:40] Because they said "well what can I do about it? I mean... because little old me and by the way... look at Brexit" and all the rest of it.

Piers Robinson [00:26:45] We're not...

Ross [00:26:47] "They're not listening to us, the political class are not listening to us. What can I do."

Piers Robinson [00:26:49] Yeah. We're not at a point of mobilisation, there is... people are divide, people feel disempowered and so on. That's the next step when people realise that the system is not working, things are broke or it's neoliberalism or war etc. I think that realisation is there now. The next step is some kind of mobilisation which then starts to affect political change. I think 10/15 years down the line if everything goes the way that I hope it will I think people will look back on this period as a terrible period in Western history where we were involved in initiating, instigating and fuelling war after war after war. Incredibly destructive. And at some point that came to an end.

Ross [00:27:27] We finished with optimism. Piers, Tara, thank you very much for your time. That's it from Renegade Inc. this week. You can drop the team a mail studio@renegadeinc.com or you can tweet us @Renegade_inc. Join us next week for more insight from those people are thinking differently but until then, stay curious.