

Trouble In America

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. If there is one thing the world has learnt during the latest American election jamboree, it's that the US is far from the world's greatest democracy. But regardless of whether the White House is red or blue, what is certain is that America will continue attempts to spread her version of democracy around the world.

Ross Doug Henwood, welcome back to Renegade Inc.

Doug Henwood Thanks for having me.

Ross So you must be delighted. You've got the forty sixth commander in chief, Mr. Joe Biden - President Biden, now. He surely will right the ship. He'll get America back on track won't he, and nothing to worry about?

Doug Henwood Yeah, you know, right, one certainly hopes that. But, you know, I have to say, I'm not in love with Joe Biden, but I'm really glad to see Trump go. But, you know, the United States had a whole lot of problems before Trump came into office. He made them worse. But I'm not sure that Biden has the formula to make them better. So it's like the relief you feel after you stop beating your head against the wall or having your head beaten against the wall - you know, where you may not recover from the concussion for a long time.

Ross Is it the case now, though, because of the way America has been managed really since Reagan and the economics that you've peddled, that anybody coming into this office of the president is going to have a very difficult time trying to, a) heal the nation and, b) turn its fortunes around economically?

Doug Henwood Oh, it's a disaster. I mean the society is so polarised, so broken, everything physically and socially so ragged and on the verge of collapse, that I don't know that Jesus Christ himself could fix things here at this point. And like I said, it's a relief to be rid of Trump. But God knows, you know, there were just so many problems before this all started and the fact that Trump almost won, that he came so close to winning after having mismanaged Covid so badly, that it just stuns me that he's got that kind of support amongst the population. And the cult around him, it's just an appalling thing. So we've got some really very, very, serious problems and I don't really see them fixed easily. Biden is talking about cooperation and bipartisanship with a party that wants to destroy him. So I just don't know that he understands the gravity of the situation, anybody around him understands it or that at this point any of this stuff is fixable.

Ross The whole jamboree was really underwhelming, you know, from looking afar. I mean, the Democratic performance to nudge Trump out - only just - was anaemic at best. You know, you've got two guys now with a combined age of over 150 fighting for this office. Younger generations understandably look up and think, my gosh, what sort of leadership is this? How on earth do you begin to re-engage people politically who have been so, as you say, polarised by this wanton campaign, really?

Doug Henwood Well, I'd say a couple of things. One, the fact that we have such geriatric leadership. And I don't want to be ageist and I'm certainly no youth myself - they're about a decade older than I am or more - but still, the fact that we have such geriatric leadership, I think, symbolises very effectively the ossification of the entire American political structure. It's almost like they're the physical embodiment of this ossification. There are some really lively younger forces that the left in the Democratic party, the Democratic Socialist of America, have just past 80,000 members. We - I should say I'm a member - are on a recruiting drive trying to get 100,000. We elected a whole bunch of candidates, a couple to Congress, but more importantly to city councils and state local governments. So, yeah, there is some liveliness, particularly in the left wing of the Democratic party. There are a lot of ideas there, a lot of energy and a lot of youth. But, you know, the mainstream of the Democratic party is run by Nancy Pelosi, who is 80, was very good at her job. But, you know, she is sort of, you know, very much in the old school. Biden is, what 77, also very much of the old school - a relic of a very different era. The Republican party now, as Trump shuffles towards, or is nudged towards, or is dragged out the door, whatever is going to happen to get rid of him on January 20th, that Mitch McConnell runs the Senate is certainly, you know, well into his 70s and he's going to block everything. So we have these petulant old guys, confused old guys, and just a really rotten underlying political structure. It's a total mess.

Ross Joe Biden, it looked to me, didn't really know where he was throughout that campaign. I'm not sure he knows where he is now. This is a real worry for a man who's going to oversee the nuclear biscuits.

Doug Henwood Yeah, I mean, people say that. I think he's always been a bit this way and people say he's got advanced dementia. My mother had advanced dementia. I watched what it looks like. Joe Biden is certainly not there. But, you know, the guy, even in the best times, doesn't seem like the brightest person on the block and the people around him. He's got some good people around him and, I actually know a couple of his economic advisors reasonably well and they're good. But then, you know, it's a lot of us, just the same old tired Democratic figures, especially the foreign policy side. The idea of a return to normalcy in the foreign policy side, is a frightening thing. Trump, for all his problems, was at least not eager to start any wars. He certainly liked to rattle the sabre, but that's more tough guy talk than anything else. So, I don't know if we get Susan Rice or people like that back, you know, it's just going to be the same old national security establishment. I think a lot of Democrats thought all we need to do is get rid of Trump and get back to the status quo ante and everything will be OK. That the idea of going back to the status quo ante has some appeal, I mean, there's something slightly appealing about the calming presence of a neoliberal technocrat rather than this chaotic character who's been running the show for the last four years. I can understand the appeal of that, but it's not so great. You know, like I said, it's like that feeling you get when your head is no longer being beaten against the wall but there's still a lot of damage to deal with.

Ross Before we come to the foreign policy stuff, let's just talk about the economics. It seems to me Joe Biden is in the pocket of Wall Street - a neo liberal, through and through. Is that a fair summation of him, especially when we look at his voting record? He was very, very, keen to ring fence the bankruptcy laws to ensure that all students had to pay back monumental amounts of debt.

Doug Henwood Yeah, well, you know, his home state, of course, Delaware, was the headquarters of a lot of credit card companies for legal reasons, tax shelter reasons, regulatory reasons. So he was often referred to as the the senator for MBNA, which was a big credit card issuer back in the 80s and 90s. Yeah. So he had a very, very, close relationship with the creditor class, very much a creature of Wall Street, very Wall Street friendly, famously, as you said, the bankruptcy legislation which he had a hand in. Wall Street, I think, is pretty happy with the results. They like the tax cuts that Trump brought in. The fact that McConnell will probably control the Senate means that there won't be any tax increases that's going to cramp their style. So they're pleased. They like divided government because they can't do anything. Biden was saying some good things about a Green New Deal that wasn't exactly 'the' Green New Deal that Ocasio-Cortez and Martin introduced, but it was large and pretty good. And that's now impossible because McConnell won't let that go through the Senate. The big infrastructure programme he's talking about, which was related to that, that probably won't go through the Senate either. Some kind of large Covid relief package, which would have helped state and local governments, which are in dire straits right now, that probably will not go through either because of McConnell. So Biden's instincts themselves are not at all appropriate to the situation, but then he's going to be blocked by the Senate. And the fundamental problem here is the 18th century Constitution it'll be run under - everything about it, the electoral college, the insanity of caring about what some county in Florida thinks as being crucial to the election of the president. It's just the most undemocratic and bizarre thing. But, you know, the Constitution is a relic of an 18th century property owning class. Much of that property was human beings and we really haven't moved beyond that where we have this divided government and this crazy, creaky, electoral system. And this really is the failure of that entire model coming to fruition to a really foul tasting fruit.

Ross But you've got one of the best democracies in the world we're told?

Doug Henwood But compared to what. You know, there's something appealing about the simplicity of a parliamentary system like the British system, as it's called a parliamentary dictatorship or something, right? Central government has enormous, enormous power. Sometimes I envy that. We have this crazy federal system where the states and localities are very, very important. With Trump in office, having some sane governors did result in some sane Covid policies at the state level. But, you know, the whole system is just utterly bankrupt. It's finished. It's broken. The whole thing is designed to be nearly impossible to amend. And we're there. We can't really change the system. We can't really get rid of the Senate, which is an undemocratic excrescence. We can't really get rid of the Electoral College, which is also an undemocratic excrescence. So here we are with this crazy system that likes to think of itself as a model to the world. It seems to be a model of not how to do things.

Ross When we look around the world, whether it be Venezuela, Iran, whether it be rising power in the East, China, and also the NATO expansion plans, which we know are always in the back of every American politician's mind, we look at a potential tinderbox. When we come to foreign policy, how does Mr Biden conduct himself, keeping in mind that he was a huge advocate of Iraq and that invasion?

Doug Henwood Yeah, I mean, he's very, very conventional. He'll do whatever the foreign policy establishment wants. It was funny, late in his term, Obama and his aide Ben Rhodes, were starting to complain about that foreign policy establishment they called the blob. The blob, you know, wants to intervene. The blob wants to be resolute and tough and do all those things the president is supposed to do. Obama didn't really act on that very much, but he did give us the Iran deal. There were rumours that early on in his presidency he wanted to reset the U.S. relationship with Israel, but, of course, didn't happen. But at least perhaps the idea crossed his mind. I don't think the idea is even crossed Biden's mind. So I think he's just going to go back to a kind of classic Democratic hawkish politics, more likely to engage, as they say, which means put us at risk of war. The country really doesn't want any kind of war, I'm sure of that. I think there's a whole lot of consensus. We may be divided on many other things, but I don't think people want another Iraq war. But, if you know, the foreign policy establishment says something, I imagine Biden is going to do it. I mean that the people at the Council on Foreign Relations will probably be back in the driver's seat after being in exile during the Trump years.

Ross Terrifying for the rest of the world, isn't it? Because we've seen American foreign policy over many, many years now. And you've left, as a nation, a trail of destruction, as have the Brits, all around the place. If he owes favours, if he and people like Susan Rice and others owe favours to the military industrial complex, maybe those favours are going to be called in. And we have another Iraq, Libya or Syria on our hands?

Doug Henwood Yeah, I don't think we're really going to get anything in the magnitude of the Iraq insanity. But, you know, the Libyan operation was Hillary Clinton's baby. She really pushed that very hard. And, you know, I think I can imagine we'd see things like that around the world. And it was remarkable to see the deterioration and competence of the U.S. government. They couldn't overthrow Maduro and they put up that, you know, really almost comical coup with Guaido in charge and just failed utterly. So, yeah, that's that's a cheering possibility that the United States no longer has the competence to mount a proper coup or a proper insurgent kind of action. But a big picture influence that's going to affect everything going forward from here is the relative decline of the US and the rise of China. And Trump prosecuted his dislike of China with unusual fervour because he just really doesn't like Chinese people. He's just a racist pig. I don't think you know, you can't say the same about Biden. But, you know, there is something going on there, the technical, technological rivalry. China is a much more serious technological rival to Silicon Valley than it ever was in the past. As a political and military power, China does not yet have the cultural influence the U.S. does, partly for linguistic reasons, I guess. But the rest of U.S. power is eroding remarkably. And I don't see the United States declining with the graciousness that the British Empire declined. It could be very, very ugly and just lashing out in very irrational ways, provoking conflicts with the Chinese just to prove that we're not the washed up old champion anymore. But we are the washed up old champion. It would be nice if we could just retire from this world dominating role graciously and let a multipolar world bloom. But that doesn't seem to be the American way. And I fear that Biden is going to want to be the one to try to reassert American power and just give the national security establishment whatever it wants after the years in the wilderness under Trump.

Ross Doug Henwood, thank you very much for your time.

Doug Henwood Thank you.

Ross Ariel Gold, welcome to Renegade Inc.

Ariel Gold Thanks so much for having me.

Ross We talked to Doug Henwood in the first half of this programme and we finished by talking about America's foreign policy. He is worried about the potency of the military, the strategic thought that goes on in the corridors of power now. What do you worry about, what keeps you awake when you think about Joe Biden as the 46th commander in chief?

Ariel Gold Well, first of all, I just want to congratulate everyone in America. I think so much of America and so much of the world breathed a sigh of relief on Saturday night as we voted out fascism. We're still dealing with Trump trying to enact a coup to remain in power. And we have a lot to deal with on that end. But all of that aside, we are moving towards a Biden presidency, and that is really a relief. Now, on the other hand, what Biden has promised us, the American people, what he has promised us during his campaign, is a return to normal. But normal is the problems that we know all too well of neoliberalism. Normal is a bloated Pentagon budget. Normal are endless wars. Normal is corporate control of so much of the American politics. Normal is a massive infusion, as we see during every election, of money in politics. So normal is not something to look forward to. Among the other concerns about Biden are some of his track record. Biden was vice president when the war in Yemen started with US support. That was the Obama-Biden administration. And that's something that we really need to see change in a Biden presidency.

Ross By not going back to normal, how then do you begin to speak to somebody, Mr. Biden, who is a Washington insider, through and through? How do you begin to change his mind because as you say, you look at his voting record, he's been involved, militarily, in all sorts of unsavoury dealings and persuade him that actually this isn't the way to go? This is a multipolar world now, and America, from where I'm sitting, can't really get its own domestic affairs in line. It doesn't have the seat at the table that it thinks it has to be world policeman.

Ariel Gold Well, one of the encouraging things about Biden being a seasoned neo liberal politician is that he does follow the rules of the game. And the rules of the game are that we have avenues to pressure him. And these are avenues that Donald Trump just threw out the window at every turn that he could. So there were some very encouraging things about the 2020 election that just took place. As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the representative in Congress, has been pointing out, not a single sitting member of Congress who endorsed Medicare for all lost their re-election bid, and that's within Democrats having lost a number of seats in the House in this election. We have some new and fabulous progressives coming into Congress such as Black Lives Matter activist, Cori Bush, and progressive incoming member of the squad, Jamal Bowman. What we've seen over the past few years, and what we saw in this recent election, is that some things have dramatically changed, especially when we look at the struggle for Palestinian rights. It is no longer an automatic lose for a candidate to support Palestinian rights and to openly criticise Israel, even to endorse the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement or to call for US military assistance to Israel to be conditioned. Now, this was not the case just a few years ago, and it is now. And so we will have these members of Congress to put pressure on Biden - this very, very necessary

pressure. And Biden has seen some of this pressure already. So during his campaign, he did promise to pull the US involvement out of the war in Yemen. And that's something that we at Code Pink, along with many anti-war, peace, progressive and social justice organisations, are already beginning to put pressure on Joe Biden to follow through with his campaign promise to end US support for the war in Yemen. And we are also geared up and ready to go to make sure that Biden gets us back into the Iran nuclear deal.

Ross So when you are campaigning and fighting the headwinds - and there are many of them, not least favours owed by politicians to the military industrial complex, the lobbyists, the fact that America sees war as a business. How do you get the cut through, and is there an increasing awareness amongst the electorate to say, actually, we've had enough of this reckless foreign policy? How do you get the cut through to make sure elected officials act on what you're saying?

Ariel Gold So one of the interesting things is that all candidates now are quite aware that the American people are sick and tired of these endless wars. We saw Donald Trump try to frame himself during the election as the anti-war candidate because he recognised that the American public are sick and tired of these endless wars. Where we've had some incredible success is in the War Powers Resolution, which says that Congress must approve any US military involvement. And we passed the War Powers Resolution through both chambers of Congress, a bipartisan resolution. Now, Trump vetoed that in 2019 but we have every expectation that Biden, on the other hand, will put his signature on that and that we can get that accomplished very early in the Biden presidency. What we do to push for this type of legislation, is we launch campaigns for constituents to call and email their representative and their senators and tell them how they need them to vote and what legislation they need them to support.

Ross Jens Stoltenberg, head of NATO, must be quite happy that Biden's in because of his track record. NATO expansion is never too far away from the discussion table. And, of course, it's the bogeyman, Russia, that constantly is used as the whipping boy to justify massive military budgets. What do you think will happen under a Biden presidency with Mr Biden, Mr. Putin, especially when Mr. Biden has incessantly stated that he's the only one who can, quote, 'tame Putin'?

Ariel Gold Well, we're not just looking now at this US Russia escalation, but Biden during the campaign, tried to out Trump Trump on hatred towards China, a dangerous escalation and a dangerous Cold War. And this is a real concern. This is going to be a real concern during the Biden presidency. As you said, Biden is likely to revert to these same policies that were pursued under the Obama administration. And we as activists, as anti-war activists, we really have our work cut out for us on this issue. It's far past time for America to engage in diplomacy with Russia, with China, and, of course, with the Middle East. And I think that one of the first places that we hope to see diplomacy play out is with Iran. And we hope that that can just temper things down a bit. But we definitely at Code Pink, we have a campaign called China is not our enemy, to try to push back against some of this rhetoric and prevent this new Cold War from escalating any further.

Ross You mentioned that people both sides of the aisle have had enough of America's endless wars. Is there a rift in the imperialist camp between the neocons, those who want to

keep going and those who've said, actually, no, we've had enough, or is the groupthink so strong because these people haven't learnt from their epic errors in the past?

Ariel Gold Unfortunately, I would have to say that these people have not learned much from their epic errors in the past. The War Powers Resolution is a crack in that where we do have some change taking place in the Republican party. We do have support for the War Powers Resolution. This was an interesting part about Trump, who did recognise that America was sick of these endless wars. And sometimes when Trump would talk about pulling our troops out. And I want to recognise that Trump talked about ending these endless wars but doesn't actually end these endless wars. But when he would talk about that, both the Republicans and the Democrats would push back against him. And that's something that we really need to change. It's both parties that we need to get on board with a more peaceful future, with cutting the Pentagon budget and with ending these militaristic endeavours.

Ross Is it the case that the world now looks at the US and says you know what your house is in such disorder, there's no way that you can come around and lecture us on democracy and freedom when actually you've got so many internal problems - go home, sort your house out, then we can sit down and talk about how we partner?

Ariel Gold Well, absolutely. America's house is not just in disarray, but very much on fire in terms of climate catastrophe, in terms of how divided we are as a country, in terms of the racism and hatred that we've seen rise. And one of the concerns is that while we may have voted out Donald Trump at this moment, we had over 70 million Americans vote for him, vote for the types of policies, the types of hatred, the types of open racism, the attacks on media, false claims, and right now even an attempted coup. This is far from over. We're going to have to continue to deal with this during the Biden presidency and then afterwards. We have so much work to do at home and we really need to be directing our resources to the problems that we have at home.

Ross Will the United States of America remain united or will it end up east, west and the rest?

Ariel Gold The United States right now is an incredibly divided country, but it's very divided within the east, west and the rest. I myself live in upstate New York and upstate New York is a largely red area, largely Donald Trump supporting area. So we we have to deal with these problems. It's not about separating them. It's about reaching out to change the hearts and minds of Americans. It's about overcoming our racist settler colonial past and forging a new future built on diplomacy, on human needs and, on finally, giving up our militaristic intentions.

Ross At Code Pink, you're very, very good interrupting warhawks who are making regime change type statements. Who's been your favourite to interrupt so far, because we love the video?

Ariel Gold Oh, so hard to to choose a favourite. You know, Elliott Abrams....

Ross Yes.

Ariel Gold A vile convicted criminal as well as a war criminal.

Video clip How dare you impose economic sanctions that hurt the people of Venezuela. How dare you in the name of the American people, overthrow the government of another people.

Ariel Gold And I thought of him immediately because he was just in Israel a couple of days ago trying to prevent the United States from being able to get back into the Iran nuclear deal. And he's in charge of both Iran and Venezuela right now. I cannot wait to see him go. Happy to say that we have disrupted him a number of times.

Ross Really great work. Code Pink. Keep up the excellent work. And thank you very much, Ariel Gold, for being with us at Renegade Inc.

Ariel Gold Thank you so much for having me on.