

The Empire Feeds Off The Republic

Ross Welcome to Renegade Inc. it was the American writer, Gore Vidal, who playfully quipped, it's not enough to succeed, others must fail. If we were to write a line that perfectly summed up America's desire for global domination, it would be hard to top Mr. Vidal's. So will the US oligarchy remain unsatisfied with its successes and continue to push for the failure of other countries in the insatiable quest for so-called exceptionalism?

Ross Ben Norton, great to have you back on Renegade Inc.

Ben Norton It's always a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

Ross Ben, new administration in Washington. Mr. Biden, now, looking after things. Where are the sweeping changes that he promised during his campaign? Are they coming or is it condition as normal?

Ben Norton Well, it's pretty shocking how quickly the Bush administration did a total 180 on all of its major campaign promises. Now, of course, in terms of its foreign policy, nothing has changed. Basically, all of the policies of the Trump administration's foreign policy have stayed exactly the same. But even in terms of domestic policy, which is usually the only real difference between Democratic and Republican administrations, it's been much more continuity than change. The Biden administration promised 2,000 dollar checks for adult Americans, and that number was instantly whittled down to fourteen hundred. The Biden administration claimed that it would raise the minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour. Right now it's just over 7 dollars an hour, which is not a living wage. And even though the Democrats have control of the House, even though the Democrats have a very slim majority in the Senate and they have the presidency - so they have control of all of the important chambers of power - they have voluntarily not fought for a 15 dollar minimum wage. In fact, it was members of the own Democratic Party caucus that were against the raising of the minimum wage. So at every single stage, we've seen a total betrayal of the constituency of the people that voted for the Democratic Party by the Biden administration. And of course, when we're talking about policy, vis a vis, Venezuela, vis a vis Iran, vis a vis China and Russia, it has been exactly the same as we saw under Trump.

Ross When will President Biden push to achieve his foreign policy objectives? We know that he's a hawk. We know that he likes the war machine. We know that a lot of his administration are neocons. Will they at some point have to pay some of the favours that they owe to the military-industrial complex? And if so, when does that begin?

Ben Norton Well, that began immediately on January 20th when Biden entered office. It's incredible that at least under Barack Obama, Democratic administrations often at the beginning, portray themselves as a different administration from the Republicans. They try to establish this marked difference and implement new policies. But with the Biden administration, immediately from day one, it was an intensification of these forever wars, as they're now known. So we've seen that the Biden administration is trying to reverse one of the very few accomplishments of the Trump administration, which was the peace deal in Afghanistan to try to end this 20 year war. Instead, the Biden administration is continuing the

war in Afghanistan. And we now know that there are actually more troops, more NATO troops, in Afghanistan than were previously disclosed. We've seen with Venezuela that Joe Biden is continuing exactly where Donald Trump left off. And this is incredible because the Biden administration and the Biden campaign has continuously said that everything that Trump did was pure evil. And, of course, a lot of the things that Trump did were very bad, but they have continued his worst crimes. And in specific, what we're talking about recognising Juan Guaido as the supposed president of Venezuela. This is a politician who no one had ever heard of, basically. Only 10 percent of Venezuelans had heard of him when he declared himself interim president at the beginning of 2019 without ever winning a single vote to be president. He's no longer even a member of the National Assembly. But the Biden administration is continuing to recognise someone that the Trump administration had appointed as so-called interim president as the leader of Venezuela. Furthermore, the Biden administration has done nothing to challenge the Trump era sanctions on Venezuela, which have led to tens of thousands of civilian deaths which have crippled the economy. According to the United Nations top specialists, the special rapporteur on sanctions, 99 per cent of revenue in Venezuela have been taken away from the country because the country cannot export oil. And this is a petro state that relies on oil exports for its economy to function. The Biden administration has done nothing to challenge these policies. Of course, the seed of the policy began under Obama. So perhaps it's not too surprising. But the brazenness of the Trump administration policy, imposing a mediaeval blockade in Venezuela and the fact that the Biden administration has done nothing - it hasn't even rhetorically challenged it - it's pretty incredible. Then there's the war in Yemen, which is, frankly, a genocidal war. And the Biden administration might rhetorically claim to oppose elements of the Trump administration, but in terms of the war in Yemen, the Biden administration has actually intensified the war. And this is particularly Orwellian because Biden gave a speech, a form of PR, in which he claimed that his administration was going to end support for offensive operations, and scare quotes, the war in Yemen. Now, of course, it's a very ambiguous phrase. What's the difference between a defensive and an offensive operation, in particular, because the the US government has always claimed that its wars are supposedly defensive? Well, what we actually saw is that the Biden administration has further intensified its support for Saudi Arabia in the war on Yemen. This is a war that has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. This is a war that has unleashed famine-like conditions, the worst humanitarian catastrophe on earth with more than 16 million people on the verge of starvation. And we've seen that not only has the Biden administration increased military support for Saudi Arabia in the name of defensive operations, but they've also expanded the blockade, which is suffocating the country of Yemen.

Ross We sit here again, a new administration, new day, same stuff. And there is a sense of pouring water over a stone on all this because we talk about it extensively and nothing really happens. The average American, the average Brit, sitting there listening to you talk thinks we do not want anything to do with this genocidal war in Yemen. But actually, we have absolutely no agency whatsoever because whatever we vote for, whatever we do, all of these things get thrown out the window after an election. All these promises, and bang, business as usual. What can the person sitting there on their couch, who see these pictures of this horrific war? And they don't want Russiagate anymore, they don't want a conflict with the Chinese, they understand that Maduro is the man in Venezuela. What can they do to start to have these conversations which don't make them feel so hopeless, helpless?

Ben Norton Well, the reality is we have to realise that we don't live in functioning democracies, neither in the United States nor in England. I mean, the British democracy, we saw how great and benevolent it was when it rigged the entire election against the most popular leader of the Labour Party in its history. Jeremy Corbyn. We saw the role of the British National Security state of intelligence agencies and police forces in helping to rig the election against him, in helping to destroy the Labour Party as a progressive force. We saw the role of spy cops, the spy police, who for decades have been infiltrating left wing groups in Britain, spying on people, even tricking women into relationships and impregnating women. And women, have said that they've been raped by the state functionally. And in the United States it's something very similar, although it's actually even worse. The United States, it claims to be the world's beacon of freedom. This is a country that has 4 per cent of the global population, but over 25 per cent of its prisoners. And by the way, when we're talking about the conditions of prisons in the United States, they're like mediaeval dungeons. I mean, if you read Dostoyevsky, those prisons sound kind of nice compared to American prisons. I mean, there have been videos recently posted of prisoners with their walls covered in cockroaches. They barely have enough food to survive. They've been turned into slaughterhouses in the Covid pandemic, where hundreds of prisoners in each prison in major prisons in United States, have died because of Covid and they do not have access to adequate medical attention. These are not democratic societies. They are oligarchies. They are authoritarian societies. And I think for a lot of Americans, in particular, and a lot of the world, 2020 was a real eye opening moment when there was a massive uprising against racism, against state violence, against police brutality after the horrific murder, the police murder, of George Floyd, an innocent black man who for nearly 9 minutes had his life choked out of him by a white police officer who had known him. And by the way, that police officer who killed George Floyd, his name is Derek Chauvin. He had previously worked at the infamous Fort Benning in the United States, which is the home of the School of the Americas, which is also known as the School of the Assassins, which has trained dictators and generals and police across Latin America who carried out coup d'etat's, who murdered and tortured leftists in regimes like in Chile under Pinochet. So we're talking about societies that are deeply authoritarian. And the reality is that we have to recognise that. We have to recognise that the system that we've been told our entire lives is so free and democratic, is not. I mean, you used the term agency. It's always funny when I hear the term agency, people talking about the people's agency, voters agency, because my response is always, well, unfortunately, we don't have much agency because all of the agency goes to the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the Defence Intelligence Agency. So we have to take that power back. And we did see in 2020, I think, the seeds of the beginning of a movement to take back that power, to say that this authoritarian state violence, repressing black people, repressing brown people, repressing poor people, repressing working people in the United States and in other countries, it does not represent us. It represents Jeff Bezos. It represents Elon Musk. It represents the billionaire oligarchs who during this pandemic, as we've seen, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and nearly one hundred years, as more than half a million Americans have died, just in the United States from a totally preventable crisis, as unemployment has skyrocketed, as poverty has increased. Meanwhile, these billionaire oligarchs, their wealth has continued to grow and to grow and to grow because the reality is that the system was created for them. They are the beneficiaries and they are the people that control the system. So the more that we recognise that this myth of the great democracies, the great Western democracies that we've been fed, especially throughout the Cold War, the more we're able to puncture that myth and wake up to the reality, then we can actually fight for

creating a new system. Because the reality is that as long as we are blinded by that illusion, we're going to continue to buy into the same propaganda that we were fed during the first Cold War and now during the new Cold War.

Ross You mentioned the Cold War. We will come to talking about the rehabilitation of Russiagate because we're sure that it's coming down the pipe. But briefly on the system - communism collapsed, obviously. Capitalism reigns supreme, free world and all the PR that comes with that. Is it the case that the system hasn't failed which is what you're getting at? The system has worked perfectly according to the software that the system peddles, is set upon. So the system has work perfectly. And that's why we're seeing such structural inequality. That's why you're seeing such incredible environmental degradation. That's why you're seeing wages that we can't get over the minimum wage mark, which is a liveable minimum wage. Surely the system has worked perfectly according to the rules this system has been set upon?

Ben Norton Well, just look who created the system. In the context of the United States, it was slave owners, it was people who said that that black people, Latinos and women did not have equal rights, they were not even human beings. They were three fifths of a human being, as we saw in the US, constitutional compromise for black slaves. So the reality is that from the very beginning of the creation of this system, it was never meant to be equal. And in the context of the United States, we saw the worst genocide in human history targeting indigenous peoples, over one hundred million people killed. And in the context of Britain, it's not much different. I mean, Britain still is a monarchy, let's not forget, led by a queen who, when she was a child, was trained to Nazi salute by her family members who supported Nazi Germany, who who met with Adolf Hitler because they saw Nazi Germany as a force that would help save them from the threat of Bolshevism as they saw it, from communism, from socialism. So the reality is that these systems have been set up like this. And in the context of the United States, I think it's especially salient when you look at the oppression of black people, which has continued and it's so brutal today. And a lot of people, especially outside of the United States, don't realise that until the 1960s, the United States was an apartheid state like apartheid South Africa. And since then, we've seen that the state has continued taking away the rights, especially of black people, but in general of poor and working class people, also Latinos. And we've seen the reinstatement of slavery, essentially. And in fact, in the United States Constitution, according to the amendment that technically abolished chattel slavery, it allowed for slavery in the context of punishment for crimes, that is to say, slavery as punishment for people who are in prison. So slave labour is absolutely rampant in the United States. There are documentaries about this, and I would highly recommend looking into them. And we're talking about conditions in which workers are paid a few cents an hour, if anything at all. And they're forced to do things like in California, when there are large fires, prisoners are sent out to put out the fires, risking their lives. They're paid almost nothing and they're disproportionately black and Latino and basically all poor. Rich people don't go to prison in the United States. They can afford great lawyers who can talk them out of their charges, even when rich people kill people, even when when the rich are caught with huge quantities of drugs. Whereas poor people with a small bag of drugs go to prison for decades. So the reality is that the system was created to function this way. And we haven't even talked about the role of the system as an empire, because in the context of the United States and Britain, these are not just normal, in scare quote, countries. These are countries, these are empires, these are systems, that were created to dominate the entire planet. And the reality is

that in the United States, the majority of revenue spent by the government, the majority of tax dollars, does not go to administer domestic affairs. It goes to administer 800 military bases abroad. It goes to wage dozens of wars. I mean, people talk about the war in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq, the war in Yemen, the war in Syria. But there are also unconventional wars being waged around the world. The US through AFRICOM has special operations forces operating on almost every single country in the African continent. The US has military bases spanning every continent. So the reality is that the US is not only not a democratic system, it was never set out to be a democratic system. But it also isn't a democracy. It's an empire. And as the brilliant scholar Michael Parenti always says, the empire feeds on the republic. You can't have a republic and an empire. That was equally true for the Roman Empire. It was true for the British Empire, and it's true today for the US Empire.

Ross There's a president called Vladimir Putin who was adamant that the neo liberal types that were raiding Russia for the natural resources were to be vanquished or at least reined in with this idea that mother Russia, therefore Russia first. If you've got a system in the US, in the U.K., as we have now, which is totally out of control and uses concessions for different people to try and get through, you have to scapegoat your failures on someone else. How much does the Russiagate, as you've called it, hoax, need to be in place to scapegoat Russia for domestic failing at home?

Ben Norton If you look at what's going on in the United States with mass unemployment, police brutality, more than half a million people who have died from this totally preventable crisis of Covid-19, the situation is absolutely horrible. It's commensurate to the situation in the 1930s which, of course, gave rise to fascism, which gave rise not only to fascism in Europe, but also to white supremacist terrorist movements like the KKK in the United States. And the situation in the United States right now is absolutely horrible for millions of working people who don't have work, who can barely pay for their own rent if they can. And there's a mass crisis now of homelessness, of hundreds of thousands of people in the United States, many children. In fact, in New York state, one tenth of all of the children in school are homeless children. That's an incredible statistic in the richest country in the world. So the US is spending so many trillions of dollars to wage war abroad, but it can't provide housing for its own children. So with a situation like that, in order to maintain stability, to prevent people from overthrowing the government French Revolution style from storming the Bastille, you have to have foreign bogeymen. Well, you also have domestic bogeymen. And we see racism is used as a tool. Republicans claim that the problem is all the immigrants who are stealing your jobs and black people who are lazy. Of course, they use racism. And then we see that imperialists use very similar tactics to scapegoat foreign countries and especially Russia. Russia is one of the main scapegoats. And there's so much emotional energy that goes toward hatred of Russia in the United States. It's not even intellectual. It's not about Russia's policies. It's not about what Russia actually does. It's just about the image of Russia that's concocted through the media, through TV shows and movies. You know, anyone who watches Netflix can always see that. And how many movies and how many TV shows are the villains, Russians? And they have a big Slavic accent for some reason. And it's part of this propaganda campaign that has bombarded us for decades throughout the Cold War and still today. And that's about opening a safety valve and taking all that energy in the United States for all the horrific problems that go on and blaming it on someone else, blaming it on Russia, which also happens to be one of the US's main geopolitical competitors, so-called enemy. I mean, it's not an enemy of the American people, just as China is not an enemy. But the reality

is that the US empire wants everything, wants to have its cake and eat it, too. The US empire sees any potential loss of control of a country as an attack on the infallibility, as it sees it, of its empire. So when the Soviet Union was overthrown, it didn't just collapse. It was overthrown in a series of coups, of so-called colour revolutions. And when the other socialist countries in the Eastern Bloc were overthrown, the US said, George H.W. Bush -, a CIA director, turned president - he declared that the US empire was ruling over what he called the New World Order. And that's not some conspiracy involving lizard people. No, when George H.W. Bush declared the New World Order, he was saying that the US empire is the unipolar hegemon - Washington controls the entire planet. There is no other game in town. No one else can challenge Washington's total control. So when you have the rise of countries like Russia and China that say, look, we want to actually have independent sovereign governments. We want to have our own foreign policy. We don't want to use the dollar. We don't want the dollar to dictate everything that we do. We want to actually be able to have our own functioning, independent societies. The US sees that not only as competition, but as an attack. So the reality is that Russiagate was always meant as a distraction. And we've seen how it has melted the collective brain of so many Americans, especially liberal Americans, which has done so much irreparable damage. Because in the George W. Bush era, many liberal Americans - at least for opportunistic reasons - claimed to be anti-war. They claim to be against the war in Afghanistan or at least against the war in Iraq. And now the reality is it's the exact opposite. Russiagate has helped convince so many liberal Americans, even people who call themselves progressive and identify with the political left, they now think that in order to oppose the Republican Party, in order to oppose Trump, they have to support more war, support war with any country that is seen as an ally of Russia.

Ross Just at a time when Britain's gradual nuclear disarmament was trundling along nicely, and now we've got a situation here where pressure has been put on from allies to actually increase nuclear warheads in this country. Are these two things interlinked?

Ben Norton Absolutely. The role of nuclear weapons in bolstering these empires is very important. The United States has hundreds and hundreds, thousands of nuclear warheads that could destroy the planet many times over and uses that to threaten countries around the world. And we saw that Jeremy Corbyn campaigned on the promise of denuclearisation, which was a very radical - it shouldn't be radical - but was a very radical proposal because peace, unfortunately, is radical in these Western imperialist countries. And we saw the insane backlash against Corbyn and his project accusing him of being a puppet of foreign countries because he wanted to pursue denuclearisation. And all we have to do is look at the situation right now with with the DPRK, with North Korea, and see how the US has continued to use this as an excuse to impose suffocating sanctions on the people of North Korea for decades. And also the European powers have suffocating sanctions on the people of North Korea because they have a nuclear weapon. And the idea is that only Western imperialist powers are allowed to have nuclear weapons, only they're allowed to destroy the entire planet, which is just insane. I mean, if we ever even get to the point of using nuclear weapons, it's going to be the end of humanity, the end of life on this planet. But the reality is that Washington and Brussels use this as a talking point and they also use it as a way to impose mediaeval sanctions on countries that bring them to their knees and they kill civilians. Look at Iran - Iran, by the way, which does not have nuclear weapons unlike Israel, which has undeclared nuclear weapons and is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran has suffocating sanctions that have led to thousands of deaths, that have caused a massive

economic crisis. Iranians can't get access to certain medicines and medical equipment, all because of this talking point of nuclear weapons. And this is a talking point weaponized by countries that do have nuclear weapons. And then finally, I would be remiss if I weren't to mention what happened with with Libya. Libya was pursuing a nuclear programme and after the overthrow of the socialist countries in the Eastern Bloc, when the US national security state and these neo conservative forces declared that their goal was total unipolar domination of the planet and full spectrum dominance as they said it, they moved their targets and began overthrowing any independent post-colonial government, as they did with Iraq, as they did with Libya, as they tried to do unsuccessfully with Syria and Iran and Venezuela. And Libya gave up its nuclear programme as part of a programme with the Western imperialist powers. And how do they respond? By overthrowing the government, by supporting Salafi jihadist extreme rebels who sodomised Mu'ammarr Gadaffi with a bayonet on camera. So that is the response, that is the incredible imperial hypocrisy of these countries that have hundreds and thousands of nuclear warheads, but deign to tell independent countries in the global south that they can't even consider the possibility of creating a nuclear energy programme.

Ross Ben Norton, it's always a pleasure. Congratulations with the continued success of The Grayzone and thank you very much for your time.

Ben Norton Thank you for having me and keep up the great work.