

Scene on Radio

American Empire (Season 4, Episode 9) Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/s4-e9-american-empire/>

John Biewen: Chenjerai, we are opening a can of worms with this one. We've talked a lot about how the U.S. has dealt with democracy on the North American continent. But we really haven't explored the U.S role in democracy out there in the larger world.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh, so you mean like how we've brought democracy to other people around the world?

John Biewen: Well, we've brought something. But, yes, actually I thought we should as part of this series, we should explore an idea that is controversial for a lot of people, and that is the idea of American empire.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Okay, so, what you're saying is we're about to start a whole new podcast. Like right now.

John Biewen: (Laughs) Exactly. Obviously, it could be at least a twenty part series, but actually, for today, maybe, could we just do one episode?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I think it's easy actually. America's not an empire. We're a force for freedom in the world, and my evidence for this is World War II. And I think we're done. Thanks for listening.

John Biewen: (laughs) Yeah. That does settle it really.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: This is one of those areas where I think it's good to have a podcast actually, because this stuff comes up in my social world, you know, like at dinner parties. Do you remember before COVID when we used to actually have dinner parties?

John Biewen: Faint memories of that experience.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I probably didn't call them dinner parties to be real, I probably just was like, come over to the house so we can eat. But at those kind of gatherings, people would talk about foreign policy, maybe the word "empire" comes up, but you can't just roll out a fifty-minute history lesson in that context.

John Biewen; At least if you want those friends to come over for dinner some other time again.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Sadly, I know this from experience. No, but I'm glad you brought the topic up. I think people are uncomfortable even entertaining the idea that

America's an empire, and to understand why I think there's a few things you really gotta look at. On the one hand, there's this idea that the country was founded through a break from empire, right? Like a rejection of British control.

John Biewen: Yeah, I mean, our very birth as a nation was a rejection of empire. How anti-Imperialist can you get? And I think that's the story that mainstream America has told itself ever since.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But the trouble with that story is pretty much everything that happened after the break from Britain, right? And we've been telling that story in this show.

John Biewen: Yes. So if anyone who has listened to the first eight episodes of this series still thinks that the American founding project was about anti-Imperialist freedom for all, then, well actually, you were probably listening to a different show, you weren't listening to this one.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: For real. So, some of the things that many of us get wrong about the American role in the larger world is about just having the wrong history. And I gotta be real, most of us including me just don't know enough, I mean I feel like I'm always still catching up to it, right? The history of American military intervention, for example, is just not in the public consciousness. We'll get to that. But even more basic stuff about what's included in U.S. territories, how we even got to the states we have,

and what that has to do with empire and democracy. These are things people don't know.

John Biewen: And I will say I learned a lot in doing the research and interviews for this episode. Let's just say it was clarifying for me.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But then there's this other issue of the things we *do* know. And I actually think this is where it gets more complicated, because I think people know that globally the U.S. has done some bad things. Like if you only watch Fox news, you might actually think that everyone we kill overseas was a bad person. But everyone else knows that what's been done in the name of freedom and security is not all good.

John Biewen: Yeah. I agree.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So, when you take that into consideration, it's not really about not knowing, it's about the way that national identity is forged around the idea of these trade-offs. It's almost like in our minds there's a wall around the country, or a moat, and here inside the moat, we americans love and cherish democracy. But out there? All bets are off. You know what I'm saying? It's like, it's rough out there. It's a jungle. People aren't civilized. They want to hurt each other and they want to hurt us. So I think this is kind of implicit understanding that, you know, sometimes it's not pretty, but we gotta do some rough stuff in order to take care of business.

John Biewen: And built into that notion is a kind of article of faith, that we as Americans mean well. Whatever we're doing in the world, we're doing it because we have to. I mean, almost by definition, if the United States is doing it, it must be the right thing, because we're the good guys. Our hats are white, if you know what I'm saying.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Oh yeah. I know what you're saying .

John Biewen: And I think behind that belief that U.S. behavior in the world is justified, there are a couple basic ideas. One is, that what we do is in our national interest. Whatever that means, right. Our national interest. And, you know, tough, but it's a rough world, as you said, and we're gonna take care of ourselves. That's what you do in order to thrive as a people and as a nation. So that's one idea. And another kinda separate idea, or one that's combined with that, is the idea that we're actually doing more good than harm in the world with our actions as a nation, and our foreign policy.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Absolutely, I mean, we hear those things all the time. And so I understand why so many of us operate with those assumptions. ,But as we get into this episode, I think that's what we really have to grapple with. Are those justifications really adequate, and actually are they even true? What's the real story behind these ideas of expansion, security, and freedom? Whose interest has it really served? And what terror has the idea of American democracy wrought upon the people we claim to have saved?

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is *Scene on Radio* Season 4, Episode 9 in our series exploring democracy in the U.S. We call the series, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*. I'm John Biewen, producer and host of the show. That was my friend and collaborator, Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. He's a media scholar at Rutgers, a podcaster, artist, and organizer. As always, he'll be back later to help me unpack stuff.

This time out: America and empire. Do those words go together, and if so, how? If the U.S. is not quite an empire in the British Empire sense, then what kind of imperialism does the U.S. practice? And how has American empire changed over time?

Donald Rumsfeld: It's now about five days since the major ground forces entered Iraq. It's almost four days and thirty minutes ago that the air war began.

John Biewen: Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. Secretary of Defense at the time, doing a press briefing during the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Donald Rumsfeld: We have intelligence information that the Fedayeen Saddam, um, people—I'm not gonna call them troops because they're traveling in civilian clothes and they're essentially terrorists—have been moving south....

[Music]

John Biewen: We know now that the Bush Administration's pretext for starting that war was false: Iraq and its leader, Saddam Hussein, did not have weapons of mass destruction. But the U.S. would occupy Iraq and keep tens of thousands of troops there for eight years. Estimates of the death toll from the Iraq War range from one hundred thousand-plus to more than a million. As of spring 2020, about six thousand U.S. troops are still in Iraq and American oil companies are still active there.

Back in 2003, a reporter from Al-Jazeera asked Donald Rumsfeld did he worry that the U.S., with its aggressive actions in Iraq, was behaving as an imperial, colonial power. Rumsfeld replied, "We're not a colonial power. We've never been a colonial power. ... That's just not what the United States does." He said the U.S. had helped to free Bosnia, and helped Kosovo. When the U.S. defeated Hitler and the Japanese, he said, it didn't seize their territory but gave them money to help recover. Rumsfeld made clear he thought the question itself was out of line.

Nikhil Singh: And I always find that really interesting because it's really an effort to kind of rule out the discussion before it even starts. What kind of power is the United States in the world?

John Biewen: Nikhil Singh is a Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at New York University. He wrote a collection of essays called *Race and America's Long*

War, and he has another book, *Exceptional Empire*, coming soon. Singh says, at least inside the contiguous U.S., Americans have pretty successfully shut down that question about empire before it's asked. But if we're going to decide if the U.S. is in fact an imperial power, we need a definition.

Nikhil Singh: The way I think of empire most simply would be, the project of governance without a body politic.

John Biewen: He's gonna elaborate in a second, but notice: for Singh and a lot of other scholars, the way to think about empire is not, what exactly are you doing in your dealings with other nations and peoples. Are you invading and colonizing, for example. The question is not even about your intentions—whether you think you're out to pillage or to help people in foreign lands. No. The question is, whatever you're doing ... did the people in that country have any say in it?

Nikhil Singh: Empire is about the effort to imagine how to govern people, how to harness their labor, how to extract their resources, how to open their markets—so it can be about selling them things, it can be about putting them to work, it can be about enlisting them in other kinds of projects, even projects that might be defined as social improvement—but fundamentally without their consent.

[Music]

John Biewen: Uh-oh. A nation acting on people beyond its borders without their consent is doing empire. Given our framework here in Season 4—democracy, government by and for the people—this seems like a reasonable and useful way to think about it, doesn't it? So, if we look at U.S. history with this understanding in mind, what do we see? Singh and a lot of other scholars talk about three phases of America's imperial career – or three “arcs,” as Nikhil puts it. The first arc, which we pretty much covered in episode three, he calls continental expansion – land theft, annexation, Manifest Destiny.

Nikhil Singh: A territorially-based conception of, creating a nation state but a continental nation state. And a nation state that the founders understood in the language of empire. You know, it was about creating a kind of imperial federation that extended across the continent and involved this sort of amalgamation, which is another kind of word, of migrants from Europe. And of course, the kind of racial alchemy is part of the story of the creation of that empire. Which is to say it's an empire that's forged against, you know, non-white adversaries—Indigenous people, Mexicans and Latinos to the south....

John Biewen: And of course the other crucial piece, the kidnapping and exploitation of millions of enslaved people brought from Africa.

[Music]

In 1890, the U.S. Census declares the “frontier closed.” Meaning, the task of seizing and establishing the continental United States is complete. The railroad now stretches from coast to coast, the Indian Wars are winding down.

Daniel Immerwahr: The last Indian war that the federal government recognizes as such is fought in 1898. And, you know, you can imagine a number of different responses to that....

John Biewen: Historian Daniel Immerwahr teaches U.S. Foreign Relations and Global History at Northwestern University.

Daniel Immerwahr: I'm also the author of a book, recently, called *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*.

John Biewen: Immerwahr says, with the end of that first phase of U.S. Empire-building, there *were* people who said, great. That conquest and expansion business was brutal, glad it's over.

Daniel Immerwahr: But there were some, like Teddy Roosevelt, who felt, yeah, this was actually a defining feature of the United States, not just its wars but its expansion and the freeing up of new lands. That's what makes the United States the special kind of place it is. And if the United States doesn't have new lands to keep growing into, it's gonna face a real crisis. For some, that was a crisis of the

spirit. But this is also happening in the 1890s, a time of great economic instability. And there were a lot of people who worried about the sustainability of capitalism. And one solution to that was, get new colonies, claim new markets.

[Music]

So there's a lot of energy for the United States to become a different kind of place, the kind of place that doesn't just take contiguous lands and then fight wars over access to them, but that would actually conquer large overseas colonies with a lot of people in them and rule them.

John Biewen: As the British, French, and other European powers had done for centuries. Old-school colonialism: this is Phase Two of America's imperial career. The U.S. leaders hungry for more expansion saw a wide-open opportunity in the late 1890s: a Spanish Empire in crisis.

Daniel Immerwahr: And it's not just happening in one colony, it's happening in many. So, it's facing political resistance in Puerto Rico. It's facing a series of wars in Cuba. It's also facing a series of insurgencies on the other side of the world in the Philippines. And Spain's empire looks like it is faltering. In fact, it is faltering. And it's doing so because of determined nationalist resistance.

[Music]

Daniel Immerwahr: And so people like Teddy Roosevelt and other imperialists, or jingos, as they were called, for their passion for war, got very interested in intervening in the Spanish crisis.

John Biewen: U.S. leaders called for war on humanitarian grounds, especially to free the oppressed Cuban people. President William McKinley warned Spain that the U.S. had, quote, "a duty imposed by our obligations to ourselves, to civilization and humanity to intervene with force." When an American ship, the USS Maine, exploded in Havana Harbor, killing 266 sailors, the U.S. blamed Spain. This rallied the American people to war, with the phrase, "Remember the Maine! To Hell with Spain!" -- though to this day, it's not clear whether the blast was caused by a mine or an explosion inside the ship. After a war in the Caribbean and the Pacific that lasted ten weeks, Spain surrendered. And then...

Daniel Immerwahr: To no one's total shock, the war ends with the United States not liberating the colonies but by taking a number of them from Spain and just sort of recolonizing them, this time under, you know, the Stars and Stripes.

John Biewen: Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines.

Daniel Immerwahr: And then in a sort of, you know, imperial spree, just, while it was at it, it also took the non-Spanish lands of Hawaii and American Samoa.

John Biewen: That colonial haul at the end of the 19th century gave the U.S most of the overseas territories it holds today. Hawaii was made the 50th state in 1959. Puerto Rico, Guam, and American Samoa are still U.S. territories. America's involvement in the Philippines, though, may be the most grossly under-discussed chapter in U.S. imperialism, and in the nation's bloody war history. Again, Daniel Immerwahr.

Daniel Immerwahr: So, after the United States decided that it would end its war with Spain not by liberating but by annexing the Philippines, not surprisingly, Filipino nationalists disagreed and fought with the United States. And this began a war that lasted years, and arguably over a decade. It just depends how you count the war. But the United States was governing militarily at least parts of the Philippines, and fighting up and down the archipelago, from 1899 to 1913. It's the second longest war in U.S. history. And it's a war that was deeply one-sided in terms of the death counts.

John Biewen: Forty-two hundred U.S. soldiers died. Estimates of the Filipino death toll, mostly from disease caused by the upheaval of the war, range from 200-thousand to a million or more. Immerwahr's estimate is three quarters of a million. He points out, the most intense period of that war lasted from 1899 to 1903—four years, the same length as the U.S. Civil War.

Daniel Immerwahr: Except here's an important difference: The war in the Philippines kills more people. We think it kills more people than the U.S. Civil War. And yet, if you read U.S. history textbooks, the Civil War is understandably and appropriately an absolutely central event. The Philippine war is mentioned, but sort of as a peripheral topic.

John Biewen: And, as Immerwahr says, those Filipinos who died were considered U.S. nationals at the time. The United States holds the Philippines as a colony until 1946. Which means it's still U.S. territory when World War II breaks out. Here's another fact mostly left out of mainstream American memory: Within hours of its attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, Japan also attacked the Philippines—and other U.S. possessions, Guam and Wake Island.

Daniel Immerwahr: It was sort of an empire wide, you know, sweep-the-leg attack where Japan was very quickly just trying to take over the United States Pacific empire....

Franklin Roosevelt: December seventh, 1941....

John Biewen: Interestingly, though, in declaring war, President Franklin Roosevelt tagged *Japan* with the E-word.

Franklin Roosevelt: The United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan....

John Biewen: Immerwahr says, yet another example of American forgetting is the common belief that the Pearl Harbor attack was the only bloodshed on U.S. territory during the Second World War. That leaves out another massive fight up and down the Philippine islands, this time between Japanese and American-Filipino forces. The fight lasted for years and killed an estimated 1.6 million people.

Daniel Immerwahr: That's the bloodiest event that's ever happened on U.S. soil in history. And that's something that, it's entirely possible to know a lot about U.S. history and not have ever encountered that fact or ever encountered even really the story of what happens on U.S. soil in the Philippines during World War Two.

[Music]

John Biewen: It's not hard to guess why the standard American narrative skips over facts like these, including the fact that the Philippines was part of the U.S. during World War II. That would serve as a reminder of the nation's colonial history. Nikhil Singh, of NYU, says even professional historians in the United States have usually minimized this Second Arc of U.S. imperialism, when the country seized and ruled foreign lands as colonies.

Nikhil Singh: Most historians who have talked about it tend to sort of describe it as kind of short-lived, aberrational. You know, not really definitive, a kind of departure from a kind of ultimately non-imperial history, that we eventually correct course. They see it as this kind of episodic misadventure. But when you think about it, how can you say occupying the Philippines from 1898 to 1946 is episodic? I mean, that's a half a century practically.

John Biewen: During that period, the U.S. acquired not only those former Spanish colonies, and Hawaii, but also what became the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, and the Marianas in the Pacific—all of which the United States still holds, not as colonies but as states or territories.

Nikhil Singh: And you've sort of created something that historians called Greater America. So it was hardly an aberration.

John Biewen: It's this Greater United States that Daniel Immerwahr writes about in his book, *How to Hide an Empire*. When we taped our conversation, remotely, I told him about the big, colorful U.S. map on my office wall.

John Biewen: And I would guess you could tell me what it looks like.

Daniel Immerwahr: I bet I can. If it's a good map, what you've got is, you've got the contiguous blob, the 48 states, and then you've also got insets that have

Alaska and Hawaii in them. But I'm guessing that there's some things you don't have on that map. Does your map have Puerto Rico on it?

John Biewen: No, it does not.

Daniel Immerwahr: Does your map have Guam? Does it have American Samoa? Does it have the Northern Mariana Islands or the U.S. Virgin Islands? I'm guessing it might not have those, either.

John Biewen: None of the above.

John Biewen: Immerwahr uses the term "logo map," coined by another scholar, to refer to that 48-state shape that lives in the heads of most Americans -- at least those of us who live in those states.

Daniel Immerwahr: ... that you in fact do see in advertising slogans just as a way of representing the United States. I think that's how people map the country in their mind, mostly...

John Biewen: Daniel says leaving Puerto Rico off U.S. maps is especially insulting, first because so many American citizens live there. Three-point-two million at last count, which would make Puerto Rico the 31st largest state, by population, if it were a state.

Daniel Immerwahr: Another reason it's egregious is that it's geographically so close to Florida, as are the U.S. Virgin Islands. It wouldn't even take a lot to get it on the map. You could do it without an inset.

John Biewen: Exactly. Part of Cuba and the Bahamas are on my map, just because they're so close to Florida.

Daniel Immerwahr: Gosh, they almost got there. Just a few miles more.

[Music]

John Biewen: It almost seems Americans go out of our way to exclude territories like Puerto Rico from the national imagination. Why? More on that, coming up.

[BREAK]

John Biewen: Alongside the empire-building impulse, these scholars agree, there was always *anti-expansionist* feeling among many Americans, too. But that sentiment was complicated. Yes, for some, the argument was, let's be humble and not throw our weight around. But for others, and for some of those same anti-imperialists, there was something else at work. Daniel Immerwahr says, going back to the 19th century, Americans had lots of debates about which U.S. possessions, and potential possessions, should become a permanent part of the country.

Daniel Immerwahr: There are proposals and serious possibilities for the United States to take a lot more of Mexico than it takes in the war with Mexico in the 1840s, or to annex the Dominican Republic, which the United States twice has very clear opportunities to do. And often the resistance to that prevails on the following grounds: Places like southern Mexico and the Dominican Republic aren't really fit for incorporation into the United States because they're densely populated with brown people. That's the argument.

John Biewen: White supremacy was a factor in the long resistance to statehood for Hawaii and Alaska, given their native populations that were not classified as white. Most people in those territories eventually came to want statehood to gain full rights as Americans, and they offered economic assets -- fishing and mining in Alaska, sugar and fruit plantations in Hawaii. Taking on Hawaii, in particular, was seen as a racially-progressive move -- and in fact a strategic one, with the U.S. facing international criticism for Jim Crow segregation at the time. President Eisenhower held up Hawaii as a "laboratory of human brotherhood." But that acceptance of Hawaiians as a desirable minority was not extended to people in all of the territories.

Daniel Immerwahr: And one reason that, you know, places like Puerto Rico and the Philippines and American Samoa never become states is also because of perceptions of who lives on them and their fitness to be, you know, fully included in the union.

[Music]

John Biewen: Residents of Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens, but their citizenship is not the same as that of Americans who live in the states. Puerto Rico residents can't vote in federal elections and have no voting representation in Congress. All this contributes to the sense that U.S. territories are kind of part of the U.S., but not really. After the island was devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017 and almost three thousand Puerto Ricans died, President Trump famously went to San Juan and tossed rolls of paper towels to people who'd come to see him—a gesture that many saw as demeaning. The federal hurricane response was criticized as half-hearted, but when the mayor of San Juan complained, Trump attacked her as ungrateful, “incompetent, and crazed.” Two years later Trump boasted about the generous aid the U.S. government had provided, even though most of it still hadn't been spent. He tweeted that the islands' leaders, quote, “only take from USA” – apparently forgetting that Puerto Rico is the U.S.A.

Earlier in the episode we heard Nikhil Singh's definition of empire – governing people without their consent. But Daniel Immerwahr says the United States meets a more traditional definition, too.

Daniel Immerwahr: Just in a technical sense, if what we mean by empire is the most modest thing we could mean by empire, which is having overseas territories and outposts, the United States has been an empire for arguably its entire

career, but certainly is an empire today. It's had states and territories from day one, it has states and territories today. And so on that really modest definition, the United States is an empire.

John Biewen: That said, there is a sense in which the U.S. stepped back from Phase Two, full-fledged colonialism, in the middle of the 20th century. In 1946, the U.S. grants independence to its largest colony, the Philippines. And in the late Fifties, the country removes Alaska and Hawaii from its ledger of second-class possessions by promoting them to statehood—although, as Immerwahr says, not everyone agrees that's an anti-imperialist move.

Daniel Immerwahr: That's right. There are some people who regard statehood as colonialism squared.

John Biewen: But by the end of World War Two, anti-imperialist sentiment is strong in the world, and the U.S. is ready to stop looking like an old-school colonial power, says Nikhil Singh.

Nikhil Singh: But at that moment, you get the third chapter. And the third chapter is the globalist chapter.

John Biewen: Nikhil is quick to add he's not using "globalist" as a dirty word, let alone as an antisemitic dog whistle, as some people use it. He's all for thinking in global and cosmopolitan terms.

Nikhil Singh: But there is a kind of globalism that was really about the construction of a system of control and force projection that was seen by U.S. planners as a kind of a necessary structure for creating kind of insurance for the global economic system they wanted to design.

John Biewen: In his newest work, Singh writes about the evolution of U.S foreign policy after World War Two. In a 1947 address to Congress that's often considered the declaration of the Cold War, President Harry Truman announced what became known as the Truman Doctrine, also called the policy of containment toward the Soviet Union. In the first draft of the speech, Singh says, Truman made it clear that a driving motive behind the policy was the protection of global capitalism, which Truman essentially equated with democracy. His draft speech said, quote, "If ... we permit free enterprise to disappear in other countries of the world, the very existence of our democracy will be gravely threatened." Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, said language like that made Truman's policy, "sound like an investment prospectus," and those lines were removed. In its final version, Truman's speech avoided direct talk of capitalism while using the words "free" and "freedom" a couple dozen times. But in a classified memo, a key architect of the Truman Doctrine was more straightforward. George Kennan, the diplomat best known for outlining the "containment" strategy, wrote in 1948, talking

about the U.S.: “We have about fifty percent of the world’s wealth but only 6.3-percent of its population.” He went on:

George Kennan: In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and daydreaming.... We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.

John Biewen: ... and world benefaction – wow, that’s pretty blunt.

Nikhil Singh: Yeah, it is blunt.

John Biewen: Singh says, though Kennan was unsentimental, he was a moderate compared to some other men in top political and military positions at the time. Kennan acknowledges the U.S. has limited power and needs to consider the interests of other nations and their people.

Nikhil Singh: And he's in some sense also not as rabid as some of those who actually want in that moment to go to war to kind of roll back communism in the Soviet Union. Containment in some ways is sort of framed as a kind of a middle-ground doctrine.

[Music]

John Biewen: But in his frank statement about the need to protect America's economic position, Kennan was expressing the consensus view in the U.S. government, and of course among the nation's business leaders. To be fair, Nikhil says, the architects of U.S. policy argued that by helping to protect and revive capitalist growth in places like Europe and Japan, the U.S. would be helping others, too.

Nikhil Singh: The United States is able to describe itself as kind of acting in an enlightened self-interest. And the enlightened self-interest being that by expanding the circuits of capital accumulation and industrial production, you can actually produce greater wealth for everyone.

John Biewen: This view becomes a pillar of U.S. foreign policy, rarely questioned across the mainstream political spectrum. Capitalist economics equals freedom, and an essential function of U.S. foreign policy is the protection of that particular kind of freedom, by any means necessary—at least in the parts of the world the U.S. considers important. Singh says, from the Truman Administration on, there have often been people in the U.S. government who wanted to help people across the world to live better lives, through foreign aid and other development projects, in the spirit of the New Deal. But that impulse, he says, is consistently trumped by an American insistence that other nations stay within certain boundaries.

Nikhil Singh: You know, and if a country is too interested in industrializing or too interested in controlling its own natural resources, or has nationalization kind of schemes, you know, then maybe it's kind of, you know, at risk. And then if it's at risk, maybe we need to sort of figure out a way to help nudge, or, if necessary, overthrow or, you know, transform the way in which they think about governing themselves, right? [Music] And so you have this series of coups, of covert actions, of proxy wars and support for proxy forces, to kind of engender the kind of governance that the United States wants to see....

John Biewen: That the United States wants to see, whether or not it's what the leaders of other countries, or their people, want to see. Take the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Americans think of it as a proxy fight between the "free" West and the Soviet-backed communist bloc. But it started as a war of independence, Vietnamese nationalists trying to break free from French colonial rule. The U.S. backed France after World War Two, until France lost the war and got ready to grant Vietnam independence in 1954. At an international conference that year in Geneva, major powers discuss the next steps for an independent Vietnam. Vietnamese factions as well as France, the UK, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States negotiate an agreement to temporarily partition the country, north and south -- and to plan national elections to re-unite the country.

Nikhil Singh: And of course, we're already in the Cold War by this point. But the agreement at partition is that there will be free elections, and it is the United States that really prevents any further movement politically at that point, in the

interests of maintaining really the rich southern half of the country within the Western sphere.

John Biewen: Only the U.S. refuses to sign on to elections, knowing the Vietnamese people would likely elect the Marxist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh. Instead, the U.S. helps to install a pro-Western government in South Vietnam, then spends two decades propping up and defending that un-elected government.

Nikhil Singh: And so then by the 1960s, you have a story that gets told to the American public that South Vietnam, again, a country that was really just created, is being defended against a communist insurgency coming from the outside. And so the United States is not involved in any kind of colonial project, but is actually involved in the project of protecting the rights of self-determination for this kind of fledgling nation state. It's a brilliant kind of sleight of hand. But you would never, you could have American politicians saying the exact same thing in 1960 as Rumsfeld said in, you know, 2003. What do you mean we're an empire? What do you mean this is an imperial war? But from the Vietnamese standpoint and from the standpoint of the larger historical context, it was nothing other than that.

[Music]

John Biewen: During the decade of America's most intense involvement in the war, from 1965 to 1974, up to two or three million Vietnamese, and 58,000 Americans, died.

By 1969, a majority in the U.S. thought the war was a mistake, but it went on for five more bloody years.

Since Vietnam, most of America's wars have been smaller, with less-intense fighting and dying, at least by Americans. The nation's post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have killed an estimated five hundred thousand people in those countries, half of them civilians, according to a Brown University study. The U.S. Defense Department says 4,400 Americans have died in what it calls Operation Iraqi Freedom. In Operation Enduring Freedom—that's Afghanistan, the nation's longest war—more than 2,300 Americans have lost their lives.

Daniel Immerwahr says, because of new technologies, and old-school empire falling out of favor, the United States in its third, globalist phase has invented a new kind of empire.

Daniel Immerwahr: Which I call a pointillist empire, because it is defined mainly by just having a lot of dots and islands and little enclaves and pockets of land.

John Biewen: Another scholar has called it the Empire of Bases—military bases sprinkled across the globe.

Daniel Immerwahr: I think a good number to use would be to say that the United States has control of eight hundred base sites outside of its borders.

John Biewen: That's eight hundred, some of them secret, in eighty or ninety different countries. How does that number compare with other nations?

Daniel Immerwahr: The world combined total, excluding the United States, is about thirty. So the world has about thirty or so overseas base sites and the United States has about eight hundred.

John Biewen: Other experts count roughly double that number of foreign bases held by other countries, but even then, the U.S. alone holds more than 90-percent of the world total. Most of the others belong to countries like Russia, the U.K., France, and Turkey.

One thing that hasn't entirely changed since the days of old-school colonialism: the importance of natural resources as a driving motivation for empire. Immerwahr gives this example from the past.

Immerwahr: You don't think about it, but rubber was in a lot of stuff in the early 20th century and it was basically impossible to run an industrial economy, certainly impossible to run an up-to-date military, without access to rubber. This was a defining characteristic of World War One, this defined World War Two as well. In fact, part of Japan's military strategy was just trying to get more rubber and get secure access to rubber.

John Biewen: Scientists eventually developed a viable synthetic rubber. Nations no longer need so much of the real stuff, so there's no need to colonize, invade, or even do business with other countries to get it. But, well, synthetic rubber is made from petroleum. A resource that of course has long been seen as indispensable for other reasons.

Daniel Immerwahr: And now, not surprisingly, oil is the one thing that kind of tempts Washington into 19th century imperialism. It's the one thing that will get presidents to say, let's invade them and take their lands. Because oil is still actually a really important raw material in a way that other raw materials have become less important.

Donald Trump [Wisconsin rally, 1/20]: So people said to me, why are you staying in Syria? 'Cause I kept the oil. Which frankly we should have done in Iraq a long time ago. [crowd cheers]

John Biewen: Donald Trump is well-known for saying the quiet part out loud. At this rally in January 2020, he's talking about his sudden, jarring decisions, first to pull troops out of Syria who'd been protecting America's Kurdish allies, but then, in a reversal, to keep some forces in the country to protect oil wells and stop the oil from falling into the hands of ISIS.

Donald Trump: It was with ISIS, but right now it's with the United States military.
[cheer]

John Biewen: In fact, these days the U.S. does not seize oil directly, as the spoils of war – though Trump has said maybe it should have done so in Iraq. But keeping oil-rich countries in the hands of friendly governments allows U.S. oil companies to do business there and keep the cheap energy flowing to the U.S. economy. Prominent U.S. officials not known as critics of the country's foreign policy have said yes, oil was a central reason for the Iraq war—including Chuck Hagel, the former Republican U.S. Senator and defense secretary in the Obama Administration, who said, “we're not there for figs.” And General John Abizaid, a former U.S. Commander in Iraq, who said in 2007: “Of course it's about oil; [we can't really deny that.](#)”

Also hard to deny is that American leaders, more than those of any other country on the planet, feel justified in exerting power in and on other countries, without asking permission. They claim the right to alter—and to take—the lives of people in those lands. Nikhil Singh says the United States is the world's last true empire. It just doesn't see itself as such.

Nikhil Singh: We have not yet figured out what it would mean to think differently about how we interact with the world, how we become a good neighbor with the world, how we live in the world as another people among peoples. Right? Not a people invested in maintaining relationships of disparity, as Kennan put it. But

people interested in actually thinking about how we coexist on a finite and fragile planet.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Wow. Yeah Nikhil is so right, man. You know we're looking at this as a part of a conversation on democracy and that makes me think about the phrase "leader of the free world." There's a lot of things that I could say about that phrase. But what I think what this episode has illustrated is that calling ourselves that has allowed the U.S. to give itself the right to intervene in other countries *without the consent of those countries or their people*. Which is clearly anti-democratic.

John Biewen: Yes. And the scale of the interventions is mind-boggling. A couple of facts I came across recently: depending on what you count as a war, the U.S. has been at war somewhere for more than ninety percent of its history -- 227 out of 244 years. And one expert found the U.S. military has put boots on the ground in every country in the world except three.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Okay.

John Biewen: Are you ready? Andorra, Bhutan, and Liechtenstein.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Wow. Those are... mm.

John Biewen: So, If we were gonna start to list the U.S. military interventions, even just since World War Two, you know, we'd, actually, we don't have time for that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I feel like this is our podcast. We should probably just mention one or two just to give people a sense of it.

John Biewen: Yeah, well, okay. Right, so, I mean, right at the end of world war two the occupation of Japan starting in 1945.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And in 1946 the School of America's opened in Panama.

John Biewen: And then 1950, of course, you have the Korean War, big deal that lasts until '53. '53, by the way, that was the year that the U.S. orchestrated a coup in Iran restoring the shah over the democratically elected Prime Minister.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: The U.S. kind of supported a coup in Guatemala in 1954 and then there was more military intervention in 1960, in Guatemala. So that's – those – yeah that's a few things right there.

John Biewen: That's just a taste, right? But then you know, '61 you have the Bay of Pigs, it's hard not to mention that.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and if you're gonna talk about '61 I think we should also talk about the CIA supporting the assassination of the prime minister of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba.

John Biewen: And then in '73 you had the coup in Chile against Allende.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah and while we're in the 70s, in '75 you had the U.S. support for Indonesia's invasion of East Timor.

John Biewen: And then you get into the 80s with the actions in Central America, El Salvador and supporting the contras against the government in Nicaragua.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, Grenada in 1983.

John Biewen: Oh, that little Grenada war, yeah. That kind of gets us through the 80s and that gives a flavor of the period.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I mean, there was Somalia in 1992, too.

John Biewen: Right. Well, and then two wars in Iraq. The Gulf War in 1990 and of course the Iraq War in 2003.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Should probably mention Afghanistan in 2001.

John Biewen: Yes, which is still going on. And also right up to today, pretty much, support for the Saudi bombing in Yemen that started in 2015.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That list, which is longer than we bargained for, is still not an exhaustive list. But folks should definitely look those up if they're not familiar. And I think that you think about this sort of massive scale of military intervention, it brings us back to those two justifications that you mentioned at the top of the episode, which were, number one: this idea that all of this is in our national interest. And, secondly, that we're doing more good than harm in the world.

John Biewen: Yeah, so let's look at these one at a time. First, what does it mean to say that these actions have been in "our interest?" Who's that "we?"

Chenjerai Kumanyika: You know John, we could go on and on about how words like "we" and the "our" in our national interest are used to discourage us from seeing severely conflicting interests in national policy. I mean saying "our national interests" signals to ordinary folks that empire business benefits everyone inside the thing called the nation.

John Biewen: But what we see is that we've had decades of endless war overseas, and especially in the last few decades here at home: the rich get much richer, and half

the country can barely survive week to week. So how is that national interest thing really working out for everybody?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I don't think it is working out for everybody. But you know when people talk about our national interest, another thing that they're talking about is the idea of security. But I think this is also something that we have to think critically about, right? I mean even if you look at the time from the September 11 attacks, there's just simply no way to argue that the world is less dangerous in the nineteen years since the September 11 attacks, right? As Medea Benjamin and others point out, today, after all our wars, there are more terrorist groups and more terrorist attacks than there were before that. So we sacrifice lives and taxpayer dollars with the promise of safety, but we simply aren't safer. Last July, Trump retweeted this video of the CEO of weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin kind of bragging about their missile defense system, but in the same video, he also positioned it as an employment program, saying it supports 25,000 workers. And I think that raises another thing that should be talked about in the context of national interest and military power, which is: jobs.

John Biewen: It's essentially the argument George Kennan made in 1948 and it's been a baseline understanding of U.S. foreign policy ever since. We want to keep as much of the world as possible open for business, for free enterprise, and that creates wealth and jobs here at home. Right? But remember it was Dwight Eisenhower, Republican president and former World War Two general, who coined the term military industrial complex... in his last address as president in 1961. He was warning that the marriage of

the military and the profit-making industries that supply it had become a vested interest group that would influence public policy in favor of military spending and war-making. And look. Even after the Cold War ended, remember, there was talk of a peace dividend we could spend less on the military now that we're not in this huge conflict with the Soviet Union. And, lo and behold, we went right on having a military budget bigger than the next ten largest military powers combined.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And you know, to support that, weapons manufacturers very consciously have spread out their industry across the country. This makes it easier for them to argue that all military spending means jobs for people.

John Biewen: Yeah and it gets more congressmen out there supporting military spending, right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. But then, so, is that actually true? One thing to look at is, reporters at Truthdig called attention to this Brown University Costs of War project, that kind of really analyzed how well military spending creates jobs. And what they found was one billion in military spending creates about 11,000 jobs. But that same amount, if you spend it in education, it creates more than twice that – 26,000 jobs. If you spend it in clean energy, it gives you almost 17,000 jobs, and it gives you almost 17,000 if you spend it in healthcare. So military spending actually proved to be the worst job creator of any federal government spending option during the years that was analyzed in that report. And if you look at a company like Lockheed Martin, who is held up as a job

creator, the company actually got rid of 16,000 jobs between 2012 and 2018, according to their filings with the FCC, in their own reports. And in this same timeframe, what happens to their stocks? They go up, right? Thinking about that, I think you really start to see whose interests are being served when both democratic and republican politicians talk about “our interests.”

John Biewen: The other justification that we talked about for U.S. empire is that we’re doing good in the world, or at least, you know, on the balance sheet, the U.S. is doing more good than harm. But I don’t know, I mean, just, first thing I think about is that if we’re talking about advancing democracy in the world, you know that so often as the U.S. has protected its business interests, in other places that has often meant supporting kleptocratic dictatorships in places like Africa and Latin America and other places.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. So, in other words, that whole thing about democracy being bad for business that we looked at in our earlier episodes? That doesn’t only apply here, keeping the world open for business means ensuring the U.S. has disproportionate control of politics in other places, sometimes through oppressive dictators. And actually this might even apply more so abroad, because as we’ve seen in this episode, the U.S. has been able to enact particularly egregious suppression beyond the north American continent, sort of outside of the sight of good freedom-loving Netflix-watching Americans. And a lot of that oppression has included American citizens.

John Biewen: Now, Chenj, I can imagine there are people listening – if they’re still listening, if we haven’t already lost them – who are saying, are you guys gonna say anything good about what the U.S. has done in the world? But the important point that we’re trying to make here is about the undemocratic nature of how the U.S. behaves. But okay. As Daniel Immerwahr the historian as he said to me, I’m quoting him in an email: “an absolute monarch can occasionally take a useful action even if the institution of absolute monarchy is loathsome,” right? So he gave me a few examples of when he thought U.S. actions had positive results in retrospect. Um, early in the 19th century the U.S. helped latin American independence movements, a good thing on the whole. Woodrow Wilson helping to break up the Ottomon and Austro-Hungarian empires after World War One. Yes, we were on the right side of history in World War Two, and Daniel thinks that helping to redevelop Germany and Japan after that war was a good and important thing. You know, pokiung a the Soviety Union iin all kinds of ways throughout the cold war. It was of course a totalitarian imperial power. There was some U.S. sypport for decolonization in the 20th century, including nudging Britain to get out of india. Daniel says none of these actions were purely altruistic by the way, they were always coupled with U.S. interests, but the results were more good than bad in these cases, he would argue.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: This reminds me that all politics comes with difficult ethical decisions, especially considering that, you know, we are where we are and things are what they are at this point. But as we figure out what our vision of governance is, I think it’s really important to look at what comes with U.S. offers of help.

The U.S. continues to provide training and resources to various countries, some of them authoritarian regimes, to help keep their people under control. One example of this that not enough people know about is something called the Office of Public Safety which was kind of like this U.S.-led. International police training program.

John Biewen: The Office of Public Safety. That sounds really benign.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah I think it was meant to sound that way, but some recent research on this agency by people like Micol Seigel and Stuart Schrader has revealed that over the course of 12 years the Office of Public Safety distributed 200 million in arms and equipment to police in 47 countries, and sent advisors to train over one million rank and file policemen around the world. Some of what they taught countries was how to use everyday police as forms of counterinsurgency. So “public safety” didn’t really mean protecting people. In many cases it meant protecting authoritarian governments from their people who were fighting for democracy. And if you look at that lawsuits that criticisms of this office, they suggested what was being supported was dictatorships and torture. Not Democracy.

John Biewen: Wow. These days, there are a lot of people expressing alarm that Donald Trump is messing up America’s good record and reputation as the world’s superpower, right? With his embarrassing and chaotic actions on the world stage, insulting allies, cozying up to dictators, catastrophically pulling out of the climate change

agreement, that he's undercut America's status as the reliable world leader. And, you know, it's not that there's nothing to that, right? But that implies that before Trump, the U.S. consistently carried its superpower status responsibly and competently and humanely.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And yeah, I just hope that everything we've talked about in this episode, including that list of military interventions, really demonstrates that these problems didn't really start with trump.

John Biewen: So just to keep score on those two justifications that we talked about: it seems like U.S. empire is really not necessarily benefitting most Americans. And actually we've done a whole lot of harm in the world, alongside whatever good might have been done.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And so I think once you've really grasped this clear picture of America's role in the world, once you've brought the victims and survivors into full focus and included them as part of the American story, it's not enough just to talk about it but then kind of dismiss it as too big or too complicated. You actually have to let this come into our minds and hearts and push us. How can we honestly face this truth of suffering and injustice and not challenge the American institutions that act like an empire?

[Music: theme song]

John Biewen: Next time: Schools. The role of education in building citizens in a democracy, with a close-up look at an experiment in hands-on civic education.

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