

TRANSCRIPT
HOW WE GOT HERE
EP 3 – Empire

[TAPE] Intro music from 1946 movie *Anna and the King of Siam*.

SHEILA CORONEL In the 1946 movie, *Anna and the King of Siam*, Isabel Cooper plays one of the many wives of King Mongkut. In the film, Isabel doesn't speak.

[TAPE] KING MONGKUT: These, my wives. This, Chow Chon Son Klin, who is favorite...

Like the other wives, she is purely decorative. The wives are there so Anna, the White governess, can teach them.

[TAPE] KING MONGKUT: I have fine idea. You teach all my wives who have sense to learn...

Make them civilized.

[TAPE] KING MONGKUT: Siam be very modern country. Very good. Everybody speaking English.

ANNA: I would be happy to, your Majesty.

Isabel Cooper was a Filipina-American actress. Over the course of her Hollywood film career, Isabel Cooper would play... a geisha, a maid...

[TAPE] LILLIE MAE WONG: Please Mr. Policeman, please. Lillie Mae very frightened to stay here all alone.

POLICE OFFICER: Don't worry sister there'll be an officer stationed right outside your door.

a hula dancer...

[TAPE] MARTHA GIBSON: By jingo it's worth the price, back in Nagasaki where the fellers chew tobaccy and the women wicky wacky woo.

There were few roles available for Asian women then, and even now. In some of those movies, Isabel Cooper had speaking lines. But not many. Like children, Asian women were meant to be seen, not heard.

Isabel Cooper would become part of US history.

But not for a role cast in Hollywood. But in Manila.

In 1930, when she was just 20 years-old, she became the mistress of Douglas MacArthur. He was 50. MacArthur was the youngest major general

of the U.S. Army. He would later command the US forces in the Asia-Pacific during the Second World War.

[TAPE] NARRATOR: The streets of Manila have never been so jammed as the Japanese surrendered as millions of Filipinos turn out to welcome one of their national heroes, General Douglas MacArthur...

MacArthur would lead the allied occupation of Japan and the United Nations Command during the Korean War. His biographer called him The American Caesar.

[TAPE] This is an American general that can stir men with words and brave deeds as well. He is one of the most distinguished men in American history and one of the most controversial. His name is Douglas MacArthur...

Everyone knows who Douglas MacArthur is. But Isabel Cooper? She is invisible. Mute. An Oriental doll. None of the MacArthur biographies gives her a speaking part.

[TAPE] DAVID BOWIE: My little China girl, you shouldn't mess with me.

As David Bowie sings in the 1980s hit, China Girl, Asian women are for the rulers of the world

[TAPE] DAVID BOWIE: I'll ruin everything you are, you know
I'll give you television, I'll give you eyes of blue
I'll give you a man who wants to rule the world

I'm Sheila Coronel. I'm a professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and the director of the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism

This is "How We Got Here," a podcast that takes a step back in time to look at the pressing issues facing journalists today--race, class, immigration, gender.

This episode is about the American Empire. Most Americans don't even know they have one.

As journalists, we like to say we're writing the first draft of history. But if we don't know our history, we run the risk of misinterpreting what we see and what we hear.

Of not being able to connect the dots. Of missing the voices and stories of those who've been silenced, erased from history.

In the past year, there's been a surge of attacks against Asian-Americans.

[TAPE] [ZOHREEN SHAH](#): Tonight in Oakland California growing calls to police help stop attacks against Asian Americans.

[HETTY CHANG](#): This 50-year-old Rowland Heights woman is one of the latest victims in a rash of violent attacks on Asian Americans.

[NANCY CHEN](#): Asian Americans Advancing Justice has cited at least 3,000 anti-Asian incidents since last February.

It's a community that's largely been unseen and unheard. Invisible like Isabel Cooper. Kept, like her, in the secret chambers of a hidden empire.

I was born and raised in Manila, in the Philippines, where America looms large.

When I was in grade school, we were taught to speak English like Americans. We learned about Paul Revere and Benjamin Franklin. We memorized the capitals of the 50 states, sang Broadway tunes, watched Hollywood movies.

I first visited the United States as a teenager. I was surprised. None of the Americans I met knew that for 50 years, my country was a U.S. colony.

[TAPE] [NARRATOR](#): For the past 40 years, 17 million Filipinos shared Uncle Sam with 130 million Americans.

At the turn of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died of war and disease during the U.S. army's brutal pacification campaign. The Philippines was America's first Vietnam. But most Americans don't know that.

And that's just the start. After colonizing the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam, the U.S. occupied Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua; supported coups and assassinations in Chile, Congo, Ghana, Brazil; sent 3 million soldiers to fight a war in Indochina; launched airstrikes in Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan.

Yet, Americans have always thought of themselves as different from European colonialists. After all, they revolted against the British Empire. They were defenders of the Free World. Not imperialists.

The U.S. press has seldom questioned the notion that America was destined to rule the world. Or that the American Way is superior to all others.

This is episode 3. Empire.

The echoes of empire can be heard in today's news. Immigration, drone strikes, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan – these are stories that can only be understood from a historical lens.

Joining me now are two scholars who have delved into the history of empire.

Daniel Immerwahr is a history professor at North Western University and author of *How to Hide an Empire*.

And Vernadette Vicuna Gonzalez. She is a professor at the University of Hawaii and author of a biography of Isabel Cooper. So let's start with you, Daniel. Why do Americans know so little about the American Empire or that they even have an empire?

**DANIEL
IMMERWAHR**

Yeah, and I think we actually need to even qualify or interrogate that statement, because some Americans know a lot about it. For example, the US citizens who live in Puerto Rico know an awful lot about US empire. But there's a way that we have and I certainly grew up with this, of thinking of, quote unquote, America as just really referring to a part of it as, as the US mainland that maybe with Hawaii and Alaska added. [8:16] And there's this really interesting long tradition on the US mainland of imperial denial. And not in the sense of denying that the United States might intervene in a kind of imperialistic way abroad, but more just not really understanding the map, the shape of the country. There's a lot of people who grew up in the US mainland, who are just fundamentally confused about Puerto Rico, about Guam, about American Samoa, about the fact that the Philippines used to be an enormous colony of the United States. And I think that has to do with a little bit the identity of the United States. This is a country that thinks of itself as a slayer of empires, it's probably not entirely a surprise that Star Wars, ...

[TAPE] [HARRISON FORD: A galactic odyssey against oppression...](#)

...which is about taking down a galactic empire, is one of the most popular film franchises in the country.

[TAPE] [HARRISON FORD: The Empire strikes back!](#)

And I think that character makes it hard for a lot of people in the United States to really grapple with the effects of empire. [9:19]

SC Vernadette, you're Asian American, and you have a different view of empire. What do you think accounts for this, I don't know, ignorance, denial; and how has it shaped the way people like us, you know, Asians are represented and how we fit in US society?

**VERNADETTE
VICUNA
GONZALEZ**

It's a great question. I think a lot of it has to do with the myths that people hold dear about the things they value, right. So I think that there's a lot of investment in a particular version of American history and American identity and American nation, right, the idea of the American nation as a particular kind of nation.

And Daniel was exactly pointing to that kind of idea, right? That this idea of America as a democracy, as as a power to international global power that is policing for the good of the globe, right, rather than for its own self interest

and driven by capitalists and political kinds of motivations is at odds with that myth.

I think it's not always always apparent, too. Depending on who you're talking to, I think it's not an automatic thing that Asian Americans will think of the United States as an empire. I think it matters deeply where you might be, the kind of education you're exposed to. I think in Hawaii, one of the things that I've seen because I've sort of like circulated in some interesting parts of the United States. I was born in the Philippines, then I, my family immigrated to upstate New York, then I came out to California, and then you know, now I've lived more than a quarter of my life in Hawaii. And so in all of these different places, I think the Asian Americans, right, the people you would count as Asian Americans have thought about empire really differently, depending on their class, location in the United States, depending on the way they migrated, the means through which they migrated to the United States. So I would say it's not an automatic kind of assumption that Asian Americans would critically think of the United States as an empire.

SC When we tell the story of empire, where do we start? Do we start with the founding of the Republic? Do we start with the Spanish American War? The Indian Wars, perhaps?

DI There's a lot of ways you can answer the question. One way that I would answer it is that it's its empire from the start. The name of the country is the United States of America and the idea behind that name is to indicate that this is a different kind of polity. It's a union, not an empire. So the members voluntarily entered into it. And it's a union of states, not of colonies or Commonwealth or anything like that. But by the time the United States had ratified the Treaty of Independence with Britain, that name was no longer accurate because it wasn't just a union of states. It was a union of state or conglomeration of states and territories and those territories were not self-governing. That's what it was on day one. That's what it is today. And that's what it's been the entire time every day in between. So I think we can say that the story of empire starts with the founding of the United States. And that just sort of inaccuracy of the name drives home that gap that I've already talked about between the ideals and the and the reality of the country.

SC So the United States was an empire from birth? Is that what you're saying, Daniel?

DI I feel very comfortable saying that. Yeah.

VVG Yeah, I mean, I guess I'm less interested in periodizing empire than sort of understanding it more deeply. Not as a moment where like 'Oh, this is the moment it became an empire.'

My training is in cultural studies. So you know, I follow the definition of Edward Said, when he talks about empire as "longing for a yearning for land that is not yours".

[TAPE] NARRATOR: In tonight's arena, Edward Said takes a journey into the realms of empire ideas and imagination to explain how he wrote his book.

EDWARD SAID: The creation of the great western empires was basically about the control of territory - actual contests over land and the land's people ...hand in hand with this expansion came the enslavement and dehumanization of the native."

So from the very beginning if then we are starting to go by that definition, right. This is not your land, and yet you came here and long for it, and you're in for it and occupied it. And so, even before there was a formal United States, right, that sort of desire, the imperial desire was already there driving it. And it's, it's something that I think is formative to American politics, right? It drives American politics, it drives nation formation West, it drives nation formation, to imagine itself across the Pacific, into the Caribbean into Latin America.

[TAPE] SAID: By the turn of the century the railroads had been built, the roads laid and the idea of empire had become a physical reality. It is an astonishing fact that in 1918 the west held a grand total of roughly 85 percent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dominions and commonwealths.

All these kinds of political, imperial, capitalistic desires have been driving the United States from the very beginning, even before it was formerly the United States.

SC Martin Luther King said in a speech in 1963, that America is a nation born in genocide. He was referring to Native Americans, the first peoples on this, in this country. Is that the origin story that we should be telling?

VVG Yes, to be quite brief. Right. I think that there again this goes back to the myths that we hold dear, that people who identify as Americans hold dear about the United States, right. The Thanksgiving myth is so formative, the Fourth of July is so formative.

And those are sort of ritualistic celebrations of American identity and American history that sort of congeal and almost characterize that history into these sort of digestible bites.

But it's a lot uglier than that, right? When we look at just who was displaced, who was murdered on a mass scale, with with the arrival of

European settlers? Absolutely, it's founded in genocide. And I don't think that that's something that the United States as a nation is still grappling with. And you're still seeing its legacy today.

DI One thing is really important to recognize is that the arrival of Europeans corresponded with what we call the Great Dying, just an enormous demographic catastrophe for the indigenous occupants of North America. But I think it's also important to recognize that that, I mean, there can be a caricatured version of that, where that's, that's just all mass murder. And a lot of that is by disease and a lot of it precedes the physical presence of Europeans, the germs move faster than the settlers do. But that really sets the tone for what it's like for English settlers and the kind of society that develops out of that. And that tone is one of displacing and dislodging the native population. And there certainly is an enormous amount of murder as part of that and bloody wars.

I think actually, there's, you can see a shift in US policy from the founding generation. Guys like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who – because Indian polities are actually still quite strong in the 18th century – have to imagine some kind of political system that makes room for them. George Washington would talk about making certain Indian polities welcome and American citizens. It's not because he was sort of eager for their companionship, but just because he understood their strength. It's in the 19th century where the just the demographic growth of us white settlers is so prodigious that things start just looking like absolute, you know, mass murder, displacement, warfare. And I think there the story of genocide starts to make a little more sense as a narrative.

SC So empire was a necessity for the survival of the Republic?

DI Yeah, I mean, I guess there's two kinds of empire, right? There's two flavors that we might distinguish. One is the sort of traditional stereotypical empire where, you know, that we think of usually the British Raj in India, of mustachioed men with pith helmets ruling a distant population. And that's really part of... it's the empire that the United States as part of the you know, back when its British colonies, and it has a lot to do with the Imperial vision that the founding generation has, when they look West, and they see a land full of people who might, in some form, be subject peoples. Then there's another flavor of empire, which Vernadette has drawn our attention to, which has to do with what we call settler colonialism, which is just about displacing the former inhabitants of the land and spamming the environment, you know, with settlers from the dominating population. And that's what the United States learns. So it's not that it's not imperial in either of those moments. But I think the shift between the founding moment in the 19th century is a really marked shift from one type of empire, at least imagined by leading figures to another type.

SC Vernadette, you tackle this in your book “Empire’s Mistress”, where you talk about the history of the MacArthur family and also the Cooper family, and how that maps on, you know, corresponds very clearly with the history of Imperial and Western expansion. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

VVG So, in my book, I wanted to explore a sort of empire on a more intimate register to kind of understand how people navigate it on everyday kinds of ways. And so, Isabelle Cooper was fascinating to me. I mean, she's fascinating to a lot of Filipinos and Americans, because she's infamous for being Douglas MacArthur's mistress, but I wanted to kind of explore a little bit further than that. And so, as I started looking into her life, I realized that one, a whole lot of lies were told about her and by her. This might preempt a question later on about the importance of knowing history when you're doing your journalism.

But the other thing that I learned was that, I got to learn a little bit more about the everyday lives and decisions that people during that time were making. And often we hear only about leading figures of empires, such as, you know, the MacArthur family, Douglas MacArthur, his father, was himself an important general during the Philippine American war.

[TAPE] [NARRATOR](#): Born January 26, 1880 on this army post in Little Rock, Arkansas his earliest memory is the sound of bugles. His father, Captain Arthur MacArthur, is a dedicated career officer in the cavalry and young Douglas idolizes him. Even as a child, he decides to follow in his father’s footsteps.

We know about these folks.

So, I wanted to know, how what were the sort of folks on the ground, the everyday folks and it turns out that Isabel Cooper's father was sort of a foot soldier in that war, right. He was from Wisconsin, from Bozeman, Wisconsin. And so, you know, because I wanted to know, well, how did this person come to be? So I, you know, tracked down who her parents were, and how, you know, what were the kinds of negotiations and transactions in the colonial space, right, that helped produce that gave rise to Isabel Cooper that made her who she was? And so I got really drawn into the kind of colonial life that started to – it didn't start, it wasn't something that just started when the Americans got there, because it was already quite a cosmopolitan place with Spanish colonialism for 400 years. But with the arrival of Americans, there was sort of a move towards modernization.

[TAPE] [NARRATOR](#): Manila is really three cities in one: old Tondo, home of the Philippine masses; modern Manila, born of American development; and Intramuros, the walled city of the Spaniards.

There was some really interesting mixes of people gathering in Manila from you know, rural soldiers from the Midwest to elite Spanish mixed race folks to Chinese merchants. So it was a really interesting kind of space and that was what I became interested in: How do we understand empire from their perspectives?

SC From the stories of these families where this individual agency figure in the story of empire?

VVG The way Isabel Cooper has been written about in very sort of minor ways is as sort of the side piece right and MacArthur's juicy morsel in Washington DC. He brings her over, she's quite young. So the age difference, of course, lends a sense of titillation to the whole the whole endeavor, the whole relationship.

But I wanted to see, you know, why don't see this woman like she, she traveled multiple to multiple places. She, she was quite well known already at the time. So and what did she learn from the lessons of her own parents? Right? Her mother was also quite young, who married a much older soldier. So there's some repeating patterns here.

And when I dug a bit deeper, it became clear that she was, you know, she was borrowing from what existed in terms of the palette of, of different kinds of possibilities, right, in terms of American repertoires in terms of relationships, she could foster within Manila as a space, right? Somehow she came to MacArthur's attention as somebody who was an actor, she was very, you know, she was quite famous at the time that this already happened, even though she was still quite young.

A lot of people like to emphasize the age difference by saying she was only 16. But she was more, she was closer to 20, 21 when they got together.

A lot of the ways in which that story is told she's either the jezebel, or sort of the innocent victim of MacArthur's desire and I wanted to find something, you know, it seemed to me that the truth was somewhere more in the middle, right. She was somebody who really knew what was up, you cannot, you cannot navigate Manila's inchoate film and vaudeville scene without knowing what was up. She knew what was up, she had been around. When this general, this powerful man comes and woos her, she has some power over him.

And we find this out because we have his letters as evidence of his obsession with her. And so you know, you can kind of get a sense of, you don't see her writing about him or writing back to him. We don't have those documented. But we have his letters to her. And they say, you know, reading between the lines and reading the lines themselves, they say quite a bit, right about who held the power and what kinds of power in the relationships that they had.

SC Empire is not just invading armies, right. It's really much more subtle than that. And how do we, how do we tell that story? I mean, what is the story to tell there, Daniel?

DI Yeah, I think that's the big question. And I think we're still working it out. I mean, and I just want to emphasize how important that perspective that Vernadette has introduced is because: if you read Philippine History, especially around really consequential and I mean, just because so many people die in the moments like like World War II, it's it's so hard not to be reading just about Douglas MacArthur personally. I mean, it is amazing, at least in the US mainland, how much and understanding the Philippines has just collapsed into this "great man" history, which becomes even weirder when they quote unquote, "great man" that you're discussing is a white person who's not from the Philippines. Sheila, the question you asked about, is kind of about power. And I think I think it's one we're still answering. So just to caricature two positions: there's one version of the empire story which really emphasizes the power and destructive power of empire and the ability of imperialists and imperial societies to really wreaking havoc on colonial spaces and that's a story about stark power imbalances. And maybe that's the kind of story that would focus a lot of, the put a lot of the agency in MacArthur's hands on the argument that, that who that's who has the power in a colonial society, but I think a lot of scholars have had been sort of dissatisfied with those stories because they kind of narcissistically put all the focus for empire on the imperialists. And so we're trying to find ways to tell stories that are really attentive to the real power imbalances within empire but that don't have to, that aren't just there for stories all about Douglas MacArthur's mysterious moods, and then you can explain Philippine history by you know, whether MacArthur was grumpy on a given day or not.

SC Let's finish Isabel Cooper's story. How does her story end and what does it tell about you know, the people telling the story about Isabel Cooper about this bear is this ending and what it tells about more the storyteller than about Isabel Cooper itself?

VVG Like my interest in Isabel Cooper started off with how I felt a historian had approached the story of MacArthur, and indeed sort of treated her more like a prop. And sort of resorted to the stereotypes of Asian women of mixed raced Asian women, as the sort of sexual appendages, right? To the story, right to lend it flavor and to lend it a little bit of I don't know, like a little sexiness right in this in this larger story of MacArthur. I've been talking to people about how sometimes a project can start from a feeling of just being really uncomfortable about something, or with me, sometimes I found a little piece of that into like, a coal of rage, right, because I'm like that we know, based on the work that folks have done, sort

of in post colonial studies, right, on sexuality and race, that that landscape is really complex, right? It's really complex. And it is not so straightforward. She's dismissed, she's disappeared, she's caricatured. And so I started to dig a little deeper. And what was interesting to me was that that story, particularly William Manchester's biography, American Caesar, which was the probably the biggest piece of work on MacArthur, became gospel and was repeated.

So the story of Isabel Cooper became truth and was repeated by other historians, including Filipino historians, as the truth, and so nobody bothered to dig any deeper.

And so, you know, I don't see myself as a historian, I wasn't trained as a historian, I do look at historical material. But, you know, in terms of my particular approach, I don't necessarily see myself as a historian, but I thought, somebody needs to do something here because there's an ease, right, that is created to how Asian women are represented and understood to be naturally in that story. And that's something that's absolutely wrong.

SC And what is that understanding, Vernadette, about Asian women?

VVG That they're passive, sexually available, that they don't have agency of their own, that they're not complex human beings with sometimes contradictory desires and motivations. And so I think a lot of that really comes out, right, in the story that I try to retell about her.

SC And her ending is she kills herself very much, you know, in the Madame Butterfly, Miss Saigon story, right?

VVG That's, I think, the fulcrum upon which the whole myth of Isabel Cooper as a Madame Butterfly figure rests, right, because she has a suicide in 1960. But when you dig a little deeper, her relationship with MacArthur ended in 1934, right, that's a lot of time to be holding a torch for one man. She is married twice in the interim. She has a whole career in Hollywood. So what I wanted to do was to destabilize that idea that she's holding this torch and she dies of despair and unrequited love for MacArthur, right. We actually don't know why she killed herself. And there are a lot of other reasons that you could, being a mixed race actor in Hollywood for over 20 years can wear one out, right? She overdoses on barbiturates, she could have had a really massive chronic pain problem. Her own mother died of cancer, right? So maybe she chose to end her own life rather than to suffer in pain. There's so many reasons why she could have taken her own life. But the comfortable pattern that I think historians, especially the male historians fall into is that well, she must have died because of unrequited love, because that is the story we're in love with. That is the story that helps us deny that empire was there.

DI You know, I sense that Vernadette, and I've read a lot of the same books, because I was doing some military history and that, you know, that's inevitably a lot of MacArthur studies and, and that book, American Caesar, that book just had a kind of iterative, wait, where the book comes out, and then you know, like, generations of fathers and grandfathers have read it. I get hate mail regularly from people who felt like I've slighted MacArthur, and they want to, you know, bring me back to the gospel by citing Manchester's book and then I have to counter cite Manchester's book to explain that, I mean, it's, it's just kind of amazing. And then there's all these, there's all this other literature. And what's amazing is that the subsequent literature is just more in depth in a set of questions. So it's like how inattentive was MacArthur on the day of Pearl Harbor? What was he doing in his room? And it's amazing how many books and we're talking shelves of books you can have, without anyone asking the questions that Verndatette is asking just basic questions about like, Oh, this really important person in her life. What's she up to? So and and his way in which the some of the most read books in the US mainland about about the most the largest colony The United States has ever held, the Philippines, just become more and more kind of involuted and actual Filipinos sort of get further and further away from being relevant figures in that whole discussion.

SC So these are kind of self-perpetuating myths that have consequences in what is happening to things that are happening at the present. Let's talk about some of those current events and how journalists who want to write about many of the issues in the country today. What would a journalism that is informed by the history of empire, or by the mythmaking around empire, look like?

VVG You need to do some reading. Right. I had a student in the last year email me – because I also do work on tourism and militarism in Hawaii, in the Philippines, that's, that was my first book. And this was a journalism student who wanted to know about the effects of COVID on tourism. And if tourism was something that should be developed going forward as we came back to a normal, and some of the questions that she sent me were basic questions that she should have done the research on. I said, I'm not going to answer those questions, you need to ask me more specific questions, because I bring a certain kind of expertise to it. But you need to do your homework. So you understand the landscape, at least of what you're entering into. So you know what questions to ask. Right? I think we should expect our journalists, right, to be able to not necessarily know the deeper levels of, you know, expertise on a topic, but to know what kinds of questions to ask and how to go after them, and not let up until they have an answer. I think we've come to a point in American journalistic reporting culture where folks can not answer a question anymore, right. And

still get away with it. And I mean, I think you see this with the Trump administration best, where folks just absolutely refuse to answer questions, in fact.

And so how do we train journalists to, to go back to that sort of critical work of digging deeper, and in a way, yeah, you're basically creating journalists who know their history and who know their context and ideally know the language and community and background of the folks that they're doing a story on, right.

[35:00] So if you're looking at the Atlanta shootings, right.

[TAPE] [ALISON MORRIS: 21-year-old Robert Long, charged with killing eight people in three separate massage parlors last night. Six of them Asian women.](#)

You need to be able to ask questions and understand, well, why were those six women there? And why did they? Why did these Asian women, you know, tend to be working in this kind of occupation? Rendering them vulnerable to certain kinds of people. And there's a history of militarism of American Empire behind that, of course, right. But nobody was asking those questions initially. [35:41]

I think it only started to really come out, when reporters started to go to the folks who had done the research, right. I think after that whole shooting event happened, the Association for Asian American Studies, got a whole lot of phone calls and emails from reporters who wanted to know, who wanted quotes from people. Right. But, you know, I mean, just some basic history, I think, would be just important to have.

DI I think that one of the things that asymmetries of power and empire is a classic asymmetry of power. One of those things that they do is they also create massive asymmetries of information. And they create dominant narratives that kind of reinforce existing power structures and tell us that the way things are is the way things naturally have to be or the way things always have been. And so in some ways, what empire does is it really makes us dumb, because it makes it really hard to see a lot of what's going on.

And this example with MacArthur and sort of how Vernadette was able to think past that is a really good example, because that's exactly you know, that's exactly how empire thinks of itself. It just wants to know more about MacArthur, and it's completely uninterested in the people around him, especially if those people are Filipino.

So I think that what, what's incumbent on journalists is to, to recognize those sort of well worn grooves that are created by power just kind of circulating the same information on the same track over and over and over again, until the group gets deeper until it just seems like that's the only way to talk about a topic. Journalists have to be in a position where they can recognize that and they can sort of depart from existing discourse.

And that's a really hard thing to do. Especially, I mean, one thing I really admire about journalists, is how eclectic they are and they're jumping from topic to topic, and they're able to sort of jump in and actually really, you know, just like learn a lot, and intellectually, that's an incredible skill. But it also means that I think you can be easily prey to the just sort of existing weight of how people are talking about a topic. And it takes a little bit of courage to, to look at that and say, I think actually, the right questions aren't being asked, and I'm gonna be courageous and or at least be willing to seem a little stupid by asking, you know, talking talking to a different kind of person, or having a different sense of who's an expert on this topic, as a way of getting at it.

So I mean, that's what I would recommend. But it's, I also say it knowing that that's a really hard thing to do. Discourses don't turn easily, they're like 18 wheel trucks.

SC It is a very hard thing to do. And in fact, the history of the journalism around empire has been of journalists as cheerleaders or apologists for empire. Is that, am I correct?

VVG I think it's always a mixed bag. Right? I think you're gonna have people who are that at any given moment, and people who let the questions, will let their curiosity and let a driving question of what's at stake here? What's the story of power in the scenario, right, actually inform the way they pursue knowledge about a subject. So just think about like the lead up to the 2003 Iraq war, and the way that press coverage just sort of hopped on the bandwagon of the weapons of mass destruction argument...

[TAPE] [STEVE KROFT](#): Tomorrow morning for the first time in four years, UN weapons inspectors will be back in Iraq to scour a country the size of California for weapons of mass destruction. What they find or don't find may well determine if the United States goes to war with Iraq.

[GEORGE BUSH](#): At this hour coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, free its people and defend the world from grave danger.

[SHEPERD SMITH](#): This is Fox News and Fox News channel continuing coverage of the campaign which now has begun to liberate and disarm Iraq.

I was looking up some of the numbers according to the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting. It said that in the lead up to the weeks leading up to the war. The media didn't feature anybody arguing against war, but instead had military, ex-military, there was one guest of 267, according to the Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting report. So there was nobody questioning, right, what was essentially a preemptive war strategy that was being those, you know, moving forward on a country that had no connection

to 911. Meanwhile, there was very little coverage of the protests that were happening and the marches that were happening against the war.

DI And, and I think that can have to do with this sort of expert granted, the unacknowledged expert granting power of journalists, right, is that journalists kind of decide who's an expert and who's worth talking to. [40:42] One of the things that really struck me. [40:43] So the title of the book I wrote is called "How to Hide an Empire" and I had to ask who hides the empire? And the answer was in part journalists – and they do it in part by just not talking about colonial spaces or topics that are relevant to empire. But I was interested in moments in US history when journalists have paid attention to stuff and often when things have happened in or around the colonies that are just so big journalists kind of have to cover them.

So one example I had was an eight city revolt in Puerto Rico that culminated in an assassination attempt on Harry Truman.

[TAPE] NARRATOR: Blair house, President Truman's temporary Washington residence naturally drew crowds as the attempt on his life was announced. The whole civilized world was shocked by the news.

That's a huge event. I mean, it and it's led by Puerto Rican independence seekers seeking nationalists. I mean, that's an enormous amount if you can't not report that. And so how did the New York Times report it? Barely even connecting all these different things, despite the fact that it's clearly an island wide rebellion, and then dismissing the people who had perpetrated violence and particularly tried to assassinate Truman as unhinged lunatics. [41:58]

And, and so if you've decided, you know, who's rational and who's just kind of acting out of emotion, then that's already telling you who you're going to interview, right, who's an expert on military affairs, if you've decided that the only experts on military affairs are people who have served the US military, in a leadership capacity, you're really going to get a certain kind of story. [42:18]

But if you're willing to kind of, you know, be critical of this notion that there are certain people who are the adults in the room and know what they're talking about. And other people are just kind of emotional children, who really, you know, you can take pictures with them at protests, but you can't really interview them, because they wouldn't have, you know, policy thoughts or anything like that, then you get a much wider set of sort of intellectual possibilities. [42:40] And, and again, it's hard for journalists to do that, I think, because it's really easy to sort of go whichever way the wind is blowing.

SC So some points that you raised, questioning dominant narratives. Second, is questioning also the voices that we amplify, the journalists amplify in their reporting. But there's also the conscious or unconscious silencing of certain voices. Can you give some examples, say of, of stories currently in the news that would benefit from a history grounded approach or a more, you know, multi dimensional approach by journalists.

DI I mean, the United States is currently running drones, and occasionally doing airstrikes throughout the world, including we don't have a full list of the countries in which the US military is authorized to take life. And that is usually just kind of not reported. We've allowed that to be backgrounds, right? The fact that the United States is effectively at war in multiple places, or has made war seem so regular, that it just feels like policing, or, you know, like, who made the United States police of the planet? The fact that that's not a news story, and also that it's we rarely see accounts of people who are living under drones over hovering overhead. I mean, that's absolutely extraordinary that the United States kills more people. I mean, there's rightly and I'm very happy to see a lot of attention to victims of police shooting, the United States kills more people abroad, by its, quote, unquote, policing actions than it does at home. And it's really, reporters, I think, have struggled to report those stories. Partly because languages are an issue. I mean, there's all kinds of reasons for that. But, you know, at a time when we are considering the policing power and police violence of the United States, that kind of overseas thing you know, if it happens, you know, in Afghanistan stays in Afghanistan. That's basically just been given a pass by reporters for the most part.

VVG I completely agree. I think also one of the other things that maybe we're starting to see a little glimmer of light on in terms of the way it's being covered in the media, or at least coming into its own through social media, even, iis coverage on Palestine, right, and the way that that has historically just been shut down or framed in sort of like, oh, it's both sides are at fault here. Right, rather than looking at the deep history of colonialism and occupation in the Middle East and the United States' role in that whole mess, right.

And so, you know, we're, I think we're now starting to see some moments of clarity. And this is not necessarily because of, of journalism, but because of the tireless work of a lot of activists, right, Palestinian activists and allies who have been doing, you know, it's sort of similar to the way in which I think we started to see a shift in in the way apartheid was being discussed in South Africa

And I think that there are these moments where there is a little bit of discursive tipping point, right, where something becomes imaginable and speakable. And I think that are, but it comes at a great cost, like a lot of those folks got a lot of hate mail, a lot of, you know, they were threatened, they were blackballed.

And so I think that there are these like moments of, maybe Facebook can be a force of good, where social media or like when people take the tools at hand, right, and you see this with the Arab uprisings, the Chiapas media project where folks who are on the ground experiencing what is happening around them are able to have the tools to report back and tell their story. So I think when that happens, it's a powerful kind of, it's a powerful kind of moment. And it's about training journalists to create space and ask the right questions, right, and amplify those stories, rather than shut them down.

SC Are we in such a moment? When we are in a moment like that, when it comes to discourses about race, for example, and gender with Me Too? Are we in such a moment, when it comes to discussions about empire, Daniel?

DI Um, I think actually, maybe this is closest to that moment that I've ever seen in my political lifetime. But, I just want to kind of, say a little more, or piggyback a little bit on what Vernadette was saying, there is a way in which there are certain things that are thinkable, and there are certain things that are sayable, and there's certain things that aren't. Or if they're, I mean, they're technically thinkable, but they would take a while to explain. So you can do a really quick report that is, you know, terrorists attack a military base. And luckily, they were apprehended or, you know, killed or something like that. And, and that that works, right people, you know, this sort of, that doesn't have to be a long story. If you want to take a different view on it, why is there a military base in the first place? Why these people really terrorists, you have to do a lot of explaining because, you know, the vocabulary is against you. So you really have to sort of wind up and be alright, Everyone sit down, I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna break down some things for you. And that's hard, right? That's part of the discursive headwind that you face when you're coming up with a kind of counter hegemonic narrative.

But it also, like, it does happen, like we can do that. And you've seen many times where the narrative shifts, and it's just enough people are sort of doing that move in, they're saying, Okay, I know that you want to think about this way. But let me let me really get up ahead of steam and, and try to give you another way of saying it, and it has to happen a lot. I mean, I think this is sort of, in painting like you first lay down the base code and then you do another cut. You just have to kind of do it a lot before the the new narrative, the counter hegemonic narrative, is legible to a lot of people and is legible to people who aren't in an activist movement or something like that.

But yeah, I think actually, this is an incredible moment and first, I mean, I work on sort of territorial aspects of empire: it's quite clear that the five inhabited overseas territories of the United States are getting way more attention than, than they have been, you know, in all the time I've been alive, especially Puerto Rico, but really shocking to me has been the attention given to military bases.

It used to be assumed, never questioned and not even said out loud, that the United States has 800 military bases in other countries and territories, which is incredible, because if you add up all the military bases that every other country has, in it, you know, foreign military bases, we're talking about 30 or 40.

You know, I mean, like it is absolutely, but you know, when is there been a political candidate coming out against military or even putting, you know, putting it on the table is something to be questioned, maybe we should not have so many bases? Oddly, and weirdly, and uncomfortably the one politician who did that was Donald Trump. There's a way in which Trump has of saying the quiet part out loud that actually has kind of fed into this moment where a lot of things that we used to just take as background and assumed and take it for granted are now being questioned.

And I'm not saying that Trump has made any great achievements in the anti-war department. But it is really exciting, because I mean, I've been researching and writing about military bases for a while, and suddenly, they're, you know, there's just a way in which we can talk about them that we hadn't before.

SC So my last question to both of you, what would a United States that is not an empire, how would that look?

DI Yeah. I mean, it's a huge question in that if we think of empire is, you know, the sort of ossified power imbalances, you know, there's a lot there, right. And there's a lot of different ways in which the United States can be thought of as an empire and I think that can I mean, for me, that's one of the reasons why that question feels a little overwhelming, but I don't think that we need to be paralyzed by by being overwhelmed in that way.

So I mean, there was just some transparent territorial ways in which the United States as an empire holds overseas territories, and it doesn't give people in them to vote about their status. It has these hundreds of military bases and, you know, there's a lot of popular discontent about them throughout the world. But, you know, the United States kind of insists on them.

But I think the really big one is this: the United States insists that it should be the prime power in the world, and that it should have, as President Biden put it, it should be at the head of the table.

That is a taken for granted assumption that kind of informs basics, like, pretty much, I've never seen a politician just say, maybe we should have a democratic world order in which the United States is not in charge of policing, or, you know, managing the economies of the entire world.

So that seems to be just this assumption of US supremacy is huge and then it informs so much of US foreign policy, and as all kinds of ways in which it kicks back to US domestic stuff and informs your foreign, you know, like, all these sort of military hardware that we have then becomes policing hardware for our own cities.

So yeah, I mean, I think that for me, that's the big one is the ability to, to look out in the world and not see a kind of place that needs to be managed. And by the only country that's virtuous enough to do it. But the willingness to do what democracy requires, which is to look at the world and see, you know, a world of peers that, you know, might be kind of difficult to get along with in some moments but that's, that's what it is to have a kind of rough equality.

I don't I don't think there's any sort of political will, you know, it's not entirely surprising to hear that, but it's, it's hard to generate political will when you know, when you're on the top. So I don't think there's a lot of political will, from our elite class to, to rethink that. But I think until we rethink that, then we're basically assuming that, you know, profound and global hierarchies are, are taken for granted, are desirable, and that any threat to them is, you know, quote unquote, terrorism.

VVG Yeah, I'll come at that question from the opposite sort of scale, right. Living in Hawaii, an occupied territory, right, and coming from another place that was colonized, the Philippines. One of the things I can see here are these little, not so little, actually, there are these moments and projects of local indigenous sovereignty, right, that provide models of what it would look like, without empire, that sort of bypass American rule altogether.

So we see this with something like the 30 minute meter telescope protests. So I don't know if you know anything about that. But the University of Hawaii, which is my employer, has a plan to build yet another telescope on the top top of Mauna Kea, and this has been resisted over many years by the Native Hawaiian community here.

And last summer, there was a big stand, right? That was taken by a few folks which then grew into a massive movement. And you can see that the sort of seeds of that moment where 1000s of people gathered on top of the mountain to keep the construction vehicles out, right. And to stop the construction of the telescope on multiple levels, not just that physical occupation, but a legal stand. There are just multiple ways in which they were asserting a different reality. Right. And I think that you can see these moments that that moment on the mountain was fed by these multiple kinds of smaller projects on restoration and sovereignty, that have been, you know, happening here on Hawaii, from home, from empire, from America, from the days of American occupation, but especially from the 1960s, 1970s, beginning of the modern sovereignty movement.

And so I think that there are these, there are these places where this is imaginable, right. And I think that we need to look to those moments as much as – because I think that if we look to the so-called leaders in Washington, they're not able to imagine it, they're in the, they're in the belly of the beast, right? I mean, we're all in the belly of the beast, but they're well fed. Whereas the rest of us are less so and so are having to survive and are having to be creative, right, in terms of how we manage living in an empire.

And so I think that there are those moments that are imaginable and can provide us blueprints for moving forward. And maybe that sounds like super hippie dippie. But that's okay. Because I see it actually playing out here, right, in these moments, and maybe it doesn't mean that the military is going to get kicked out.

But actually what happened, you know, this has actually happened, right? When you think about it, the things that are unimaginable, have happened here in Hawaii. There was a whole island here, that was like Vieques in Puerto Rico that was used as a bombing range by the US military for decades, right. It's Kaho'olawe, and it was just, you know, casually dropping bombs, and, you know, running, running military exercises that destroyed essentially the island. And at some point, a lot of protests, sustained protests, finally resulted in that island being returned to the care and stewardship of a native Hawaiian entity.

And so that was, I don't know, that was even imaginable, but people pushed for it, and it became real, right.

And so I think that that's what it might look like. And I had the honor of going to that island and seeing the kinds of projects that are happening in terms of revegetating, you know, planting I mean, it's destroyed, right, but folks are planting new things. And so maybe what we can do is, you know, contribute to that energy and to that vision and that hopefulness.

SC Thank you both. That's a very nice way to end, you know, this vision of rebuilding, you know, in the ashes of war, or, and trying to reimagine a new world where there's less asymmetrical power.
Thank you, Vernadette Gonzales. And thank you, Daniel Immerwahr, for this wonderful conversation.

DI It's a pleasure.

VVG Thank you for having us.

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