

We Rise Episode 3: Left-Wing Military Historian Jason Ridler Ramirez on #DroptheMic

Podcast Transcript

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HOST/CAT: Good afternoon and welcome to We Rise here on 89.3 FM, KPFB, in Berkeley or occupied Ohlone territory known as Huchiun. If you tuned in to our intro show on October 8th, you'll remember the spark of our campaign to #DroptheMIC or Military-Industrial Complex. On last week's episode we shared Dr. Margo Okazawa-Rey's profound intervention to pop culture feminism, an invitation to us all to remember our privilege and responsibility as US citizens in a nation living off of imperial war mongering. On today's show we will explore the conditions in the United States that set the stage for perpetual war. I speak with Canadian born left-wing military historian and professor Jason S. Ridler Ramirez about his experience in the field of military studies in Canada and the US, the history of the military-industrial complex, and tangible strategies to truly challenge the MIC and US-made war. Throughout the show you will hear excerpts from documentary films that reveal the ways US citizens have been taught to accept war as status quo. All films can be found for free online. To begin, let's take a listen to Sean Penn, narrating the film War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.

VOICES OF NEWS REPORTERS:

Marines were ordered into the Dominican Republic as the rebels... while the US Marines have also taken center stage in South Vietnam.

This is what the war in Vietnam is all about.

First wave of Marines landed in Grenada... some 1,200 US Marines would land in Grenada for several days.

Those Bolivians were terrified during last night's heavy bombing.

Breaking story: President Bush's decision to neutralize Panama's General Manuel Noriega.

The Japanese reign of terror is over.

...of the war in Iraq.

SEAN PENN: Since World War II, we have seen a dramatic escalation in the United States military actions around the globe, ranging from missile strikes and rapid troop deployments to all-out wars and occupations. The reasons for these military interventions have varied, each involving complex geopolitical interests in different parts of the world at different times in US history. But the public face of these wars has not reflected this complexity.

Over the past five decades, deliberation and debate about US military actions have largely been left to a close circle of elite Washington policy makers, politicians and bureaucrats, whose rationales for war have come into public view only with the release of leaked or declassified documents, often years after the bombs have been dropped and the troops have come home. In real-time, officials have explained and justified these military operations to the American people by withholding crucial information about the actual reasons and potential costs of military action, again and again choosing to present an easier version of war's reality. A steady and remarkably consistent storyline designed not to inform but to generate and maintain support and enthusiasm for war.

HOST/CAT: That was an excerpt from *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*. Now let me introduce my guest for the hour. Jason S. Ridler Ramirez is a writer, improv actor, and left-wing military historian. His novels include *Hex-Rated*, the first installment of the *Brimstone Files* series for Nightshade Press, *Rise of the Luchador*, and *Death Match*. He's also published over 60 stories and numerous academic publications. A former punk rock musician and cemetery groundskeeper, Mr. Ridler Ramirez holds a PhD in War Studies from the Royal Military College of Canada. He lives in Berkeley,

California and is a teaching fellow for Johns Hopkins University. It is such a pleasure to have you on the show today. Welcome.

JASON: Thanks, Cat. It's good to be here.

HOST/CAT: So, this will air at a later date, but it is indeed Halloween. So how appropriate that we have a former cemetery groundskeeper in studio with us today. Do you want to say anything about that experience, or shall we launch into some of your background?

JASON: Well, I got one great anecdote from working in a cemetery. It was a Jewish cemetery, Bathurst Lawn Memorial. And pertinent to our discussions today and in general, it was also during that time in the 1990s where there was a rise in the neo-Nazi movement in Canada and the US. And we had to do stuff like clean-up to do with tombstones being knocked over, Nazi swastikas and other sort of anti-Semitic junk being graffiti'd on tombstones, memorial sites, and stuff. So, I learned sort of firsthand about people trying to revise the past through, you know, evil. And it was a great experience. I met a lot of interesting characters. And I guess my takeaway was it was about the best first job for somebody fresh out of a history BA.

HOST/CAT: Because what is more historical than dead people?

JASON: Exactly. Working with the dead. It's what you do. I mean there are some historians who primarily do oral histories and work with the living, but 99.9% of us are working with people who don't argue back and don't speak. So, telling the stories of the dead is a near sacred task for -- and that's how I was taught to view my vocation was that this was an incredibly respectful, important, and noble vocation that, if done poorly, distorts and destroys reality.

HOST/CAT: Absolutely. This is a perfect segue. So, I'd love to hear about how you wound up in the field of military studies. How did you wind up with this vocation?

JASON: I studied history because I found it interesting as one of the few subjects at school at the time that I was, I had an inclination for, because it was story-based. I was a story engine. I didn't know it at the time, but I wanted to be a writer. And history is a mode of storytelling and writing. And I also, I like argument and I like evidence, and I got a pretty critical head. But I had one wonderful teacher. This is the case for a lot of people who model things. And her name was Miss Watson. She was a tough, old, Union battle-ax. And her brother had served in the Second World War in Canada. So, she had a particular interest in military affairs, the way that a lot of my teachers did not, and she made it come alive. There were maps, there were dialogues from people who were there. It was a very important world event that Canada played a role in. So, I got hooked on that side of history versus national or labor or political or whatever. It seemed to be the most dramatic. And for, let's be frank, if you know you're a young 16-year-old, 17-year-old guy like me, something dramatic to compete with hormones and punk rock, you're gonna -- I needed something other than it's very important. So, I gravitated towards the more dramatic. And as I got older, a bit of the darker side of, you know, the nature of the human condition and war certainly explores that. So, I studied it at York University, which was an incredibly left-wing university but had a couple of classes on diplomatic and military history, including in the Canadian context, and so I did that there. And then I got a job at the cemetery and realized I should probably do more education because there's only -- you know, winter hits and this job is over. So, I applied to a graduate program at Kingston, Ontario for, one of the few places in Canada where you can study military history, which is at the Royal Military College of Canada. Now, I've never been a soldier, I've never served, it's not my cup of tea, but they accepted me, and I did my master's there. So, that led to my doctorate on Dr. Omond Solandt who is the only Canadian to do casualty analysis at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And when that was done, I switched my pistols and decided to study American-focused stuff and American subject matter experts on military affairs, especially those who are outsiders, people who the military are interested in, who have a skill set they desire or

require but don't kind of like. So, humanitarians, scientists, anthropologists, archaeologists, advertising executives, and that's kind of what's been my bread and butter for the past six years.

HOST/CAT: I'm curious to know more about the difference between doing war studies in Canada versus in the US.

JASON: Well, war studies, it has its roots in sort of a British tradition of studying military affairs. War studies is still taught as a multidisciplinary degree, and it has a correlate in the States sometimes known as Strategic Studies, where you don't study just military history. You can do that. You can, especially in the States and the UK, less so in Canada. But war studies was like, we're going to teach you all about the myriad of dimensions of armed conflict, which would include military history and military theory, which is what were like prerequisites of what we did. But a lot of the people that I was at school with were in the Defense Department or soldiers. So, they were studying operational stuff, defense economics, defense management, which wasn't really my bag. I was studying more the historical and the political science side of the house. But the point was to have a degree that had breadth, to demonstrate a command of literature and subjects so that you could be a well-rounded scholar, whatever your particular focus was. So, part of my training was on literature, because I'm a writer as well, and so I studied the war memoirs primarily of veterans who decided to use fiction to explore the horrors of war, from Ernest Hemingway to Frederic Manning, and VM Yeates in a very brilliant novel called *Winged Victory*, which is one of the few novels about the air war in the First World War which was a horror show for many of the guys who, you know, were able to reach the skies, do something that you know, a hundred years was just a daydream of science fiction, they experienced that and it was majestic and awe inspiring and getting closer to God, while at the same time terrifying because you're basically flying a mini gas tank that has guns on it that are being shot at. And below you is the horror of the First World War. And the people who experienced that level of technological sophistication, the human achievement sort of surpassing itself,

and at the same time being utterly destroyed by the nature of combat tore, at least in the case of Yeates, apart. He ended up dying in the sanitarium after he wrote the book. But to fully answer your question, war studies encompasses a variety of different disciplines to understand armed conflict from peace studies to military history to cultural analysis. The last, when I was there, the last chairman was a psychologist. So, the psychology of war was hot on the agenda.

HOST/CAT: Well, war isn't a monolithic thing in that it's just combat. It does affect all facets of our life. So, it seems quite appropriate to be taking a transdisciplinary approach to it if you will. Can you talk about your experience as the child of a war refugee and how this piece of your identity influenced your decision to get into military studies and has affected your work thus far?

JASON: Sure. My mother was born in a free and independent Latvia in 1939, and she experienced the full brunt, from the perspective of a child between five and six, of the fighting on the Eastern Front, which in the Second World War was the worst fighting that occurred. There is no equivalent in the West in any sort of concentrated fashion. So, she grew up in a world that was torn asunder by racial violence, and first Soviet, then German, and the Soviets came back occupation. And eventually my grandmother, who was, you know, tougher than steel and pregnant with my aunt, grabbed my mom, and said, we're getting the hell out of here, and headed out towards Germany. Now I gotta say with full disclosure that during the German occupation, my grandfather was in, was a part of what they called the Latvian Legion of the Waffen-SS, which were you know ethnic minorities in the occupied territories that the Germans rounded up to help fight the Soviets. Because the casualties were so high that even the racist policies of the Germans said we're going to have Latvians who were inferior to us, but they can still stop a bullet. So, my grandfather served with them as a jeep driver, so he had a modicum of influence. And when the, when the tide turned after Stalingrad by 1944, they were heading towards the Baltic to reclaim what they had taken in 1939. My grandma said, let's get the hell out of here. And he stayed behind and died behind the Iron Curtain, I think in the 1980s, though it's

impossible to tell. Grandma headed to Germany right at the time where the worst of the allied bombing campaign of the country was happening, pregnant with my aunt. And my mom was taken from her while she was giving birth and was sort of stolen by an aunt and was taken to all the different sort of displaced person camps, trying to get it, you know, trying to stay safe but also staying away from my grandmother. So, the infamous story was grandma with one baby under her arm gets out of the Red Cross Service Station where she's given birth and then just basically crosses Germany to find her daughter while the Second World War is coming to an end. They emigrated to Canada under false pretenses and came here as war refugees sponsored, if I'm not mistaken, by the Lutheran Church. And my mom had PTSD for -- although it was not diagnosed as that until the 1970s, primarily after the Vietnam War, she suffered from like perceptual migraines and, I wouldn't say flashbacks because she never talked about the war coming back to her, but it was present and I knew that I came from a people that were under Soviet occupation and that we would never see our grandfather, and we weren't sure if the letters that were coming back were from him. They might have been from the, the equivalent of the KGB that was in occupied Latvia. So, her experience is, which she didn't talk about all that much but when she did, they were poignant and powerful, were about like being a child of the Eastern Front and being -- the infamous story was being like thrown out of a car or a Jeep rather, that they were using to get out of the country and seeing all the dead soldiers. She must have been six or five. And my grandmother going, they're just sleeping, they're just sleeping, let's keep moving, don't wake them. So, the psychological trauma of that must have stayed with her forever. And as a result, she had no time for what she called dead white guy history, like she just hated it. But when she was writing her own memoir, she kept like all of a sudden sending me emails, going, okay, where would I have been in 1944 on this day. So, we were actually able to connect, despite the fact that she had no time for politics. She hated military conflict, and when she was a kid, she was terrified that, as a lot of people were, that the Korean War was going to lead to another world war. But it gave me a respect

and sort of profound sympathy for those who have endured what I can only imagine and that I've written about, and I've read about, but I've never, thank God, experienced. And if you don't start from a place of empathy for those who have suffered those conditions, then whatever you do when you write about them, you're gonna be doing it maybe at an objective distance, but you're going to miss the subjective value of war. And that's important, too. And so, whenever I've read memoirs, novels, stuff that's been done by veterans, I try to keep that, keep that in mind that there's a common humanity of suffering that my mother was a part of, and that was shared with me. And I wouldn't say it unites us all or anything, but it's, it's something I'm very aware of and I respect, because those are life shattering experiences that shape perspective and value and the rest forever.

[Music]

HOST/CAT: You are listening to We Rise on 89.3 FM. I'm your host, Catherine Petru, and that was young Latvian musician and ethnomusicologist, Laima Jansone, with her song, Zalktis. Zalktis is an ancient symbol in Baltic mythology that symbolizes continual change, living energy, and of the serpent. Before that, you heard me speaking with left-wing military historian, Jason S. Ridler Ramirez, about his experience in the field of military studies, particularly as the son of a war refugee from Latvia. Let's return to our conversation.

Let's talk about writing and its capacity for healing. Let's talk about veterans and your knowledge of war literature written by veterans, and your own experience as a writing teacher.

JASON: Okay. Well, I studied the literature of primarily veterans, people like James Jones and Hemingway, in sort of the American context, Frederic Manning, and John Dos Passos, and Remarque. So, sort of the biggies of the major world wars because they produced the most literature. It wasn't a conscious choice other than that's what my mentor was like interested in teaching me. And it got me interested in reading and working with veterans who had decided that

writing was going to be their means of either catharsis or in some ways managing and dealing with the phenomenal experience of war. And I don't mean phenomenal in a positive sense. I mean like all-encompassing. A war is a phenomenon unlike everyday civilian life. And I came to work for about two years with what was then called Military Experience in the Arts, now called the Journal of Military Experience, which primarily works with veterans who were making that choice. They decided that art in some ways has to be part of their story. And I've worked with Afghan Iraqi vets, a couple of Vietnam vets, and it's heartbreaking not only to do with, you know, if they've been combat veterans or even if they've just served and it was debilitating in some way, that there's not always a happy ending. One of the most profound experiences I had was reading a young soldier's work who couldn't come to terms with his own racism after serving in Iraq. Like he just couldn't, he's like, I don't, he didn't like this about himself, and he knew like sort of rationally that it was wrong, but he couldn't help thinking about quote-unquote those people being quote-unquote that way. And I was just informed that he sadly came to a rough end and never came to terms with the damage that was done by his experiences overseas, which were primarily combat. At the same time, I've dealt with Vietnam war veterans who perpetually go back and revisit, reconsider, and revive their experiences, find the common humanity that they had, the good that they did in the midst of a war that many people think of either as illegal or bad or wrong, not just because it was lost. And the kind of reward I get for helping someone who may not think of writing as their best friend, may actually think of this is a very distinct and powerful challenge -- is really, I teach a lot of different kinds of people, and teaching veterans who've had those kinds of experience has its own unique kind of reward. Because they don't think they can do it. And then I'm like, I'm just asking you to tell your story, and I emphasize very clearly, it's like, I want it raw. I don't, don't expect it to be a grade 11 composition class, or you know, if you don't do things right, the teachers gonna be mad at you. I read writers who are as raw and unvarnished as they get. Go with that if that's your gut. And knowing that they're allowed to, that they can be as ugly as what's, you know,

screaming inside their head, I'm like, absolutely. Get it on the page, let it be there if it's cathartic for you. I've also had students who have refused because it's too hot. And I'm like that's absolutely okay. You're the best judge of what's too much for you.

HOST/CAT: Right. Do you think that your mom writing her memoir was healing for her?

JASON: I think so but only to a limited extent. And this has to do with the peculiarities of my mother's intellect and heart as opposed to a comment on memoir.

HOST/CAT: Sure. Yeah.

JASON: I don't know if she got a sense of closure or how much catharsis she had. What I think helped her was getting memory on the page and then seeing how that felt.

HOST/CAT: You know, it's interesting you've mentioned your mom critiquing, in your words, her critique of white guy history.

JASON: Yes.

HOST/CAT: And you yourself as a white Canadian –

JASON: mm-hmm

HOST/CAT: -- cis-male in the field of military studies, generally speaking that's a huge critique, and soon we'll talk about the military-industrial complex, but of this war profiteering industry that it is perpetuated so much by men. So, I'm curious how you take into account your own identity and the power that you have as a professional historian as a scholar, someone with this level of institutional respect to bring this critical awareness to the work that you do.

JASON: It's become more so over the past, I don't know, eight years largely since I got my doctorate where I've had more serious considerations on this front

about you know how much, how much being a straight white male influences my frame of reference. And there's no question that it allows me to have an interest that keeps me going. But at the same time, I have to acknowledge the limitations of that, and the limitations are huge, which is like I've grown up with a largely Western bias, that you know a series of nations of predominantly white dudes have done incredible things. And that's true but it's not the entire truth. And I've noticed that more and more with, in terms of responsibility with the changing of the guard in this country, when somebody who's a straight white dude who's in power is using the past so irresponsibly, let alone illogically, let alone propagandistically. The importance in reverence for my field or the validation that history has, like the power it has, I've always been aware of that. And I guess I was aware of that because of you know growing up in this sort of the rise of the neo-Nazi movement in the 1990s. But I don't know if I have as great a command of the vocabulary to talk about how much I'm trying to be considerate of my position these days than I used to be. These days I'm like how do we study systemic oppression? How do we study gender bias when it comes to analysis so that we can't even see? And these are struggles that I have within my own heart and mind when I think about what will I do next. Right? I have a platform for creating another body of work that's supposed to move human knowledge forward an inch or whatever. And like, okay, well then what I choose next will speak volumes based on what my frame of reference and my acknowledgement of limitations are. And I'm trying to push against some of the, the sort of normative ones that have been in command of my mind and heart for years. So, I've expanded outward to be thinking about things like race and gender when it comes to American historiography. How does America view its wars through these lenses? The project I want to do most next, which may be the most difficult for me because I'm coming from a position of an expert in some field, but it's adjacent, it's not specific to it, which is you know the, the study of American military history from the eyes of the adversary. From Native Americans, from Filipinos, from Dominicans and Cubans, to of course, Germans and Russians, and Vietnamese and Colombians, and the folks of Panama,

people that were on the inheritance side of imperialism and you know American exceptionalism. And so, I'm trying to be more conscious and aware and realizing that I've got a skill set there might actually be a value to studying this stuff and explore those issues in a, in the context that would perhaps be uncomfortable for me but nonetheless necessary and important.

HOST/CAT: Important indeed. To further illuminate the danger and violence of the Western bias Jay speaks to, here is University of Massachusetts Professor of Communication and founder of the Media Education Foundation, Sut Jhally, introducing *On Orientalism*, his film based on the renowned work by Edward Said, followed by a brief excerpt from *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits are Spinning us to Death*.

Orientalism tries to answer the question of why, when we think of the Middle East for example, we have a preconceived notion of what kind of people live there, what they believe, how they act. Even though we may never have been there, or indeed even met anyone from there. More generally Orientalism asks, how do we come to understand people, strangers, who look different to us by virtue of the color of their skin? The central argument of Orientalism is that the way that we acquire this knowledge is not innocent or objective but the end result of a process that reflects certain interests. That is, it is highly motivated. Specifically, Said argues that the way the West, Europe and the U.S. looks at the countries and peoples of the Middle East is through a lens that distorts the actual reality of those places and those people. He calls this lens through which we view that part of the world Orientalism, a framework that we use to understand the unfamiliar and the strange; to make the peoples of the Middle East appear different and threatening.

DAVID LEE MILLER: *President is essentially giving Saddam 48 hours to get out of Dodge. War now seems all but inevitable.*

GREGG JARRETT: *Short of a bullet to the back of his head or he leaves the country, war is inexorable.*

UNIDENTIFIED: Well, I think that's exactly right. War is inevitable and it is approaching inexorably.

WOLF BLITZER: Is war with Iraq inevitable right now?

LAWRENCE EAGLEBURGER: I think it's 95% inevitable.

UNIDENTIFIED: You at this point, right now, tonight, don't see any other option but war?

RICHARD HOLBROOKE: Do you?

UNIDENTIFIED: I'm asking you, Ambassador.

WESLEY CLARK: I agree. I don't think there's a viable option for the administration at this point. We're way too far out front in this.

MAJOR BOB BEVELACQUA: Send us over there, guys. Let's get on with it. Let's get it over with.

MSNBC AD: Showdown Iraq. If America goes to war, turn to MSNBC and The Experts.

HOST/CAT: Let's back up a moment and, from your perspective, from your expertise, what is the military-industrial complex? And give a brief history of it.

JASON: All right the MIC was a term that was popularly coined by President Eisenhower in his farewell address of 1960. And what Eisenhower was warning against in this farewell address, and it was a phenomenal thing for a president to do, was the, what he called the undue influence of weapons manufacturers and private industry in shaping American foreign policy. That, because the Cold War was so technologically focused with ICBMs and nuclear weapons, that the people who manufactured this material would have an incredible role to play in shaping how strategy and war was fought. And he didn't think this was necessarily a good thing. And in fact, because their motive was profit, right, that's the obligation of Bombardier or Lockheed Martin or whatever, because

they have a similar interest but a different goal than the military. Military is interested in defeating its enemies with the most advanced technology yada, yada, yada. But Eisenhower was really terrified that, if left to its own devices, the weapons industry in the United States might actually bankrupt the country and turn it into a quote-unquote garrison state, which is what he wanted to avoid. As far as he was concerned, America's chief asset in the Cold War was a strong economy. You can't do that if you're perpetually buying expensive and untested weaponry in perpetuity regardless of its validity. And so the Cold War set up these really sort of strange conditions that were very different than previous eras of warfare where the stakes were so high and yet at the same time, when the military, what it wants is weapons that it can test, it can't really test whether or not an ICBM is effective, right? You can't. It can game, it can theorize; but it can't actually hit Russia to figure out whether or not it's successful. So, knowing that there would be no end state where these weapons were going to be tested in actual battle meant there was a very strange equation to do with getting the next best weapon system throughout the Cold War. And so, Eisenhower was warning about this. This is like we can't actually test this stuff in real-life combat conditions. We're always told that the next weapon is going to be the most important because the stakes in a thermonuclear war are so astronomically high that there is going to be a push to keep putting money into greater and greater weapon systems regardless of validity. That was dangerous. They put way too much influence in the hands of private industry, and as far as he was concerned, outside of where it should properly be placed which was within government.

HOST/CAT: That's really helpful. Thank you. Who are the active partners in the military-industrial complex today?

JASON: They're still the same, the same three players that Eisenhower warned about, which is the government, Congress, the Pentagon, so the people who are sort of generating strategy and doctrine, and the weapons industry or the defense industry. I shouldn't say just weapons because they're also talking

about systems and ships and propulsion and other materials of war, the people who make it. Because previous to the Cold War, even into the sort of until the First World War, the role of industry in military affairs grew exponentially because of the Industrial Revolution. Previous to that, people had weapons like in the Crimean War that didn't look that different from weapons a hundred years ago. The Industrial Revolution changes this. So, the Second World War acts as the massive catalyst for this in the United States, particularly by the end of the war, building massive amounts of material. The Cold War sets conditions for the need for a perpetual armament, and then there was supposed to be in the 1990s what they called the peace dividend. With the end of the Cold War and the Soviets is a major ally worth sacrificing most of the national treasure to defend against, there was supposed to be a retreat from the power of the military-industrial complex. That was the promise of the 1990s. There would be human security, peacekeeping missions, but vast armaments acting as a deterrent against another adversary of similar power kind of wasn't there. That didn't stop the defense industry from existing of course. And because their interest is in perpetually making you know profit for their shareholders and themselves, those industries argue that whatever they make next is the most important thing. Without it you're doomed. And who's going to be the one who says we're not going to invest in that and have our boys come home in boxes, etc.? So, there's a psychological warfare cost to dealing with them. And you know I must be very blunt, I'm not an expert on the modern military-industrial complex. I just, of course it exists because those relationships have to exist. Whether they should, huge, huge question, but they do. Lockheed Martin exists. De Havilland exists. And their interest is in making as much money as possible in their industry with their only patron which is the United States government. Or their only significant one. They do do international stuff. But let's face it, the largest Defense Department on earth is their greatest benefactor.

HOST/CAT: Back to War Made Easy.

NORMAN SOLOMON: And tied in with that is the worship of Pentagon technology.

HANSON HOSEIN: I've fallen almost in love with the F/A-18 Super Hornet because it's quite a versatile plane.

BRIAN WILSON: I got to tell you, my favorite aircraft, the A-10 Wart Hog. I love the Wart Hogs.

JOHN ELLIOTT: This morning around 4:00 a.m. local time, the first three took off. And when you're 300 feet away from them, when they do it, you hear it in your shoes and feel your gut.

SEAN PENN: The Pentagon's influence on war coverage has also been evident in the news media's tendency to focus on the technical sophistication of the latest weaponry.

GREGG JARRETT: Should they have used more? Should they, you know, use a MOAB, the mother of all bombs, and a few daisy cutters? And, you know, let's not just stop at a couple of cruise missiles.

JAMIE McINTYRE: The newest, biggest, baddest US bomb --

GENERAL BARRY MCCAFFREY: We'll pound them with 2,000-pound bombs and then go in --

PAT BUCHANAN: 2,000-pound bombs in urban areas?

GENERAL BARRY MCCAFFREY: Oh, sure.

LESTER HOLT: The plan I'm holding in my hand here, the F-117 Stealth Fighter, was used in these attacks significantly --

GRETA VAN SUSTERN: How do you steer this thing? I mean, there's no -- you have a stick, is that right?

*PILOT: Sure, we have, both of us have matching center stick with left throttles.
You can do every –*

NORMAN SOLOMON: Every war, we have US news media that have praised the latest in the state-of-the-art killing technology, from the present moment to war in Vietnam.

WALTER CRONKITE: B-57s -- the British call them Canberra jets -- we're using them very effectively here in this war in Vietnam to dive-bomb the Vietcong in these jungles beyond Da Nang here.

[Sound of jets]

WALTER CRONKITE: Well, Colonial, it's a great way to go to war.

NORMAN SOLOMON: And there's a kind of idolatry there. Some might see it as worship of the gods of metal.

UNIDENTIFIED: That's the JDAM. It is a 2,000-pound bomb that is deadly accurate, and that is the thing that is allowing us -- it allowed us in Afghanistan and will allow us in this next conflict to be terribly accurate, terribly precise and terribly destructive.

SEAN PENN: In fact, even as US military technology has become increasingly sophisticated with the development of so-called smart bombs and other forms of precision-guided weaponry, civilian casualties now greatly outnumber military deaths, a grim toll that has steadily increased since World War I.

HOST/CAT: I have a few more questions about this, and one that I didn't write down, but I'm just curious about your perspective on, is the role of media in either confronting, challenging, or perpetuating the military-industrial complex.

JASON: The term has kind of fallen out of fashion, and I'm not sure if that's like by design or by the shifting trends of media chatter, right? It also feels very old-school. There are other levels of media dialogue that are far more

sophisticated than ones that were created in the 1960s. So, in some ways it's kind of been left behind. Yet it's such a powerful precedent because it came from, of all people, you know, one of the orchestrators of victory on the Western Front in the Second World War. Eisenhower was not a dove, and yet this, this man who was, you know, a supreme ally commander of NATO and President of the United States, said we have to be careful of this. And he said this in 1960. So, it still has value in power. But in terms of like what the media talks about now, no. You occasionally hear, and it's mostly from you know, like satirists like on The Daily Show about where are the major armed plants in congressional districts and what are the influences on government. That you see a fair bit of. In terms of media complacency and not acknowledging it, I can't speak to. Although I'm taking classes at Liberation Spring, and this has been one of the major dialogues of the past couple of weeks, which is media portrayal of war in general, and I think we're getting to the military-industrial complex soon. And I would say the dialogue on weaponry and technology, there is very little exception to the rule about where the fetishization is going, right? It's in the wonder of the weapons and whatever. But you don't hear as much deep digging from investigative journalists looking at the malfeasance or the complicity, except for you know the occasional 60 Minutes that will talk about people switching from being Pentagon insiders and living in the beltway for 20 years and then all of a sudden being the chairman of the board at a senior weapons manufacturer, that this relationship clearly exists. It's almost like an uncontested fact so you don't question it anymore.

HOST/CAT: Right. Well, and when things are so normalized, that's how institutional oppression for example is allowed to continue, because it's invisiblized.

JASON: Right.

HOST/CAT: Well, and I suppose my question isn't limited to just the military-industrial complex but also war in general. In the vast majority of the country, war is still glorified. There are shows on CBS right now that are

glorifying a police state basically and glorifying Navy SEALs. You know, in some ways trying to put the humanity into it. But why do we need to put the humanity into something that is inherently inhumane?

JASON: Well, the why can be answered by profit motive. But from a moral standpoint, I've been studying war too long to see it anything other as like grotesque and massive and trauma-inducing as it was for my family and is for millions of others and has been since, you know, the ancient world emerged. I will say that, at the same time, what I hate about its portrayal the most in media is how simplistic. Simplicity speaks to the lack of critique of its inhumanity on the one hand, and heroism being emphasized versus the cost of war. So, that I'm pretty cognizant of and I just don't like. The idea that, you know, all soldiers are heroes or that all war is good. If you back your nation, you can't be anti-war and pro-troop or whatever. There's a series of sort of, you know, conceptual dichotomies that get thrown at us to keep things very, very simple, and I have to be anti this. I'm a scholar. I don't trek to that because war is incredibly complex. They're, yes, bravery, courage, camaraderie, sacrifice. These exist in war, too. But here's the fun fact; you don't need war to have these things.

HOST/CAT: Right.

JASON: That they're emergent or forced upon folks who are experiencing things, absolutely. It's part of that dialogue. But it amazes me sometimes watching how war is portrayed. And I've been hearing increasing criticisms of Ken Burns Vietnam documentary on this front, that there is a, still a romantic, almost nostalgic -- they tried their very best, ah they lost -- gloss to a 10-volume review of one of the most defining wars in US history. And not as much rigor, critical thinking about American arrogance, exceptionalism, the kind of stuff that as a historian, and granted I'm a historian who was raised in Canada, which naturally had a critical eye of the United States. And I can't look at things like the Iraq War or Vietnam or Afghanistan as anything but complex phenomenon. Complex with regards to the people who are living in those countries that fought a very different war than the ones that CBS was telling you about.

HOST/CAT: Right.

JASON: So, I kind of wish the complexity of war was championed more in popular media. But there's a very discrete and important reason that it isn't. And for those who know how to manipulate and sell their product very well, they don't want complexity. Complexity gets people thinking instead of saying yay this.

War of Words –

and images

War of Words –

and images

War of Words –

and images

War of Words –

and images

Finally, finally –

The psychological impact, the psychological component here appears to be having some effect...

DR. ROGER STAHL: In 2003, a new word entered the English language: Militainment. We now consume war in much the same way as we consume any other mode of entertainment. This has become a prominent feature of American life in the 20th Century. The blending of war and entertainment is not necessarily a new phenomenon. What is new is the massive collaboration between the Pentagon and the entertainment industries. In addition, the scope of militainment has grown rapidly. The television war has now invaded popular

culture on multiple fronts, including toys, sports, video games, film, reality television, and more. How has war taken its place as a form of entertainment? The answer to this question has powerful implications for who we are and the world we inhabit. Join me now as we map the terrain of this new entertaining war. This is Militainment, Inc.

HOST/CAT: You are listening to We Rise on 89.3 FM, KPFB, in Berkley, occupied Ohlone territory known as Huchiun. I'm your host, Catherine Petru, and you just heard a clip from documentary film, Militainment, Inc. which you can find for free in full online. Now let's return to my conversation with left-wing military historian Jason S. Ridler Ramirez.

On that note, can you please share some strategies about ending the military-industrial complex or, even more broadly, ending war? And I know that's a massive question, and I ask it to draw upon truly what you know of war. What conversations can we have that aren't just hopeful and magical thinking as a really incredible scholar, Chris Hedges, would say, but that have some grit, that have some teeth?

JASON: For sure. This is a question that has plagued people far smarter than I for millennia. I mean Plato was the one who said only the dead have seen the end of war. And I hope he was, I hope he's wrong, because there's been an increasing volume of scholarship largely from the 19th century that tried to argue one of two sides. That war was actually not positive fiscally as well as prestige-wise for nation states, or whether it was destructive and cost negative. And there was a particular German school of thought they thought it was great. And a man named John Nef wrote a compelling and forgotten work called War and Human Progress which categorically said it was not. You could not take the values of war. Some of the positive things that emerge because of horrific circumstances, you could not stack those next to the amount of money and blood, sweat, and toil that has been spent in two world wars, let alone countless and smaller ones, and say net positive. It's impossible. I am really hoping that the future can be free of this as a means to solve conflict, because

we just keep getting too many ledger sheets filled with blood, and treasure being spent, and very little being accomplished other than perpetual suffering. I'm not an ardent pacifist. I think there are times when you have to fight. And because you're either self-protection or if you're a nation state there has been some grave, grave danger that has to be protected through the use of organized violence, through those who know how to use it, maybe not a popular opinion here but –

HOST/CAT: There's a difference between that kind of protection versus, as you've named, you know, American exceptionalism or this imperial ethos or desire that's been acted upon time and time and time again by large nations. In fact, world renowned theorist and psychologist Frantz Fanon wrote about the necessity of violence if colonized peoples are to get free. Lauryn Hill narrates contemporary filmmaker Göran Olsson's documentary, drawing from phenoms wretched of the earth, entitled Concerning Violence, which can be viewed in full on Netflix.

[Music]

FRANTZ FANON: Colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.

[Music]

JASON: And it almost always follows trade. The story of imperialism follows the expansion of world economies from a series of Western nations across the globe to dominate others. And with that came military power to protect those interests, France, Britain, to a lesser degree Germany and others, and then in the 19th century, the United States. So, if say the origins of these things tend to be about dominance over resources and fiscal strength, I would like to hope -- I don't, I don't -- believe it or not, I don't have a solution to this problem. But I would say that my hope rests in a couple of things: a growing global

consciousness about the cost of war actually not being what the myth makers make it out to be, that helps. The fact that there - greater access to a variety of different kinds of literature that you were not getting the one, sort of Patriot rah-rah-rah, even though some sectors will hold on to that forever, I'm less interested in changing their minds. I'm more interested in changing the minds of the people that are curious and may be swayed either way, which seems to be the greater, in general, the people holding the hardest, most ardent viewer, almost always a very vocal minority, and most people are really scared and trying to make decisions for themselves. And to speak to that in political science and other fields, they talk about an empathy gap. It's really easy to sort of use wars as perpetual problem-solver if you don't view the people on the other side as human. It's a necessary component of military training to see your adversary as de-human because it breaks down the resistance of a human being to kill another human being, because that's a terrible thing that most of us don't want to do. To act as a catalyst against viewing the world in dehumanized terms, I guess I got convinced of this reading, Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which is a very loud, very thick book that deals with the de-escalation of violence in human history over the, like a millennium. And there are great arguments against it, but one of the things that I thought was a compelling element that a lot of people don't include is the role in the rise of literacy and generating empathy, that this can be a catalyst for people fighting against dehumanization of other people. We can't always visit or be with people who are different than us, but you can do it. And you can do it with books. And I will make a strident argument for the value of literature in this regard, because as powerful as history is, and I'm saying this as a historian, as powerful as it is, the one thing it can't do, the one thing is a historian I am forbidden of doing, is telling you what somebody thought. That is a locked box that has no key. But I can be in the mind of a character in a novel or a short story or up a narrative poem. And I can walk with them as they experience hatred, oppression, racism, find the courage to challenge it, whatever the case may be. And so, I would hardly recommend that as one of the pillars of changing the minds of the great,

confused and scared, who are listening to a president talk about World War Five, and unemployment not magically vanishing because he became president, going, he's certainly demonizing a lot of people on the planet, women primarily, at least with the, throughout the election cycle, but everyone who's not a rich white man like he is. Well, what's an antidote to this? I'll give you one book that I wholeheartedly recommended which changed my tune all a lot of things, which is an anthology of short stories called God Spies by Alberto Manguel. He collected stories against oppression from a variety of different authors from around the world. And the common element through all of them was that I was in their heart, in their mind while they were suffering and trying to find peace. That allowed me to connect with people whose stories were vastly different across the globe, and yet they had this one commonality of me being with them and trying to understand their culture, their norms, their oppression. It's been one of my go-to's. If I'm ever feeling the overwhelming smash of media blitz's trying to glorify war -- and I say this is somebody who went to a military college, has tons of friends who serve -- if I'm feeling too much of that simplicity, and dehumanization is the ultimate simplicity, right? You're not human, you're a thing.

HOST/CAT: Right.

JASON: One great antidote for it that I champion, because you can access it anywhere and you can be alone with it, you don't have to be with a large group, is reading the experience of others and walking in their minds and hearts as they struggle and try to survive.

HOST/CAT: Thank you so much for that. I wanted to come back to Sarah Chayes and Emma Sky can you tell us briefly who those women are?

JASON: Sure. They were two figures in the major wars of the 21st century and Afghanistan and Iraq. Sarah Chayes was an NPR reporter. Her parents were very famous lawyers. Her dad served in the Kennedy administration during the missile crisis as the legal adviser during the quarantine. And she's a

phenomenal writer and a very interesting person, had served in the Peace Corps but was getting kind of tired of bourgeois journalism for NPR. And she got interested in covering world conflict when the Kosovo Crisis of 1999 occurred. And she was not very happy with how journalism was being done. Journalists were not as engaged in and going into dangerous spaces and talking to a variety of people rather than sort of sticking with the troops and giving a more business-as-usual story. And she continued that sort of path in post-conflict Afghanistan where she was actually kept in Pakistan while the bombing campaign and before the sort of the seizure of the country had happened. And her experiences there made her throw away her journalistic hat, because what she was finding was that, in the post 9/11 period, America was so traumatized, they were only interested in stories of anger, vengeance, and the vileness of the Taliban. They weren't interested in this other story that was emerging, like American special forces bringing back the old governor of Kandahar, who was basically a war criminal and they had rape gangs and monopolistic control of the country, abuses of women, the whole nine yards. That's who the special forces, that was the best person to bring back to run the province of Kandahar. And so, she covered this and then was so disgusted, she abandoned journalism and started working with a civic rights organization that was backed by the Karzai government to rebuild Afghanistan. So, for six years, she ran small businesses and she fought corruption on the ground floor with no support from the US government whatsoever. And she earned the trust and admiration of those who were suffering under this governor's thrall and eventually became an adviser to three different NATO commanders, because her understanding of the culture, the people, the politics, and the corruption all of a sudden had strategic salience when the Taliban come back. And she worked with Stanley McChrystal and David McKiernan and eventually Petraeus. And she really thought that when the switch to counterinsurgency happened and in this interest in a much more like save-the-people, save-the-war approach to the campaign was happening, that maybe her work in anti-corruption would challenge things. But eventually she found that her main adversary within this camp was the CIA, who preferred to

work with the criminals that they knew and liked rather than fighting corruption that was really at the heart of the problem in Afghanistan. So, she eventually took her hands off and said, I can't, I can't support this anymore, because it doesn't work. And she's been an anti-corruption activist ever since.

HOST/CAT: Wow. And what about Emma Sky?

JASON: Emma Sky was a humanitarian and sort of reconciliation expert who had done work in Palestine before the Iraq War and incredibly brilliant and hard-driven, independent force. She eventually took a job with the British during the post-conflict phase of the Iraq War where she worked for the Coalition Provisional Authority and was astounded. And if you ever get a chance to read her memoir, *The Unraveling*, of the volume of American ignorance and arrogance in trying to manage a country where there was clearly no major plan for its future, only knocking out the Saddam regime. So, she worked on reconciliation between Arabs and Kurds, Shia and Sunni, and was a thorn in the side of most of the US Government for pointing out the fact that they didn't know junk about junk, and they had to admit that. And they refused to. So, there's a section from *Mavericks of War* which references her work that I'd like to share, because I think it's important.

HOST/CAT: Let's just tell listeners, *Mavericks of War* is Jay's latest book. *Mavericks of War, The Need for Unconventional Experts and Eccentrics*. So, yes, please share.

JASON: What do we do to be loved, said one soldier. This guy was quoted as saying, I said that after the first Gulf War of 1990-91, a decade of sanctions with its devastating effects on the health, education, and the economy, and the humiliating defeat of the Second Gulf War, I could well understand why Iraqis were shooting at us. American soldiers were invaders who killed civilians. Expecting love was ridiculous. "Who are you going to believe? A West Point graduate or a lying Arab," said another officer when Sky disagreed with him. She challenged the morally and politically simplistic and dangerous binary thinking

of good guys, pro-American or Kurd, or bad guys, anti-American or Arab, reality was more nuanced. "I wanted to understand who we were fighting and what they wanted. I tried to argue that how we treated people would affect how they reacted to us, like as of this is, this is supposed to be a landmark thought, right?" But the military did not do nuanced, and they were, they were always sure that they were right. So, ignorance and arrogance going hand and hand led to a lot of problems that Sky fought against in trying to reconcile many of the different parties in Iraq.

HOST/CAT: I want to hear more. I wish we had more time.

JASON: Read the book.

HOST/CAT: It's a really great excerpt. For listeners to learn more about you, your work, what's the best way for them to find you? Do you have a website? I do. It's called Ridlerville, And it's a WordPress blog like everybody else from 2010. And it's probably the best way to find information on me and my writing. I also have a formal website called Dreamers in Daylight.

HOST/CAT: Okay. So, Ridlerville.com and Dreamers in Daylight?

JASON: Dreamers in Daylight.

HOST/CAT: Dreamersindaylight.com. Did you want to mention your new class at Johns Hopkins?

JASON: Yeah, sure. I recently got hired to work at Johns Hopkins as a teaching fellow, making classes and teaching them. And the most recent one, Historical Methods, involves revamping the critical skill set that historians need to do in passion, objective work, and we use an incredible variety of case studies from both US and in world history. And I actually just finished up, there's a two-lecture, one-two punch on Holocaust denial and the importance of the historical oppression that became in the public eye in the 1990s when people like David Irving and his ilk were trying to make a lot of money by denying that

the Holocaust happened and eventually leading to a libel suit in the UK which destroyed his career and vindicated others.

HOST/CAT: And is there anything else you want to add about anything?

JASON: Just that if there's a truth that I've learned from being an historian over the past decade, it's the importance of two elements that may seem antithetical, which is critical thinking and empathy. Historians love to be cynics, and they love to be hypercritical, and they like to be skeptical, and these are these are valuable, except for maybe cynicism which sort of presumes something about how human beings are. But at the same time, I'm growing more and more interested in the role of empathy and understanding the other, because I've studied a lot of dead white guys and some of them are fascinating and a lot of them are vile. But I'm more interested in getting outside of my comfort zone and studying the rest of the planet. And that requires not just a critical eye, but it also requires empathy.

HOST/CAT: Thank you so much, Jason S. Ridler Ramirez, for being here.

JASON: Thanks again, Cat.

WAYNE MORSE: What I'm saying is, under our constitution, all the President is, is the administrator of the peoples' foreign policy. Those are his prerogatives, and I am pleading that the American people be given the facts about our foreign policy.

PETER LISAGOR: You know that the American people cannot formulate and execute foreign policy.

WAYNE MORSE: Why did you say that? Why, you're a man of little faith in democracy if you make that kind of statement.

PETER LISAGOR: No.

WAYNE MORSE: I have complete faith in the ability of the American people to follow the facts if you'll give them.

PETER LISAGOR: It isn't that I lack a faith –

WAYNE MORSE: And my charge against my government is we're not giving the American people the facts.

NORMAN SOLOMON: Independent journalist, I.F. says that all governments lie and nothing they say should be believed. Now Stone wasn't conflating all governments, and he wasn't saying that governments lie all the time, but he was saying that we should never trust that something said by a government is automatically true, especially our own, because we have a responsibility to go beneath the surface. Because the human costs of war, the consequences of militaristic policies, what Dr. King called "the madness of militarism," they can't stand the light of day if most people understand the deceptions that lead to the slaughter, and the human consequences of the carnage. If we get that into clear focus, we can change the course of events in this country. But it's not going to be easy and it will require dedication to searching for truth.

HOST/CAT: And that brings us to the end of today's show. That final clip was, once again, from War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits are Spinning Us to Death. Thank you so much for tuning in to We Rise here on 89.3 FM, KPFB. Soon we will have an online archive, so you can find links to resources and share our shows. We do this work in the service of collective liberation. Meeting this historical moment with humility and courage, honoring our ancestors, those who came before us, and the young people who deserve to inherit a safer world. Please do you take good care of yourselves as you digest this material and have a beautiful weekend.