

I'm privileged today to have Andrew Coburn. He's Washington editor of Harpers Magazine. He has written a host of books on national security and produced many films with his wife, Leslie Coburn, including The Peacemaker, starring George Cloony and Nicole Kidman. One of his films of special interest to me was the 1991 documentary on the after affects of the First Gulf War, entitled The War We Left Behind, which he produced for PBS with Leslie Coburn. His most recent book is Kill Chain: The Rise of High Tech Assassinations, dealing with the evolution of drone warfare and the shift to assassination as a principle US military strategy. Kirkus reviews calls it "sharp eyed and disturbing."

Also, Andrew has relations in this country going back to 1814. Maybe he'll tell you about that. Welcome, Andrew Coburn.

**Andrew:** Thank you.

**Blase:** Here I am reading from the UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and emergency relief coordinator Steven O'Brien, who states: "Yemen, the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, and the Yemeni people now face the specter of famine." Would you have any comments.

**Andrew:** I certainly would. I'm so glad you're going this. We hear so much about the disasters in Syria and Iraq, and various other places. But this is - as the officials point out - this is the worst. And not only is it the worst in terms of the arms, and the 19 million people who are in danger - who are in reach of starvation, or close to it, or actually suffering it - we always hear about people who are on the brink of starvation but we are past that now in Yemen. Children are starving to death, no one knows how many really, but it's a very large number. And moreover this is our war, we are directly complicit in this and have been for two years. We're coming up to the second anniversary of this incredible manmade disaster. It's totally manmade - you know, we can talk about other disasters that are due to drought or whatever, but this is completely manmade and it is thanks to the war that was initiated by the Saudi-led coalition, which is armed and supplied by us.

**Blase:** The Saudi news channel claims that the Saudi army liberated Imafliia and DAESH claims it liberated Imaflika. Now, who are we fighting with? Are we working with DAESH?

**Andrew:** It's a very good question that should be asked more often. We fighting both sides. On the one hand, we are aiding and abetting in a meaningful way the Saudi coalition who are waging war on the Houthis, a group in Yemen that seized a large chunk of the country in 2015 and are allegedly in the view of the Saudis pawns of Iran. We're fighting that war on the Saudi side. On the other hand we have Al Queda in the south, who we are also attacking causing great destruction and loss of civilian life with drones and special forces raids and all the rest like you're been hearing about recently. It's clear that Al Queda and hardline jihadists are aligned with the coalition that's fighting the Houthis. It just underlines the madness of our destruction of these countries in which we're attacking everyone.

**Blase:** Well, it's one of the poorest countries in the world. The claim is that Iran is helping the Houthis. Many people deny it. Do you have any thoughts on that relationship?

**Andrew:** Well, the Houthis are a kind of Shia - not the same kind of Shia Muslim at the Iranians. There had been a connection because many years ago the Saudis started to infiltrate their own

jihadis in the Houthis area and the Houthis were upset about this and thought they should assert their Shia identity more forcefully. So they did communicate with the Iranians, but it was mainly to get teachers and religious textbooks and stuff like that. In more recent years, the Iranians did have friendly relations with the Houthis, but no serious scholar or study has shown that Houthis are acting as agents of Iran. It just isn't so, apart from the sort of brazen playing of the Saudis and our own defense department, people like sec def Mattis who everyone in press seems to talk warmly about the voice of moderate sanity in this insane administration. He's completely off the rails on the subject of Iran and by extension Iran in Yemen. Obama had a sort of queasiness of the ongoing atrocity of the Saudi war in Yemen. Not secretary Mattis, who even talked about restarting our supply of cluster bombs to the Saudis, which the Obama administration had decided were a bit much and had stopped shipping the cluster bombs.

**Blase:** Mattis was called Mad Dog in Fallujah. The destruction was so great that the witnesses said it was the birthplace of ISIS. There's a terrible history there.

**Andrew:** Yes, you know we keep reading about how he's read 7,000 books, or has 7,000 books in his library. He doesn't seem to have learned very much from them, I'm afraid to say. I'm horrified to read that UN report, but I'm glad they issued it and hope it has some effect. One thing I should point out - when that report was issued, there was a certain amount of commentary, but there was nothing about the war...you might be left to believe this was about a drought or a hurricane or something beyond man's control. It's all thanks to these wars that we a waging on Yemen.

**Blase:** This seems to be a problem with the democrat party as well. I don't hear them speaking about the war.

**Andrew:** One person who has been speaking about it is Congressman Ted Liu. His record on this has been excellent, as has Senator Murphy of Connecticut, though he's gone rather quiet on the topic lately. There was, last year, thanks to congressmen Liu and Keith Ellison, they did actually get I think they managed to round up 60 votes (from memory, correct me if I'm wrong or off by a bit) to vote against to suspend arms shipments to Saudi Arabia. But shamefully a huge number of democrats and of course republicans votes to keep sending the arms.

**Blase:** I'd like to look in terms of our long standing perpetual war. I have a statement here from Bill Blum, authors of the Killing Hope, and he mentions "it's a scandal in contemporary international law...don't forget while wanton destruction of towns and villages is a war crime of longstanding, the bombing of cities from airplanes goes not only unpunished but virtually unaccused. Air bombardment is state terrorism, the terrorism of the rich. It has torn apart more innocents in the past 6 decades than all the anti-state terrorists who ever lived." This is Bill Blum, and I'm trying to think of this in context of a list of bombings and interventions from Korea to the ones currently going on in multiple countries. These are war crimes. Now how long does this go on.

**Andrew:** Let's back date it a little earlier than Korea. Just this week is the anniversary of the firebombing of Tokyo in March, 1945 when they incinerated 300,000 people in one night. So how long does it go on? Well, for quite some time yet. This is our weapon of choice. This is how we do things. People kicked up a fuss (that's kind of a trite phrase, but...) people spoke out against the recent campaign in East Aleppo and the Russians using airpower there to aid the

Syrian army in recapturing East Aleppo. We hear a lot less of what is going on in Mosul, where we're doing the same thing. Aerial bombardment of cities is what we do.

**Blase:** I'm afraid our people just don't know what's going on. You mention Korea. I've never heard of such a high number of a population being killed as in the North. One third of the population, according to everything that I have read, and generals bragging about the fact that every single city in the North was bombed into first gravel and then into ashes. And now they have a few little missiles. We fire intercontinental ballistic missiles from an air base about 30 miles from here regularly, and we have for years. Fortunately there are no bombs in them. This again is the exceptionalism that we hear. There's a religiosity of false patriotism that we're dealing with and we're trying to break through it. I was so happy to see Andrew Bacevich break through this the other day, calling this the religion of the redeemer - the redeemer! - an officer who lost his son in Iraq, and he's calling it a religion. I think maybe it is. Maybe he's on target.

**Andrew:** I think there's an extra element that we should never leave out. And that is that it's about money. You know, it's a vast industry dependent on this approach on a perpetual basis. You know, we're about to spend a trillion dollars on developing and producing a new bomber, the B21. I think what drives this - in a way, yes, it's a religion - but it's a religion to justify a whole economic system.

**Blase:** Indeed. I have a release here from the Intercept which is titled US Defense Contractors Tell Investors Russian Threat is Great for Business. Weapons makers have told investors that they are relying tensions with Russia to fuel new business in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea and modest increases in its military budget. Well, that's really business is business, I guess. But what a release. And it does worry me on this terrible tension now build up between the Trump situation, the CIA, the democratic party -- is there any way to try to make sense of the tensions that's going on.

**Andrew:** Yes, there is a way to make sense of it, listen to the defense contractors you just quoted. It's about money. You know, we need those tensions with Russia, even though Russia spends comparatively little - the increase in defense spending that Trump is talking about, 54 billion dollars, is more than the entire Russian defense budget. We need a threat to justify this whole business system and these huge expenditures that the economy apparently come to depend on. Then it all makes sense.

**Blase:** The whole world is concerned about it. There's reports coming from almost every source. Here's one from Cairo saying that hundreds of thousands of Yemeni children languishing in refugee camps to which they've fled the American Saudi onslaught are nearing starvation. Families that fled airstrikes are being forced to return to war shattered homes, risking their lives again. The UN and other humanitarian groups describe alarming scenes in the Middle East. Yemen is the poorest country in the Middle East, and this humanitarian just deepens after two years of war. Now everyone knows about it. Is it ever going to stop?

**Andrew:** I wish I could say of course, but I see no political movement to stop it. There has to be a desire on the part - and you can't leave anyone off the hook here, because the Houthies and their allies and former president Salah who is trying to regain power by fighting with that coalition, they won't stop. The Saudis certainly won't stop. We won't stop supplying the Saudis with weapons. So there's the horrifying prospect of a huge chunk of the Yemeni people starving to death, and I should add that Yemen for anyone who knew was a wonderful ancient culture

and a very civilized country with wonderful people and a wonderful tradition of poetry and architecture, it was indeed an incredibly wonderful country which has now been destroyed.

**Blase:** We could say the same of Iraq. We could say similar things of Afghanistan. We're destroyed the cradle of civilization. Now in the midst of all this we have an organization called NATO, and there's going to be a summit in Brussels on May 21 on why we need a world without NATO. Do you have thoughts on that situation.

**Andrew:** The prospect for having a world without NATO I'm afraid are receding. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, people asked "what do we need NATO for now?" And the NATO took pretty effective steps to make sure NATO not only continued and expanded and provided thereby its own justification. The Americans promised Russia that if they pulled out of Eastern Europe, NATO would not expand beyond Germany. Bill Clinton promptly broke that promise to get himself some Polish votes in Cleveland, was one of the basic reasons, and the Russians reacting. They decided "the Cold War isn't really over because you are encroaching on our borders" and this deepened when they tried to get Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. The Russians reacted, of course, and now the NATO states say "oh God we certainly do need NATO because of Russian aggression." So this has been very well manufactured.

**Blase:** The conference feels the same. It's saying that NATO and its member states participate in illegal wars and military interventions from Yugoslavia to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. They contribute massively to international instability, fueling the arms race and further militarization. NATO remains committed to humanity's greatest threat, nuclear weapons. This is one of many important gatherings trying to create peace where there is no peace. What led you, Andrew, to write your most recent book about the Rise of High Tech Assassinations.

**Andrew:** Well, I wanted to explain just where the whole notion of drones and the reality of the technology of drones, which hadn't been properly reported. The whole concept behind them, behind this notion of precision high-value targeting, as they call it, which means basically assassination. The evolution of both these things, the technology and the intellectual notions related to its use. In terms of the technology I wanted to explain that all these movies about drones have one misconception that they always promote: they show pictures from the drone as absolutely clear. This whole notion of the omniscience of drones, that they can see everything. Well, I have a chapter in the book called "Legally Blind," and most of the time the pictures that people are using, that operators use, are not great. Under perfect conditions they are, but most of the time conditions are not perfect. That 20/20 vision - well, the images that the drone sees and transmits and that operators use to target people. The vision is actually 20 over 200, which as it so happens is the legal definition of blindness for most DMVs in this country. If your vision is 20 over 200, you can't get a driver's license. And this explains the reality of military technologies, which are never as perfect as the advertising suggests.

**Blase:** The operators are getting PTSD because they are operating out of places like Nevada. They kill people during the day and then go home to greet their children in the evening. This is an unusual relationship for most fighting people, and this has done great harm to their minds to say nothing about the innocents who have died in funerals, weddings, parties. The world "suspect" eliminates any sense of due process whatsoever, and this absence of due process has arrived in our own country now. It's organized crime. In thinking about today's program, I reflected that the greatest threat to our security is actually our own government because here

we have one individual sharing the key to nuclear disaster, and if he orders people to do that he is ordering an illegal action which they are not bound to carry out. Any action that would lead to biocide would have no legality. And many times our forces carry out illegal actions, and I consider this type of warfare to be as far as I can see illegal as well.

**Andrew:** You know, to bomb jihadis by whipping some ersatz legal justification that doesn't really cut it under international law. But this goes back a long way. I mean, in the old days they used to be ashamed of it and would try to hide it. I talk about it in the book on the early days of the CIA. They produced an assassins manual that suggested you push people under cars and things like that. There were famous episodes of trying to kill Castro and trying to kill Lumumba, but it was still regarded as something pretty far out. You wouldn't have an official government program devoted to it. And you know, latterly, now the CIA, the fastest career track is at a targeter, it a whole career track, you know, assembling dossiers on people, locating them, setting up the kill chain.

**Blase:** We had a similar situation with the CONTRA war. Father Roy found a manual for killing people that was used against liberation theologians and other non-combatants, so this does have a long history going way back to the days of the CIA trying to build the Christian Democratic Party in Italy after World War II. It has a long history, and in many ways I think what's happened now is kind of the apex of this constant war movement with the coming of the new president and him personifying the idea that we just don't have enough military at this time and we need more because we have so little...it's very difficult to talk decently about what's being said. Our poor military is suffering terribly inspite of the fact that it we outspend the rests of the world together.

**Andrew:** The other thing I talk about in Kill Chain is how this whole business of Assassination is completely unproductive. It's sold on the premise that if you kill Mr. Big on the other side, his organization is set back a step and you're one step ahead, whether its Al Queda or ISIS or whatever. But the record shows, and I found interesting records on this, that it has exactly the opposite effect. In Iraq, for example, when the insurgency really go going as we all know, their primary weapon was the homemade mine. It was very effective and maimed thousands of our troops. So the whole war, our strategy to defeat the IED as they call them, improvised explosive devices, so they had a whole effort to kill or capture (usually kill) IED team leaders, these people who were in charge of the various groups laying the bombs. Well, it turned out that in the US army intelligence operation in Baghdad, someone decided to take a look at how effective this strategy was. This was in 2007. So he go the list of the 200 people they'd killed in the previous couple of months. Then he looked to see what happened once we'd kill these people. If our theories were correct, the number of people killed should have gone down. But the truth is that once you assassinated one of these group leaders, killings of Americans went up by 40%. And this has held true in Afghanistan and even for the Israelis in Gaza. You can find the parallels everywhere. We're pursuing this totally misguided strategy every where you look.

**Blase:** Well, we created Pol Pot in Cambodia by dropping more bombs on Laos and Cambodia than were dropped during WWII. That's enough to create fanaticism. I think we created the fanaticism of ISIS in the same way. People don't like to see their homes broken into and their families savaged. Can you imagine being in a situation like that? Wouldn't you expect some people to become slightly rabid in their response to a think like that? It is possible for us to break through our dogma of exceptionalism? There's a sharp rise in children killed and maimed in the

war in Afghanistan. 2016 saw the highest number of children killed since the war started. Winning wars? What does that mean when you're destroying this tiny, endangered planet.

We can only think internationally because international action is the only think that can save our oceans and all the ecosystems we depend upon for survival. By 1900, the Hague and other place were saying that the day of nationalism is over. All nationalism will lead to more wars, that's it - this was in 1900. That was the time of internationalism and international peace. No one was listening, right?

**Andrew:** Well, we know what happened. The book *The Sleepwalkers* I recommend everyone read. People were making decisions all along the way but not thinking through the consequences, and the result was WWI. Now we are in a situation of perpetual war with Obama bombing seven countries by the time he'd left. I hate to think about the number of countries we'll be bombing by the time this administration is finished.

**Blase:** It's so curious that our general Eisenhower saw this coming. He was a great interventionist. My God, he was very much involved in the overthrow of Mossadegh in Iran and Arbenz in Guatemala. He was involved in planning the Bay of Pigs. But is there such a thing as the Deep States that's going to tell Eisenhower what to do. What can you tell us about the consistency of our warmaking which continues no matter which party or individual is in power.

**Andrew:** The other thing we should look at is the consistency of the defense budget, which bears no relation to the degree of engagement in wars going on. One fact always jumps out at me, and I discuss it in my book *Kill Chain*. With the end of the Cold War, with its huge defense budgets justified by our conflict with the Soviet Union, with huge air forces and naval and land forces all because we were afraid of the Red Menace and all that, then the Red Menace abruptly disappears. And what happens? The defense budget never actually fell after the end of the Cold War below the Cold War average, and now of course is vastly higher.

**Blase:** We actually had conversion meetings. I was at one with Lockheed Martin and the military. How can we convert to peaceful spending and people pointed out that Lockheed Martin would have been perfect to convert to building transportation systems. But the representative from Lockheed said "we are accustomed to having one customer." And so we went to Spain to ask them to build rail cars, and we let the whole idea of conversion from military spending go down the drain.

**Andrew:** I'm not much of a fan of conversion because if you'd had Lockheed build your trains they would not have been very effective. (laughter) Years and years ago in New York, the Drummond Corporation at one point - its now been absorbed into Northrup - they thought they should try some civilian projects and they build some busses, and NY bought a bunch of them. They kept breaking down. Now they did produced an excellent canoe for a period of time. I had one, which I liked a lot.

**Blase:** A new fighter is spending more than anything in the past - the F35.

**Andrew:** And remember he can't take off if there's a thunderstorm anywhere with 25 miles.

Blase: Yes, well that's no problem, just use them when there aren't thunderstorms.

**Andrew:** Yes, of course, and hope no one attacks when there is one. (laughter)

**Blase:** The ghost of President Eisenhower Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

**Andrew:** Well, he waited until he was halfway out the door before he said it.

**Blase:** I recognize that, sad to say. It's often the case. We have a comment here from our former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Jack Matlock. Here's what he says:

Our press seems to be in a feeding frenzy regarding contacts that President Trump's supporters had with Russian Ambassador Sergei Kislyak and with other Russian diplomats. The assumption seems to be that there was something sinister about these contacts, just because they were with Russian diplomats. As one who spent a 35-year diplomatic career working to open up the Soviet Union and to make communication between our diplomats and ordinary citizens a normal practice, I find the attitude of much of our political establishment and of some of our once respected media outlets quite incomprehensible. What in the world is wrong with consulting a foreign embassy about ways to improve relations? Anyone who aspires to advise an American president should do just that.

Yesterday I received four rather curious questions from Mariana Rambaldi of Univision Digital. I reproduce below the questions and the answers I have given.

**Andrew:** Well, he's entirely correct. Of course, that's what diplomats do, it's absurd to say that no one should talk to the Russian ambassador. There's plenty to say about the Trump administration, but this whole focus of attack and focusing on Trump's mild remarks about having some kind of rapprochement with Russia and friendlier relations - for this to become the focus of the democrats attack is entirely misplaced. It's very shortsided, and I would suggest maybe prompted in some cases by the alarms felt by the people we've been talking about earlier, the Lockheed and Raytheon's that don't want any rapprochement with Russia or a reduction in the enormous profits they make off the taxpayer. Of course, the spending won't go down, it never does. But they didn't care for the idea of better relations with Russia.

**Blase:** Real diplomacy is with our adversaries, those we have problems with. I can recall way back in 91 in Baghdad I met with Arafat and he said no one would talk with him. He said he could talk to people in the Arab world, but Americans would talk with him and he wanted to war them about the lose lose situation they were about to get themselves into." Ambassador Andrew Young was fired because he talked with Arafat.

**Andrew:** Yes, very silly. But I've just noticed that my phone is about out of power but I've enjoyed this very much.

**Blase:** It's been such a pleasure talking with you and thanks for much for joining us today, Andrew Coburn.

Join Voices for Creative Nonviolence, CODEPINK, Veterans For Peace, Nevada Desert Experience and other activists at Creech Air Force Base, Indian Springs, Nevada for a

3rd national mobilization of nonviolent resistance to shut down killer drone operations in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and everywhere. In 2005, Creech Air Force Base secretly became the first U.S. base in the country to carry out illegal, remotely controlled assassinations using the MQ-1 Predator drones, and in 2006, the more advanced Reaper drones were added to its arsenal. Creech drone personnel sit behind computers in the desert north of Las Vegas and kill "suspects" thousands of miles away. In 2014, it was leaked that the CIA's criminal drone assassination program, officially a separate operation from the Air Force's, has been piloted all along by Creech's super-secret Squadron 17. Creech is where the drone killing started, it will be where we end it!

Friends, we're seeing terror raids in our own country continue and intensify. According to the New York Times:

In Virginia, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents waited outside a church shelter where undocumented immigrants had gone to stay warm. In Texas and in Colorado, agents went into courthouses, looking for foreigners who had arrived for hearings on other matters.

At Kennedy International Airport in New York, passengers arriving after a five-hour flight from San Francisco were asked to show their documents before they were allowed to get off the plane.

The Trump administration's far-reaching plan to arrest and deport vast numbers of undocumented immigrants has been introduced in dramatic fashion over the past month. And much of that task has fallen to thousands of ICE officers who are newly emboldened, newly empowered and already getting to work.

Gone are the Obama-era rules that required them to focus only on serious criminals. In Southern California, in one of the first major roundups during the Trump administration, officers detained 161 people with a wide range of felony and misdemeanor convictions, and 10 who had no criminal history at all.

Friends, these are inhuman practices that can't be tolerated. ICE is celebrating that the "shackles have come off." Well, they have moral kindred that go back to the 1930s in Germany, and they are the same people who were searching for the Jews in the 1930s. We cannot let this repeat itself, we must say never again and not permit this to happen ever again, not here, not anywhere. Thanks to joining us today on World Focus.