

[Transcript] The Realignment / 332 | How the Congo's Cobalt Fuels Electric Vehicles, Batteries, and Modern-Day Slavery with Siddharth Kara

Marshall here. Welcome back to The Realignment.

Hey everyone, you are listening to the Friday edition of The Realignment.

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Also, if you haven't gotten the chance to check out Saga and my Ask Me Anything

episode from the past two weeks, go to our Supercast page at

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Today's guest is Siddharth Kharra, researcher, activist on modern slavery and author of the

forthcoming Cobalt Red, How the Blood of the Congo Powers Our Lives. This follows the

Realignment's

coverage of energy and environmental issues. The TLDR on Cobalt is that it is the essential

component in every lithium-iron rechargeable battery, everything from smartphones and laptops

to electric vehicles. With the global pivot to EVs, Cobalt is only going to 10x in importance

over the next decade. Cobalt mining comes at an extreme cost, especially in the Congo,

where 70% of the world's supply is located. Exploring the story involves everything from

supply chains to child and peasant labor, and as we discussed in the episode,

justice, sweatshop, labor conditions, controversies, where the cost of 1990s

globalization, conditions in the Congo, and the cost of progress will define the 2020s.

Huge thank you to Lincoln Network for supporting the podcast. Hope you all enjoy this conversation.

Siddharth Kaur, welcome to the Realignment. Oh, I'm so pleased to be here. Thank you.

Let me ask you a naive sounding question. Why does slavery still exist?

Yeah, it's not naive at all. In fact, it's one of the most pertinent questions we should be asking

because we study in history books that slavery was abolished in the 1800s,

starting in England and eventually in the United States. So this is all done, right?

There's no more slavery. But in fact, what happened is slavery was abolished on paper,

but it persists and it persists and continues to evolve across the global economy. For the

same reason slavery has always existed. There's a certain class of people who are deemed to be

worthless and can be exploited for their labor in servile, offensive, brutal conditions to generate

profit up the chain. And that's why slavery continues to exist. And there's a kind of

modification I want to add to the question because I'm not just asking that in the sense of

history was supposed to be over. There is Hegelian progress. And we've moved on from the 19th

century

more in the sense of slavery is economically inefficient. A country that depends on slave

labor isn't going to be as economically productive as a country that let's say is still impoverished,

but is still paying people decent wages. Like why would a country, especially once you kind of take

the racial and more sort of like political ideas, side things out of it, why would a country allow

that to continue? Well, so slavery is inefficient for everyone except for the slave exploiter.

And it's very efficient for them and their stakeholders up the chain. And by that, I mean,

if you run a business, any business throughout history, labor has always been one of the highest,

if not the highest, expenses. And so slavery, of course, it's cruelty, it's violence and all of

that. But fundamentally, it was an economic crime driven by the desire to minimize or eliminate

labor costs. And then for the exploiter who does that, for the slave and producer who does that,

they can generate more profit by stripping out labor costs. So that economic rationale continues to exist. And it exists and is still beneficial for those who exploit people and survive labor conditions across the underbelly of the global economy. There is a subclass of humanity because they are grindingly poor, disproportionately people of color, disproportionately in some sectors, female gender, who are either out of sight, do not count as much. And so one layer up from them, there's a class of reprobates who are willing to exploit individuals in slave-like conditions and then pass the profit benefit up the chain. And once you get to the top of the chain, you're talking about multinational corporations that sell us our clothes and our food and our chocolates and our jewelry and our shampoo and our pizza dough and our gadgets and our cars. You think, well, shouldn't they be paying attention to what's happening all the way down their chain to make sure that there's nothing like child labor or child slavery or even just extreme labor exploitation taking place? And that's the pertinent question that we need to ask across the global economy. Why isn't there more attention paid by the stakeholders at the top of the chain? We're ultimately also profiting from labor exploitation. Why aren't they taking more accountability and paying more attention to conditions at the bottom of their supply chains? Yeah, this is a good time to get into definitions then. We were just chatting before the recording started. Your first ever podcast appearance was the episode you did on Cobalt Red with Joe Rogan. I was saying that that's the definition of jumping into the furthest end of the pool to have that be your first episode. But during the conversation, you were kind of interchangeably referring to people in the Congo as slaves. But then other times, you'd refer to people who are being paid less than a dollar a day. So what actually is the definition of slavery? Because isn't as simple I'm taking as you're not literally paid anything at all. What's the actual definition now then? Terrific question because throughout most of history, slavery meant owning someone like property, literally having title over them and owning them like property like you would a horse or a chair or a house or a car or whatever. And so like any other piece of property, you can do whatever you want to do it. And so that's what people did throughout history to slaves in the case of a human being exploiting them and abusing them and profiting from their labor. Now, in the modern sense, today you can't own a person anywhere on the planet legally. But that doesn't mean it's impossible to treat them as if you own them like property. And that's what people mean by modern day sleep or modern sleep. You can't actually legally own someone, but you can essentially treat them in that same way and exploit them for their labor in horrid conditions. Now, whether they're paid 50 cents or a dollar or a dollar and a half or given food or given shelter or \$2 and 22 cents, that's ultimately irrelevant. What's relevant is if you're exploiting someone and treating them like property against their will, coercing their labor, that constitutes modern day slavery in how we think about it. So what does coercing labor mean then? So coercing labor, when you think of the type of population that you vulnerable to that, like let's say like migrants, that seems to be like a very obvious opportunity for coerced labor. But in the case of once again, the Congo, we're talking about people who live in the country. So it's not maybe as much the case of migrants, I would guess. What actually forces the coercion part to happen in a situation like that? So there's a range of scenarios and international law tends to recognize that coercion can take many forms. So there's the obvious forms of coercion, which is the threat of violence.

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I mean, that's the easy one that if you don't do this work, there will be violence inflicted upon you to make you do it. And so that's easy, easy enough coercion. But coercion can take other forms. There can be psychological forms of coercion. There can also be coercion by circumstance. So let's say you have a population of people who are displaced or grindingly poor. And there is no other way to survive but doing a certain kind of work. And you know that basically they'll accept any condition of labor as long as it means that they get something that will help them survive for that day. And so there's coercion and duress forces of extreme poverty, of displacement, of lack of alternative. And it gets a little bit fuzzier there. But international law is very clear on recognizing that these constitute forms of coercion as well. It doesn't have to be the overt, I will beat you or stab you or shoot you if you don't do this. It could be you don't have another option to survive. And this is the only option you have. And I'll give you my 50 cents or a dollar. So you have enough food to eat for today. If you do this work, which is dangerous, you will probably get injured, you may very well die. But you think, what's my alternative? You know, I have this devil's choice. I do this work that may invariably kill me on any given day, or I may suffer a grievous injury on any given day, but I'll eat. Or I don't do it, and I don't eat. And when you have that kind of scenario, those are coercive forces of lack of alternative, of duress, of poverty. And when someone up the chain is relying on that reality to avail of the products of that labor, in the case of the Congo, cobalt, that's slavery. That's slavery. I'm not saying every person digging for cobalt in the Congo is a slave, but many of them are. Yeah, that's the perfect pivot to the actual book topic. So a couple of questions here. So A, just what is cobalt at a literal like natural resources level? And then two, like, what's the significance to the broader electronics conversation that comes in there? Yeah, so right now, everyone who's listening to our conversation is listening to it, I'm confident on a device that has cobalt in it. 99.99999%, if not 100%. Cobalt- Quick question. What would be that? What would be that 0.001? The 0.001% is just me accounting for the possibility that there's something out there I don't know about yet that allows people to listen to this podcast. I don't know. So the real answer is you don't know of anything else that isn't it? Yeah. Yeah, like that 0.001% is just I toss that out for God because he's probably got knowledge I don't have. But everybody is listening on what? A smartphone, a tablet, a laptop, some other rechargeable device. Cobalt is in the battery. So what is cobalt? Cobalt is a metal. And it is found in the cathode part of just about every single lithium ion rechargeable battery made in the world today. That's all the gadgets that we use to conduct our daily lives, as well as increasingly electric vehicles. They have cobalt in their batteries as well. So cobalt is ubiquitous. We can't function. You and I, people like us, we cannot function. We cannot get through a day without a cobalt. Now, roughly three fourths of the world's supply of cobalt is mined in a small patch of the Congo. So in a way, people like us, many people in the world, billions of people in the world cannot function on a day to day basis without cobalt coming out of the Congo. And it is mined in appalling, subhuman, violent, dangerous conditions, unsustainable conditions involving massive pollution, contamination, clear cutting of trees, just utter destruction of people and earth in the Congo, feeding cobalt up the chain to companies that are worth trillions of dollars and sell us the devices that we use every day. And as I said, increasingly also the electric vehicles that we are adopting to transition out of fossil fuels

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and attain climate sustainability goals. And what's interesting, what you just articulated, there is, obviously, we're going to do a section of this podcast where we're comparing the movement you're describing to the 1990s debates over sweatshop labor, but it seems like a key obvious difference then, though, is that 70% of the cobalt is there. So this isn't like with Bangladesh, where there's a debate about, okay, maybe this could be in Mexico, maybe this could be in Vietnam. This is with the whole point of 1990s globalization. It was a race to the bottom, which ultimately featured debates and choices there. But if we do have our goals with electric vehicles, but just basic cell phones, laptops, et cetera, someone is going to have to get something from the Congo no matter what happens. So can you just talk about this dynamic I'm describing? Yeah, that's right. You're right on point. That's exactly right. I mean, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, capitalism won the day and the capitalist model spread across the world. And as you said, race to the bottom, where can I find the cheapest labor to make my stuff? And so then you've got garments made in Bangladesh, widgets manufactured in China, and so on, right? You can go across the global economy. Where is their cheaper, under-regulated shadowy labor markets where I can get things made on the cheap, because now the world is open, and I can ship it from anywhere for a pretty, you know, marginal cost and then sell it at retail and generate more profit. And so you're right. If attention suddenly shined on child labor in garment factories in a certain country, okay, we can just shift a little bit over here or shift a little bit over there. But with resources similarly, you can get a lot of things from a lot of places, oil, gold, you know, on down the list. The world is full of these things. The Congo, and when I say the Congo, I mean a small patch to the Congo in the southeastern corner, holds more cobalt than the rest of the planet combined. So you cannot avoid Congolese cobalt. There's not enough other cobalt out there remotely to meet demand. And it's not just that more than half of the world's cobalt is there, but roughly three-fourths of production is there of cobalt supply. And forecasts are only that it will increase in terms of share. So, yeah, you can't just say, well, let's shift our garment factory from this place to that place. No, we have to fix the problem on the ground in the Congo. And it's a problem stakeholders at the top of the chain are all aware of. But they turn the other way, look the other way, continue minting profits, continue selling us the gadgets we need to serve function each day. And the question is, well, why is it okay to treat the people and the environment in the Congo in this manner, in Africa, right, in this manner? And it's okay, because that's how the Global North has been treating the people and resources of Africa for generations and centuries. So it's just the latest chapter in a long story of foreign pillage and plunder of the people, resources of Africa. So here's the question that I'm always interested in the kind of counterfactual of like, why, in the case of this specific resource, is it leading to this terrible context? So in certain statement about the Global North, oil is exploited, there are all sorts of resources that are exploited, but they don't always result in a situation as bad as we would describe in the Congo here. So is the reality just that because there's an essential monopoly operationally on this resource to like the Congolese state is like near zero when it comes to state capacity? I guess what I'm kind of trying to ask you is, if we're talking about profit incentives and like massive corporations who have stockholders and everything like that, it seems like your incentive would always be to race to the race

to the bottom. So why is cobalt unique in comparison to all sorts of other resources, which obviously there's history, there's bad dynamics, but wouldn't I think extend to this level of depravity almost? This is extreme. There are severely harmful, violent, exploitative conditions at the bottom of many, many global supply chains. But what's happening in the Congo is extreme. Of course, because of the amount of money that's generated at the top of the chain, it's extreme because of how many people's lives this chain touches, everyone. But it's also extreme because of what's happening on the ground in the Congo. And that's a mix of uniquely tormenting circumstances. The Congo was starting off at the bottom already. I mean, it is, I'm quite confident in saying the most heavily exploited place on earth. And I don't mean just now, I mean, going back generations. One fourth of all the slaves carted across the Atlantic throughout the duration of the entire Atlantic slave trade departed from Luongo Bay, which is the mouth of the Congo River. Okay, across three and a half centuries. So already you've got a massive destruction of people, culture, family, economy caused by three and a half centuries of the slave trade. Then you get to the colonial period. And this is the Belgians and the malignant consequences and legacy of King Leopold. And history is not without its own tragic sense of irony. And you can't make these things up. But Leopold got his hands on the entire Congo, the entire interior of Africa in 1885 as personal property. He owned it personally. And that was the same year that a fellow named Ben's invented an internal combustion engine and put together a car that had steel clad wooden wheels that could go up to a certain speed before the wheels fell apart. Three years later, another fellow named Dunlop invented a rubber tire. And that allowed the car to go much faster. And lo and behold, the Congo rainforest was one of the largest known sources of rubber trees on the planet. And Leopold deployed this mercenary army that terrorized, killed and slaughtered the Congolese population to extract rubber sap. He walked away with billions of dollars. The Congo was devastated, suffering probably a 50% destruction in its population. In addition to the harm, tear and consequence of that brief 23 period of colonial destruction. Then the country gets independence and it has a chance. It has a chance at freedom. It has a chance to use its resources for its own benefit. And its first leader, Patrice Lumumba, that was his great promise that won him the election at independence. And at that time, the minerals in the part of Congo that are relevant to Kobal called Katanga had just been prospective in the early 1900s. And they were starting with copper mining. And by independence, mining in that part of the country, the 80% of the country's entire economy, 11 days after the country was free, Belgium annexed the mining provinces. They didn't want to get, they wanted to keep the money. And then there's a whole song I want to get into of how the the neocolonial powers of Western Europe, the United Nations and the United States conspired to rip apart the Congo, assassinate the democratically elected president and install a bloody dictator, Joseph Mobutu, in his place because he'd keep the minerals flowing in the direction they wanted. So the Congo never had a chance. It was just corruption, destruction, poverty, and then violence after violence. And so that's your starting point. When you get to year 2010 and the Cobalt Revolution takes off, a country, a people with such a history of destruction, Conrad, who was in, Joseph Conrad, who was in Congo during the Leopold's time, that's what inspired Heart of Darkness. And to this day, it is still the Heart of Darkness. This is just a new chapter. And now we have a new automobile renaissance. Remember, it was rubber for rubber tires the first time the

car was invented. Now we've got electric cars, which are important for us from a sustainability climate standpoint. But they need cobalt in those batteries. And guess who has all the cobalt? Once again, Congo. So the new pillage has begun. I just want to shout out King Leopold's ghost. I saw that, you know, Adam Hush hired blurb like the front of the book, it's on the cover. So that's a huge kind of like huge endorsement for your work. So folks who definitely want to learn more about

that 1800s to like early 1900s period, definitely check that out. A question about sort of post independence, because I don't know that much about the period, was the kind of like intervention and

corruption, was that like tied to the Cold War? So was that like US versus the Soviet Union? Was that part of the dynamic? Yeah, that was part of it. And I'm glad you mentioned King Leopold's ghost, by the way. I mean, people should read that book because you can't understand Congo, you can't understand Africa, you know, without understanding that period of not just the Congo's history, but Africa's history. It's not just the slave trade, but it's what was done post slave trade during the colonial period. But yeah, this, this Soviet dynamic was a big factor. So Lumumba, I mentioned him, he was the country's first democratically elected president, won the election on the promise of keeping the country's resources for its own benefit, for the benefit of its people. Remember, this is a country that's coming out of centuries of foreign plunder. So it's a natural nationalist message, but it got the Belgians and their sort of neocolonial pals really anxious.

So as I said, Belgium annexed the mining provinces 11 days after independence, so the country's thrown into crisis. Lumumba reached out to the United Nations. This was 1960, 1961. He reached out to the United Nations for help saying, look, they just chopped off part of our country and we need that to survive. Can you send a force to kick the Belgians out and reunify our country? And the UN sent a force to stabilize, but they did not kick out the Belgians. They let them stay there. They let them keep the mining provinces. So Lumumba said, well, we can't survive as a country. What's the point of the UN if you're not going to help, you know, kick out these invaders who have chopped off part of our most valuable part of our country? So we turned to the Soviet Union. He said, can you help? And the minute he did that, he sealed his fate. The US, the UN, Belgium, they couldn't stomach the idea that those mineral riches that were so valuable would be directed towards the Soviet Union.

And they immediately started a plot to assassinate Lumumba. And within six months, he had been killed, chopped into pieces, dissolved in acid, bones grind down, except for one tooth that was taken by the Belgian head of police as a souvenir. And that was the lesson that was taught to anybody who was thinking of running a country in post-colonial Africa and not playing ball. And so, yeah, it was very much about Cold War. It was also very much about basically saying, okay, you can have your freedom now, but only if you continue sending resources our way. And if you

don't, we'll make lessons of, you know, your supposedly elected leaders to teach you what the consequences will be. Yeah. And I ask about the Cold War context, because obviously, you know, this came up during your Rogan interview, there's a huge global competition over cobalt batteries, like those styles of technology, really. So is there any, obviously, like, it's not as if the US and China are in like a purely ideological struggle. It's not quite the same like metaphor, but does international competition play into the dynamic for seeing

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today at all? Yeah, China, China, it's China's, they're taking their turn at pillaging the Congo right now. Before anybody knew what was happening, they cornered the entire cobalt market in the Congo. They signed some very corrupt deals with the former president, Joseph Kabila. There's been some very thorough investigating done by journalists that, you know, he siphoned off money, took bribes and paybacks to basically carve up these huge mining concessions and sell them off

to China state run mining companies. And Chinese companies run 15 of the 19 major mining concessions

in the mining provinces of the Congo. That's where all the cobalts coming from. So they control the production. They supplied roughly 75 to 80% of refined cobalt to the global market. So they have the supply chain. They also have two of the biggest battery manufacturers. So from dirt to battery,

they dominate the supply chain, vertically integrated. And so there's, and the U.S. has no mining presence in the Congo at all. There was one U.S. mining company there called Freeport MacMoran. But they sold off their concession to a Chinese company. And that ended the U.S. presence

there. And now the U.S. and its Western allies are trying to play catch up because they realize China has a complete control of this very valuable and crucial supply chain. But there's just not much else cobalt out there. So President Biden had actually his administration signed an MOU, I think a week or two ago, with the DRC and Zambia to support and cultivate EV battery supply chains. What that actually means we'll have to see. But there's definitely an effort to play catch up on the part of the U.S. because they were left sort of flat-footed in the time that China moved in, secured territory, and basically monopolized this chain.

And you know, we're kind of playing shorthand when we just refer to the Congo. But by you referring to Zambia, the DRC, the Democratic Republic of Congo, what countries are we actually talking about here? Yeah. So DRC is Democratic Republic of the Congo. That's like the entire central heart of Africa. If you look at a map, it's the entire midsection of the country.

It's surrounded by eight or nine other African countries working clockwise. You've got there's Republic of Congo, which is a small country, just to the west of the DRC. You've got the Central African Republic to the north, and you've got Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi to the east, moving down to Zambia on the southeast and south, and then Angola to the southwest. So it's the entire central part of the continent surrounded by eight or nine other countries. The mineral cobalt copper rich soil is in an area called the Central African Copper Belt, which is this little crescent, like 400 kilometers by 100 kilometers. About 90% of it or 85% of it of that crescent is in the southeastern part of the DRC. And then there's a touch of it that's in Zambia.

It's mostly copper in that part of the copper belt. As you move northwest along that crescent, there's more and more density and grade of cobalt attached to the copper.

So another question that comes to mind then is, given your articulation of how extensive just Chinese ownership of the chain is, what exactly are we or anyone really supposed to do?

And not just in the like, what can I as an individual do? I'm more just mean that,

and once again, this gets complicated because we're talking about the global north versus the global south, but a lot of these frameworks and these arguments tend to be made within a day. Like quasi-western human rights framework, which is definitely one at a minimum. You could

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agree if a Chinese don't believe in, subject themselves to, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. So how does that kind of play into this? Yeah, look, I don't think we have to mince our words. I mean, the Chinese companies operating in the Congo do not incorporate concepts of human rights and sustainability in the way that you and I would if we were running those lines. Okay. And quick question. When you say that you and I would, I'll be ungenerous to the two of us and just assume we're just rapacious capitalists in this joint venture, I'm sure there are legal limits. That's right. So there's our more personal bike morals, but there's also legal limits, I'm assuming. Yeah. Say you and I were running a mining company with headquarters in the US. We are subject to the Foreign Practices Act. We are subject to a certain level of auditing, a certain level of public disclosure of any treachery we may get involved in. We can be investigated for bribery or corruption. If some journalists were to head down there and uncover that you and I are exploiting Congolese children in servile, hazardous, miserable labor conditions, they'd write a story about it. Some congressmen would pick it up and maybe make a convening on it. I'm not saying our country's perfect and our system is perfect. No, of course not. Because at the top of the chain are US-based companies availing of this cobalt without consequence. And so we have to recognize that. But there are mechanisms for internal correction and policing that we have that certainly China does not. And so they're operating there. And I'm telling you this from firsthand observation, months on the ground, repeated trips across years. People and earth in the mining provinces of the Congo are being utterly destroyed. It's only about the loot. It's only about what's valuable in the dirt. And that's what's being pulled out at a rapacious pace without consideration for the consequences near and long term to the people and environment in that part of the Congo. What happens when everything's scavenged out of the ground and these companies move on, leaving nothing but poverty, misery, and valueless dirt behind? What happens to the people there? No one's investing in the communities there. No one's trying to develop, support, or empower communities there. When I say no one, I mean these companies, they say they are, they say they do, but you get there and there's nothing happening. So yes, you and I, we can't fix this problem as individuals. We can raise awareness and we must and should. And that's what you're doing now with this conversation, which is so valuable and so important. But ultimately, it is up to the stakeholders at the top of the chain to start fixing this problem because demand started with them. No one put a gun to the heads of these companies and said, you must use Cobalt or else. They started a chain of events by putting Cobalt in batteries and selling us these things. And they have to own and take accountability for the consequences of that chain of events all the way down to the child caked in toxic dirt, grime, and filth in the Congo. And their refusal to do so is a problem that this country needs to remedy because many of these companies, not all of them, are headquartered here. There are others, of course, headquartered in other countries, but the big titans of industry, okay, they're here. And the problems start with them and need the solutions need to begin with them. So two questions follow from that then. So one, could you, and I know you're comfortable doing this, like name some names, but then two, what do they say in regards to this, right? Because there's a counter, I'm not saying it's a morally okay counter, but there's obviously, because once again, given the legal dynamics, frankly, the 1990s sweatshop stuff was a disaster for companies like Nike. There's a reason why Phil Knight has two or three chapters on it in his big autobiography. So what do they say in

response to the dynamics that you're describing? Because you're not, once again, like this is extensive, but you're not the first person to bring this up in these contexts.

No, no, that's absolutely right. I mean, there have been some NGOs on the ground trying to expose this truth. There's some journalists who have been into the Congo trying to expose this truth. There are people who have come before me and many people will come after me. Now, my book is the first book on this subject. And I think I've been to places and gone deeper than just about any other outsider has to uncover the truth, not the first layer, not even the second layer, but all the way down to the inner deep truth of what's happening in the Congo. And I think that's what my book reveals through the voices of the Congolese people. But what do the companies say? They say that there's no problem. Or if there is a problem, it's not in their supply chain. And they say that they uphold human rights standards all the way down to the mining level. And they have zero tolerance policies on child labor. And they've given money to so and such foundation and so and such NGO. And all of our chain is adheres to standards of international human rights and sustainable practices. And they'll all say it down to the mining level. And then you get down to the mining level and you see that that's all a fiction.

It's all a fiction. None of what they say they're doing is actually being done on the ground. And I can only assume it's because they think, well, who's actually going to go down to the Congo? And demonstrate otherwise. And until that day, we can just carry on with business as usual. And even when that day comes, we'll probably find some way to spin it and make it go away because I put myself in their shoes. These are trillion dollar super powerful companies with all the lobbying influence and marketing influence in the world. The problems of the people in the Congo are a minor annoyance, even if even if revealed. Okay, that's so what we have to do is continue bringing ground truth up to the world, world's attention until they can't ignore it anymore and have to take reasonable and sustained efforts to address all of the offense, all of the indignity, all of the exploitation, all of the pillage and plunder that's taking place as a consequence of a sequence that began with their demand for Kabul.

You know, something I'm wondering, because once again, we're doing the comparison to the 1990s sweatshops. And Nike, I'm wondering if at almost like consumer level, there's a difference between like hardware and just like consumer goods. So it's like one thing to put on a pair of, you know, Air Jordans, when there's this broad campaign about how sweatshop labor and all those bad things, there's actually the ability to put pressure on like Michael Jordan himself. But with my iPhone or something, I don't think people have like the same attachment to hardware goods versus just like generic consumer ones. Like what do you think about

that? Yeah, well, the irony is you could survive and function perfectly fine on a day to day basis without those sneakers or the shirt that's being made in those conditions of child labor and sweatshops. But you can't function at all from sunrise to sunset without that smartphone you just picked up or any of the other gadgets that we use. And so in point of fact, we should feel a very deep attachment to what's happening in the Congo. And I think that's the connective tissue that will be formed as this story continues to be exposed that wait a minute. Every time I plug in my phone and I send out a tweet or I check my Instagram or whatever you do on social media or send an email or take a photo, I'm doing that by virtue of the exploitation, injury, contamination and death of people in the Congo. We have to feel that viscerally

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because we're so intimately connected to it no matter that there are thousands of miles away and layers in the supply chain separate us. Ultimately, there is an unrelenting line of connection between us and children in the Congo by virtue of the batteries and all the stuff we use every day. So let's make the chain literally because we've talked about I think both ends. So we've talked about young children literally just digging up a month's toxic sludge. We've talked about Apple like a big company. What's actually in between? So A, what's in between and who owns what? So are the children employed by a Chinese mining concession? What's in between

those two places? Yes. So I go through this in detail in my book because I spent a lot of time tracing the supply chain because you asked about what would companies say? Well, one of the things

they say is well, it's someone else's responsibility downstream and they keep pointing their finger downstream until the last finger is pointed at the kid in the Congo and then no one's accepted responsibility for him or her. So what does the chain look like? So if you start at the bottom and you've got a child and their mother or father and sister scrounging through toxic conditions to gather cobalt and they gather it up and they put it in a sack. That's the very bottom of the bottom of the chain. That sack of cobalt that they'll sell for a couple of dollars and that's their income for the day will be sold to traders. They're called negotiations and those traders will sell the cobalt either to another layer in the supply chain called buying houses or they'll sell it directly to mining companies. If they sell it to buying houses, the buying houses sell it to mining companies. So no matter what, it gets sold to mining companies and from that point forward, we're in the formal supply chain. So mining company then processes the ore, the stone has various things in it, cobalt's never by itself in nature. It's always attached to copper and nickel and sometimes radioactive uranium. So that's another kind of exposure these children and their parents are suffering. So they process that ore to separate the cobalt from the copper from the nickel and so on into sort of a crude but separated metal form. That then gets exported by truck and then see mostly to China where it's then refined to commercial grade form and I think last year China supplied the world with about 75 or 80% of refined cobalt to the world supply so almost all of it. That refined cobalt gets sold to battery manufacturers who then make the battery that goes in the phone or the laptop or the e-scooter or the

e-bike or the whatever and then of course the electric car. So then the battery gets sold to the manufacturer of the phone in the car and then that gets sold to us. So that's the sequence of events. So here's the important thing. Formal supply chain is from the mining company up. In formal supply chain is mining company down and there are these layers of intermediaries, traders and buying houses that basically serve as a laundering mechanism to get childmine cobalt into the formal supply chain because the mining company doesn't want to go and just buy it from the kid. The optics wouldn't work because they have to say no child labor in our supply so it gets laundered through these little traders and depots and buying houses and then put into the formal supply chain. Now crucially, crucially the other way in which artisanal cobalt ends up in the formal supply chain is that despite claims to the contrary almost every single industrial mine, the formal part of the supply chain, has artisanal miners working inside. They'll say they're not there because who's going to show

otherwise but they're all there digging cobalt, boosting production for penny wages. So that part of it doesn't even have to go through intermediaries. They just dig on the mining concession and it's sold right into the formal supply chain directly. Then of course there's valuable dirt all over the place near villages and in forests and so on and that's where other people dig and that part gets funneled through these intermediaries right into the formal supply chain. So for his last section I want to hit a couple news you can use things for folks. So let's talk about different actors like what in your ideal world with the US federal government, regulatory agencies, state department, etc do about this. Ideal world? I'll tell you exactly what I would like to see. We have something called the Trade Facilitation Act that prohibits the import of goods made through child labor or forced labor. You can't get it out of the port on arrival if it can be demonstrated that some part of it in piece or whole was made through child labor forced labor. Well I'd like to see that applied to every smartphone, every tablet, every laptop, and every electric vehicle that's arriving on our shores because I can guarantee you they all have child labor, forced labor, and worse inside of them and that would change the conversation very quickly because then the onus would be on the companies selling those devices and cars to ensure that there's no child labor and forced labor in their supply chains. So right now the causalities it's backwards. Companies can sit back and keep doing business and making money and availing of child labor and forced labor because there's no consequence. But if you flip it around and actually enforce laws that we have on the books and that gets back to our point about there are things that our country has or mechanisms that we can use that other countries don't have, we have a very powerful tool and it was signed under under President Obama. So this is you know it's a relatively recent piece of legislation. You apply that and then suddenly every phone, tablet, laptop, e whatever and car that's manufactured abroad that has cobalt in the battery can't leave the port unless companies clean up their supply chains. I guarantee you it happens in a much quicker and more reliable and robust time frame than it would otherwise. And by the way on that point it's not like this is a hard problem to solve. All these companies already claim they're doing all these things and there's no child labor and forced labor and sustainable practices and so on. All they have to do is accomplish the things they say they're doing and the key thing is because I like to hear formal versus informal chain within the formal chain quote unquote these practices are being pursued. The issue is that that does not extend to the informal chain. It's the informal chain and in fact circling back to the start of our conversation that reality exists across the underbelly of the global economy. It's the informal substrate of supply chains where you find child labor, forced labor, labor abuse and unsustainable practices, be it garment production, cocoa harvesting, palm oil. You can go on and on agricultural products, tea, coffee. You can go on and on across the global economy. It's that informal underbelly. Everybody knows it's there. Everybody looks the other way and in the case of Cobalt the informal part of the supply chain is supplying I think at least 30% of the cobalt that's ultimately exported from the Congo and 30% of 75% means what half the world supply or maybe a third or a fourth whatever someone can do the math on their smartphone as they're listening. So that has to be addressed and it means you just get down into the ground. How many of the CEOs of these companies that sell phones in cars and so on have actually gone to the Congo to see where their where their cobalt is coming from?

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Any of them? I mean have any of them ever even stepped foot to see the bottom of their supply chain that they rely on and they're happy to be billionaires as a consequence of this cobalt. So surely that merits them taking one week of their life to go down to the Congo and see with their own eyes. Wait a minute, I do see kids. I see people in the artisanal mind. I see toxic exposure. They do not have hand gloves. They do not have goggles. There's a baby on her back, her back, her back. That baby's being exposed. This is a problem. They don't have schools. They don't have public health clinics. We have a lot of money. We rely on them, their labor, their resources. Let's sort this out. None of them are even willing to go there. I'll take them. I'm offering any one of them right here right now if they're listening. I will take you. We'll go and I'll show you around. Let's go see the bottom of your supply chain together. It's worth your time. You owe it to the people of the Congo to go and see the bottom of your supply chain. And I think at that point, it will be hard for them to not address this problem. So they can either do it because they have a sense of moral obligation and duty to their Congolese employees, or we can use legislation like the Trade Facilitation Act I mentioned to ban the import. Either way, pincer movement, let's just bring the pressure and solve this horror. I think last two questions. So number one would be, what is the, because like we said, we really started by talking about how, given the 70% of global capacity that's in the Congo, given just the clear electronics needs, just everyday life, but also down to climate change, we're going to need resources from the Congo. What does your ideal scenario look like? Because for example, you were on the Rogan episode, you said like \$10 a day, I believe. So that's not even like an American minimum wage,

just like articulate for us like what that reasonable accommodation looks like.

Yeah, look, there's some little things that could be done tomorrow that would eliminate the majority of the harm and misery being suffered by the people of the Congo who dig out of Kobo. Give them a fixed decent livable wage. And I said, yeah, \$10 a day. That's the difference between child labor and no child labor. Right now, if you earn a dollar or two or three, you have to bring your child to work to earn another dollar or two to survive, to eat, to have clothes and just base survival. Now imagine something as simple as \$10, like a dollar an hour. Then children could stay in school. Adults would have a decent wage. And that would solve or help solve a lot of the child labor problems because it's out of poverty desperation that families bring children to work to boost their basic survival income. So how about a decent wage? How about some PPE? Gloves, boots, uniforms, masks, goggles, to protect all the people there from the toxic contamination associated with digging for Kobo. Kobo is highly toxic. And they touch it and breathe it. And it all adds up. And there are massive public health consequences. You spend time on the ground. People are suffering

through cancers, respiratory ailments, skin disease, eye disease, neurological problems, because of simple exposure. I mean, it's not simple, but because simply they're exposed to the toxic nature of Kobo. So some basic PPE would help. If we avail of the labor and resources of this part of the Congo, aren't we obliged to do something to support those communities? Shouldn't we build some schools and some public health clinics and maybe help expand electrification

and sanitation so that people can live there with some basic human dignity, rather than just ransack the place and run off like a virus? Just feeding, devouring, and leaving a carcass behind.

That's where we're headed right now. And that's what we have to stop. So there's little things that can be done that will radically improve conditions. And finally, the mining companies that are operating there, they've clear cut millions of trees. I never met anyone who heard of anyone planting one to replace them. They dump toxic effluence into the water, into the air, into the dirt. They treat the place like a toilet. They behave in ways they wouldn't behave in their home countries. But it's okay to treat the people of the Congo that way, to treat the environment in the heart of Africa like a toilet. So that needs to stop, because that has broader public health consequences, that level of contamination. So all these things that could be done in a snap, if there were the will to treat the people in the Congo, the people in the heart of Africa, with the same dignity and respect that we would want to be treated here ourselves. You know, the last big question, this is something I'm really fascinated by. So once again, like your first podcast appearance last month is with Joe Rogan. Obviously, you're on a publicity tour, but not just a publicity tour for your book, but for this movement and this issue. If you look back at the 1990s, one shop issue, a fun fact, despite like the stakes is Jonah Peretti, you know, Jonah Peretti founds BuzzFeed like famously, he first started getting interested in virality because he used Nike ID to say like, basically, thank you for the sweatshirt labor, it's when you could customize your shoes, you can still do this. They said, no, it kind of like went viral, people forwarded the email chain, then he won the Today Show. And back then, going to Today Show in the early 2000s, like that's huge. Rogan is huge, but Rogan is huge in the sense that like modern media is huge, as in he's very siloed. So can you just sort of talk about how you think about publicity and publicizing a campaign when you just got in the biggest podcast in the world, but like your reach across society is almost certainly smaller. So for example, policymakers are probably not listening to that Rogan episode. I probably are going to have more Hill staffers listening to this episode than the Rogan episode. That's just kind of fascinating to me. And that's why I know like how like as an author, reporter, activist, you think about this dynamic. Yeah, it's certainly a very fragmented media landscape, right? More fragmented than in years past for sure. But here's the thing, I'm on an awareness mission. You know, you and I having this conversation, you're very gracious to invite me on to talk about this issue. My sole purpose here is for people to learn about the tragedy and this new chapter of horror taking place in the Congo. And I say that because I believe the following. When people learn of an injustice, a great injustice, there will always be a meaningful segment of the population whose conscience and compassion demands that they do something. I don't have all the answers to fix this problem. I know some things that would certainly help very quickly to fix a lot of the problems. But I'm not smart enough, influential enough, powerful enough to have all the answers. But there are people out there who do and who will. And there is a movement that I know is awaking from slumber that will take this on until the work is done. And so I want to just do my part. And you and I together are today doing our part to expand and amplify the voices of the Congolese people to a world that cannot survive and function without their suffering. And that formula is repugnant. We need to function and survive by the grace and good dignity of the Congolese people, not their misery. And so it's up to us to invert that reality. And so whether it's my book, my book is written as hopefully a pass-through of Congolese voices to reader through me, you know, it's not about me at all. And these podcasts, any interviews that I do, the purpose solely is to amplify their voices, their truth to an audience

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that I know exists and a population of people who I know will be driven by conscience and compassion and compassion to address this horror. But you're right, you know, it's a fragmented media marketplace.

You know, you've got to hit one silo and another silo and another silo. You know, it's not the days where everyone tuned in to Johnny Carson at the same time and, you know, half the country watched his thing. So the more invitations I get, I will take them small, big, medium, because eventually, as I said, we'll get to that critical mass where the where enough people in the world say, no, no, no more of this horror on my watch. And that's how the first Congo horror was dealt with. People went and got the truth and brought it to the world. And there were there were forces that wanted to keep things the way they were. And they used every trick in the book and every lever of power and influence they had to suppress the truth. But ultimately, decency and conscience and goodness won. That didn't solve the problems of all the problems of the Congo, but it solved the colonial pillage that was taking place under Leopold. And so now we have to just do it again. And we have to just keep doing it as long as it takes. But that's that's the calling that the people I hope will hear the voices from the Congo reaching out to them to say, please, we are dying here. So you can plug in your things. We'll keep digging this stuff out, but you need to help.

Yeah. And so let's just close with where folks should go next. So obviously, we shot it out. King Leopold's ghost. That's a great place to go after folks check out your book. I'd also suggest Dancing in the Glory of Monsters, which is about the post 1990s wars, wars in the Congo. But I also would like you to shout out the audiobook version of Cobalt Red. I've heard you like record like a special like opening for it. So let's just close with that. Yeah. There's an audio version and they asked me to record like a little opening, you know, message. So I did that. There's just an opening message of what I hope people will learn and hear as they listen to the audiobook. So and there's a terrific voice author, actor or whatever they're called who recorded the book. I heard it does a great job. So whether they listen to it, you know, or read it. The point is, let's keep spreading the awareness of what's happening in the Congo. It's been hidden from us for far too long by powerful stakeholders that want to keep the status quo. And it's up to us to demand that people with whom we are so intimately connected and are suffering immensely for our daily lives, we have to reach out to them and demand that these these injustices be dealt with, not through facile marketing statements and proclamations of adherence to human rights standards, but get down there on the ground with your team, keep them there and ensure that day in and day out, the people of the Congo are afforded the same dignity of existence that we would expect for our people here in our country. Really well said. Siddharth, thank you for joining me on The Realignment. Oh, thank you. I really appreciate your invitation to talk about this topic. Thank you.

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