

Allies Ep. 1: Faithful and Valuable Service

04-06-22

MJ/BK

A warning for listeners. This podcast features stories about war, terrorism and violence. It's important to hear... but it can also be disturbing.

After two decades... the U-S was getting out. President Trump had negotiated a deal with the Taliban... promising a departure of U.S. troops.

In Spring 20-21...President Joe Biden let the whole world know that he wasn't reversing course. American troops would be out of Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of 9/11.

[Biden: "I'm now the fourth United States President to preside over American troops presence in Afghanistan, I will not pass this responsibility on to a fifth. After consulting closely with our allies and partners, I've concluded that it's time to end America's longest war.

It's time for American troops to come home."]

[MUSIC W/ Kabul SFX, drone of military planes, helicopters]

Journalist Matt Aikins was covering the withdrawal for the New York Times. He had been reporting from Afghanistan since 2008.

He says with the Americans leaving... nearly every Afghan he talked to had no clue what was in store for them. Some who worked for the US government didn't know if they would be able to get out. Others wondered what life would look like if the *Afghan* government collapsed.

[Aikins: "So the clock was ticking. People were very anxious, very desperate to leave, but still very few people had any sense that the end was that near."]

Rumors of the Taliban's advance had been trickling into Kabul for months.

But now The Taliban was closing in on the capital city.

[Aikins: “I think that the Afghan government was in denial that the Americans were going to leave so quickly. The military was largely concerned with force protection – with covering its own but as it was leaving. That meant getting out as fast as possible.

And that took the Afghans by surprise. Definitely.”]

As part of the evacuation effort... The Biden administration announced ‘Operation Allies Refuge.’ A plan to get at-risk Afghans on flights out of the country.

There was one group that was in *particular* danger. To wage this war... the U-S had hired thousands of Afghan translators, interpreters and other local partners. They were often on the front-lines with US soldiers. To any Afghan who dealt with the U.S.... they were the face of the war.

Their service made them targets for kidnapping, extortion and murder by The Taliban. In recognition of their service, and the danger they faced, Congress had created a program over a decade earlier. This program would get them resettled in the U-S. These Afghans could apply for something called a Special Immigrant Visa... also known as an S-I-V.

If there was ever a time for it to kick into gear... it was now.

In Kabul... Matt Aikins spoke to two Afghan interpreters on August 15th. They both served with US Special Forces and had applied for SIVs.

[Aikins: “They were waiting for years for this visa, jumping through all these bureaucratic loopholes while feeling the Taliban were getting closer and closer. They were just staying one step ahead of the insurgents and they kind of realized at the end that they were going to be left to their own devices.

And we were actually sitting there together at lunch, talking about this on the afternoon the city fell. Our driver actually came in and he's like, ‘People are saying the Taliban are inside the city.’”]

[MUSIC]

Aikins stepped out and saw armed men walking the streets. He saw members of the Taliban drive into Kabul in captured government Humvees. They were hanging out of the windows carrying U-S assault rifles... waving their white flags in the wind.

Some crowds cheered them on.

[Aikins: “But that same day as the city was falling, I was getting a lot of messages from former interpreters and other people who were working for the US government, the foreigners who were asking me for help. Like, ‘how do I get out? How do I get to the airport?’”]

[CROWDS AT KABUL AIRPORT]

As The Taliban rapidly took over Afghanistan... desperate Afghans flocked to *one* place in Kabul: Hamid Karzai International Airport. There were just a few weeks until the deadline for flights out... August 31st. As each day passed... bigger crowds started to gather at the airport.

Eventually... people started flooding the tarmac. Men, women and children crowded around departing planes. People dangled off jet bridges trying to force themselves into cabins.

[Aikins: “There's thousands of people streaming from all directions.

At that moment, actually, a US C-17 was taking off on the runway and crushing people to death beneath it's wheels, you know, those video images that were broadcast to the world...”]

[MUSIC W/ MONTAGE, Anchor: “This morning, the flight from Kabul in one stark image...

Anchor: “... complete and utter mayhem and chaos today at the Kabul airport, we are now playing the visuals on your screen....”]

Anchor: “... they're images that have shocked the world, desperate Afghans clinging to a U-S military plane ... others are seen falling to their death from the undercarriage of a plane as it becomes airborne...”]

The U-S Military locked down the tarmac after that. They started funneling people through an entrance called Abbey Gate. But *this* airport wasn't built for a country at peace. It wasn't a facility designed for flowing crowds. The Kabul airport was built to withstand blasts from car bombs and suicide bombers.

So it had high concrete walls, narrow passages...

[Aikins: "... moats, hescos, barbed wire. Towers, you know, with machine guns in them, sandbags, like it's a, it's a fortress.]

That kind of defense – when you push mobs of people up against it – created death traps. I mean, people would get trampled, would get crushed, they get kind of, forced into these choke points.”]

American soldiers were posted at the gate to sort through the crowds. But it was nearly impossible to check for travel documents in the mad rush of bodies.

Afghan men and women did anything to get their attention... yelling at the Marines... waving their papers... or even *their children*... in the air.

[Aikins: “The sight of these bedraggled people, men, women, and children, dusty, you know, weak from dehydration, sitting at the base of these vast concrete structures with soldiers, you know, either Taliban or the CIA black paramilitary units aiming their assault rifles at them.]

It was just the most grotesque contrast. It was like something out of science fiction.”]

For weeks... Aikins heard rumors that the terror group ISIS was planning *something* in Kabul. Then on August 26th... he was sitting at his house when he heard an explosion. Aikins saw smoke coming from the airport a few miles away.

[Anchor: “... The Pentagon confirming there has been an explosion outside Kabul airport where people have been gathering ...

Anchor: “... as the staggering death toll soared to at least 170 Afghan civilians, today it was revealed the attack was be carried out by a single bomber...”

Anchor: “... we can confirm that a number of U-S service members were killed at the Kabul airport.”]

The attack laid bare the chaos of the U.S. withdrawal and accelerated the evacuation.

[PLANES TAKING OFF...]

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All month... Aikins remembers hearing jet engines hanging over Kabul each night.

The noise only got louder as each day passed and more planes weaved in and out.

The last flight was on August 30th...

[Aikins: “Well, I remember that night listening to the sound of aircraft.

And it seemed more intense than normal. It was everything, you heard the jets, fighter jets, drones, you’d hear for a while helicopters, C-17s.

[MUSIC]

And then, all of a sudden it went quiet...

And my housemate and I stepped outside and we’re listening like, ‘huh, there’s no more planes...’

And that quiet didn’t last that long because then we start hearing gunfire and the gunfire gets more and more intense until it’s all around us. And we can see like tracers going up in the sky.

And it’s the Taliban just shooting in the air to celebrate the departure of the last American.”]

[Gunshots into Allies THEME]

From Lawfare and Goat Rodeo... This is Allies... a podcast about how the US government failed its eyes and ears in the War in Afghanistan.

I’m your host Bryce Klehm.

The U.S. military got thousands of people out of Kabul in August. But... despite the decade-long efforts of veterans, lawmakers, and the highest ranking officials in the military, even more were left behind.

Many have gone into hiding... fearful of the Taliban seeking retribution.

So how did we end up here? How was the fate of thousands of Afghans decided by which side of the wall they were on... and whether or not they had the right pieces of paper?

What happened at the Kabul airport in August was the culmination of twenty years of war. A war where language... and those who had access to it... shaped the very way it was fought.

[Fred: “We were the eyes and ears of U-S troops in Afghanistan.”

Crocker: “You're literally fighting blind ... if you do not have those interpreters with you.”

Zeller: “The Taliban knew all this, you could hear them on the radio, they'd say ‘shoot the eyes’”]

A war where the U.S. asked translators and interpreters to serve in the line of fire. They're people who you will hear from on this podcast... but we can't use their full names.

[Hakimi: “The Taliban will find them and will kill them.”

Fred: “I moved my family from location to location three times.”

Allen: “People are going to listen to this and there will be blood spilt back in Afghanistan if we're not careful.”]

We will take you from the frontlines to the halls of Congress... where lawmakers created a program to protect Afghan allies. We'll tell you how it was supposed to work... and how it collapsed in the slow churn of bureaucracy.

[Reisner: “He was just banging his head against the wall, trying to figure out how do I unstick this?”

Crocker: “These things might seem reasonable when you're talking about them in Washington, much less reasonable if you're trying to stay alive long enough to get the damn visas.”

Allen: “The problem wasn't the idea, the problem wasn't the legislation, the problem was the execution.”]

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We will seek to answer questions that still linger from two decades of war: How did this program fail so many?

Over 7 episodes, we'll take you through the 20-year war. We'll explain why the SIV program was created at the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. You'll hear from veterans, advocates, journalists, and most importantly Afghans... who tried to navigate a never-ending bureaucratic maze. You'll hear how 4 presidential administrations supported then ignored America's eyes and ears. And, in the end, we'll tell you how these failures culminated in the chaos at the Kabul airport...

In this episode, we're going back to the beginning, just before 9/11.

This is Episode 1... Faithful and Valuable Service.

[THEME FADES]

In the late 1990s, the terrorist group al-Qaeda repeatedly attacked the U-S assets. Bombing embassies in Africa and a Naval ship in Yemen. The U.S. responded with airstrikes against al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan.

Clinton tape...

A few years later... in the Summer of 2001... John McLaughlin was the Deputy Director of the C-I-A. He says the agency was flooded with tips from Afghanistan.

So the C-I-A knew al Qaeda was planning another attack.

[McLaughlin: "It was kind of off the chart in terms of indicators of preparations for some kind of attack by extremists...."

[CROSSFADE W/ PLANE SCREECHING ACROSS SKY... SIRENS... NEWSREEL]

And so when the second tower was hit, instantly, of course I knew this was what we had been expecting."]

McLaughlin says the rest of that day was a blur. But he does remember connecting with President George Bush via telecom.

[McLaughlin: “We made clear that in our judgment, this was an al-Qaeda operation, and the one that we had been talking about during the summer in particular.

And I remember, I wrote down what he said. He said: ‘Form a worldwide coalition. We will find them and destroy them.’]

Four days later on September 15th... the President gathered his national security team at Camp David. They talked about the attack... how it was coordinated... who was behind it...

But the question they were there to answer was... what should we do about it? Here’s McLaughlin again.

[MUSIC]

[McLaughlin: “...the CIA had come prepared with a thick binder – a spiral bound booklet, I remember it quite well – with a plan we had developed and updated that week. It was a plan we'd had in preparation for a long time.

But it was a plan for attacking al-Qaeda in dozens of countries around the world.

And we explained it. Everyone absorbed it.”]

The C-I-A’s plan homed in on al-Qaeda’s camps in Afghanistan.

President Bush reconvened the group two days later in the White House. McLaughlin remembers him rattling off several decisions... the administration’s war strategy.

President Bush told the military to call up reserves. Justice to ready warrants and indictments. Treasury to follow the money.

[McLaughlin: “and for the CIA, he said, ‘I'm basically, I'm adopting your plan.’

I want you first into Afghanistan as fast as you can be.”]

President Bush spoke to Congress and the American public on September 20th. He told the country about al-Qaeda... the terrorists who many people were hearing about for the first time.

[Bush: “They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan, where they are trained in the tactics of terror.

The leadership of al-Qaeda has great influence in Afghanistan and supports the Taliban regime in controlling most of that country.”]

The President also spoke about ‘The Taliban,’ who call themselves ‘The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.’ At the time, they were the country’s government – a militant Islamic political body.

The Taliban sprouted out of Afghanistan’s rural Pashtun tribes... that’s the country’s largest ethnic group. Taliban is actually a Pashto word... meaning “students.”

After the Soviet occupation... there was a power vacuum in Afghanistan. So Pashtun leaders started joining forces with former mujahideen fighters, A civil war ensued. The details are complicated.

But Taliban rule offered some security. So their influence spread across the country. It took hold in huge parts of Afghanistan’s rural provinces. By 1996 the Taliban had grown into a vast political movement. It governed through an austere and harsh vision of Islamic law...

A fact President Bush and his administration repeated in the lead-up to war.

[Bush: “Women are not allowed to attend school. You can be jailed for owning a television. Religion can be practiced only as their leaders dictate. A man can be jailed in Afghanistan if his beard is not long enough.

The United States respects the people of Afghanistan, after all, we are currently its largest source of humanitarian aid. But we condemn the Taliban regime.”]

Osama Bin Laden had a longstanding alliance with the Taliban. With the FBI and CIA on his trail... Osama bin Laden was allowed a haven in Afghanistan.

So after 9/11... President Bush spoke directly to the Taliban. He demanded they hand over the leaders of al-Qaeda to U-S authorities and close every terrorist training camp.

[Bush: “These demands are not open to negotiation or discussion.”]

[CROSSFADE MUSIC W/ APPLAUSE]

Here's former CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin again.

[McLaughlin: "... within 15 days we had those two teams on the ground in Northern Afghanistan. Each one had about eight people on it... a fair number of them had the local languages and weapons specialists...]

CROSSFADE W/ HELICOPTER...

Our objective was to get in there as fast as we could on a chopper, that was an old Soviet, I want to say M-17 helicopter that we flew in from Uzbekistan, through the mountains of Northern Afghanistan."]

Within just a few weeks... McLaughlin says about 300 C-I-A agents and Special Forces had landed in Afghanistan. They met with sources sprinkled across the country: Afghan village leaders and warlords who pointed them in the direction of Bin Laden.

[McLaughlin: "Uniforms went away, everyone was dressed in civilian clothes. People were riding horses. It was a remarkable thing."]

[CROSSFADE W/ MUSIC, WARFARE SFX]

One reason President Bush wanted the *CIA* first in... was because it was the only agency that knew much about Afghanistan.

[MUSIC]

[McLaughlin: "Everyone has to realize that when this occurred, there weren't many people in Washington who had paid attention to Afghanistan or knew much about it.

And I recall in say the first month after 9/11, I was sending teams of analysts out into Washington to other agencies, carrying maps and doing a briefing on — I would say the subject of — what exactly is Afghanistan."]

McLaughlin remembers one officer spreading out a map on the blue rug of the Oval Office. He squatted between President Bush and Vice President Cheney and pointed

out Afghanistan's 34 provinces. He told them about the topography, Afghanistan's deserts... river valleys... and snow-capped mountains.

They talked about the bordering countries: Pakistan to the Southeast... Iran to the West... Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to the North.

What immediately became clear was that Afghanistan is a very complicated place.

In the fall of '01... about two months *after* the first U.S. boots were on the ground... Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote a memo to his staff. He asked them to breakdown all of the languages spoken in Afghanistan.

[MUSIC FADES W/ MONTAGE]

[Hakimi: “We have a great deal of language. Like we call Pashayi, Kyrgyz, Obashi...”

[Fred: “... my main language is Persian, which is Farsi or Dari... so I speak Pashto ...”

Morgan: “There are two main languages spoken in Afghanistan, Pashto and Dari, which is complicated enough and Pashto has its own regional sub-dialects.”]

That last voice you heard is Wesley Morgan. He's a freelance journalist who embedded with US combat troops in Afghanistan. He saw firsthand how US forces interacted with the local population.

Most Afghans are multilingual and speak Dari or Pashto. But the country has almost 40 million people across cultural, ethnic and tribal groups. In all... they speak nearly 60 languages.

Wes Morgan was in a place called the Pech Valley...

[Morgan: “In The Pech valley floor, everybody speaks Pashto, a lot of the security forces speak Dari. But then the farther you go up into these side valleys, north and south of The Pech, you wind up encountering all these other languages: Kalasha-ala, Gambiri or Tregami, Korangali – languages that have no written form and have only a few thousand speakers, which makes them inherently really, really difficult to kind of get a grip on.

... There were a bunch of other languages as well – more, really than the US military kind of appreciated at the time.”]

[MUSIC]

So the military needed interpreters, translators, and local partners. Afghans who understood the languages and culture. Over the course of the next 20 years, these interpreters would prove to be essential. The number of local partners the U-S hired would grow enormously: first tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands of Afghans. And they'd be right next to U-S soldiers, looking for al-Qaeda, asking locals about them, intercepting terrorist communications, breaking down messages over walkie-talkies. Later, they'd help broker huge government contracts to build roads and schools.

Even the words interpreter or translator are too *narrow* to describe their role.

Matt Zeller was a U.S. Army officer who advised Afghan forces, he deployed to Afghanistan in 2008. He fought side-by-side with several Afghan interpreters and translators. We asked him... what sort of things did they teach him about Afghanistan?

Zeller gave us some examples.

[Zeller: “I'm going to – your audience, can't see this – but I'm certainly sitting right now with my legs crossed right? With my left leg crossed over my right.

And the bottom of my left sole is pointing at you. The worst thing that I could possibly do is to show you the bottom of the sole of my foot. I'm telling you to fuck off right now in Afghan culture. We Americans cross our legs all the time, I have no idea I'm giving you the finger.

There is just so much, if you sit in a meeting with somebody in the United States of America, and let's say it's a really important meeting and you're going to sit around a table, where do you put the two most important people on opposite sides? Do they sit next to each other or across?”

Max: “Across.”

Zeller: “Yeah, in Afghan culture, they sit next to each other.

So like it's these little nuances that if you don't know, like if you were to sit them across from you, it's a big insult. Why? Because you want to build a bond with someone to make a deal. You sit them next to each other so that they can talk and that they're equals. They sit across from each other, It's very, it's adversarial.

The food, the culture of showing up to a meeting. Here in the United States, you show up to a business meeting, you might have a quick coffee and whatever, you get down to it. In Afghanistan, you'll talk for 30 minutes about their families before you even come to the matter at hand ... to rush it along is seen as very disrespectful. Cause it's not like you're appreciating their hospitality, you're just trying to get to the business.

What else? Anytime an Afghan family would feed us, if we were in a village and someone invited us over to their homes, you know, we'd walk away and be like, 'wow, we were famished, that was an amazing meal.'

And the interpreters would pull us aside, and be like, 'Do you realize that they fed you everything that they have? They've literally cooked all the food in the house, food that was supposed to last them, maybe for the next couple of months.

If you don't come back tomorrow with like food for this family then they're going to starve.'"]

As a number of veterans, journalists, and diplomats would say, these translators were the US' Eyes and Ears.

But at the start of the War... the U-S had none.

[MUSIC FADES]

[Schake: "Because we had not expected to fight a war in Afghanistan, you had an incredible dearth of expertise on the country, an incredible dearth of language skills."]

That's Kori Schake. She was on the National Security Council during President Bush's first term.

[Schake: "I bet there were less than 20 people in the American national security establishment who had the language abilities to help navigate the societies in Afghanistan, we were utterly dependent on our interpreters and translators."]

And that need for local partners was about to grow. The CIA and Special Forces operators would soon be joined by thousands of American soldiers.

Less than a month after 9/11... President Bush announced Operation Enduring Freedom. Now U-S Marines were joining the fight.

[Bush: “On my orders, the US military has begun strikes against al-Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan ... These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations. At the same time the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of Americans and our allies.”]

[SOUND WASH/MUSIC/TRANSITION]

Donald Rumsfeld would later call this a “new kind of war.” A war that wouldn’t be fought by conventional armies. Instead... an international coalition would wage it quietly... fighting in the shadows against terrorist cells.

[Schake: “Secretary Rumsfeld viewed himself as a revolutionary in this regard. I remember once hearing him tell the President, 'These generals, they're dinosaurs! They think it takes a quarter million troops to do anything, you gotta help me push us forward into the modern ways of war.'”]

This ‘modern war’ meant night raids... and clandestine missions ending with airstrikes.

[Schake: “... but of course that style of warfare is great for punitive raids, it's great for many things. It is poorly suited to stabilizing a country, on holding territory in that country. And it's poorly suited to being a supportive and protective force for a population.”]

Within just a few months... the international coalition swept through Afghanistan. By November they captured the capital city of Kabul. U-S forces spent the Winter chasing al-Qaeda... Bin Laden and the Taliban toward the Pakistan border.

But with the perpetrators of 9/11 still out there... Schake says the war changed. The Bush administration thought the War in Afghanistan wouldn’t require lots of American troops. But she says... it turned out to be a bigger commitment than they expected.

[Schake: “Creating safety throughout the country was going to require a magnitude of forces that the United States did not want to provide. And so we wanted to build an Afghan military that could increasingly take over the military responsibilities that the United States was performing in Afghanistan.”]

[MUSIC]

So after the smoke settled from initial combat operations, the US military was now in a country with no government. And many inside the Bush administration worried that Afghanistan would again become a terrorist haven.

So the President gave a speech in April 2002 that outlined a change in the mission.

[CROSS FADE W/ cue, Bush: “We know that true peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan people the means to achieve their own aspirations. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan train and develop its own national army. And peace will be achieved through an education system for boys and girls which works...” APPLAUSE]

So the US mission was growing into a nation-building one. And every single part of it... was going to require interacting with the Afghan people. Whether that meant fighting The Taliban... or opening new schools... or even building an entire army from scratch. U-S forces would need more translators, interpreters and advisors.

The War in Afghanistan was going to need more resources. But then the Bush administration found a distraction.

Here’s Kori Schake again.

[Schake: “I would say the Bush administration had persuaded itself that Afghanistan didn't require any more attention or resources than we were giving it, which is not the same thing as having won.”]

So... The Bush administration started planning *another* invasion.

High-ranking officials had been ringing the alarm on Saddam Hussein, the dictator of Iraq.

They said Saddam was as big a threat to the U-S as Osama Bin Laden, and some even sought to connect Saddam to al-Qaeda.

[Cheney: “We could not accept the grave danger of Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies turning weapons of mass destruction against us or our friends and allies.”

[Powell: “... a regime that harbors ambitions for regional domination, hides weapons of mass destruction and provides haven and active support for terrorists... ”]

So in March, 2003... the US invaded Iraq with more than 150,000 American soldiers.

[Bush: “At this hour American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free it’s people and to defend the world from grave danger ... ~~These are the opening stages of what will be a broad and concerted campaign.~~”]

And this new campaign... would require more translators and interpreters.

Next time on Allies... we’ll head to Iraq... and you’ll hear from one interpreter who saw this invasion up close.

[MUSIC FADES W/ INVASION SFX]

Allies was created, written and produced by the show’s Lead Producers: Max Johnston and me, Bryce Klehm.

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At Lawfare... editorial support from Natalie Orpett, Katherine Pompilio, Claudia Swain, and Scott Anderson.

A special thanks to Matt Aikins, Wes Morgan and his book 'The Hardest Place,' John McLaughlin, Matt Zeller and Kori Schake.

Allies is a production from Lawfare & Goat Rodeo. You can find it wherever you get your podcasts. Please rate & Review the show... it helps spread the word.

[CREDITS/ALLIES THEME]