Failed States

Jill Magid

Artist contribution – November 18, 2011

In *Failed States* Jill Magid finds a mentor in CT, a writer and editor in Austin, Texas with a military and intelligence background. A former war reporter who has covered ten conflicts, he agrees to train her to be an embedded journalist with the US military in Afghanistan. In these excerpts Magid is confronted with the reality of going to war, and what is personally at stake for her in this decision. *Failed States* approaches the themes of transparency, secrecy and publicity through Magid's personal desire to engage the war on terror and its media representation through becoming an eyewitness.The following is a series of excerpts from *Failed States*, a work-in-progress manuscript by Jill Magid.

Thursday March 4, 2010



Jill Magid, Training in Texas. – Photo credit: CT.2010

CT travels in from Texas and visits my studio in Brooklyn to discuss a possible embed in Afghanistan. He described what it's like going into a war zone, that it will knock you down.

You need someone there who's done it before, to warn you when you have to get down.

After coffee, we take a walk around Williamsburg, south of Broadway. A Hasidic Jew is walking in front of us. His black hat covers his shaved head which is cast down, his eyes fixed on the ground. His black tailcoat catches in the wind. We're stretching our legs and looking for an ATM. All the Korean delis around here are owned by Hasidic Jews, but none of the Hasids shop at them.

I am going with you.

That is what I wanted to hear. Hearing it changes everything.

I will be your fixer.

I don't know what that is.

A fixer is a guy who gets you in, gets you access. You could spend three weeks there just trying to figure out how the system works. I already know how the system works.

I asked him how someone does it if they don't have a fixer.

You go stay in the fanciest hotel in the area, ask the hotel manager to help you, and then give him a bribe.

So it's all about money.

Yeah. It's all about money.

As for subject matter to explore, he tells me, short of a real interrogation there is no limit.

A real interrogation is off limits, even for me as an experienced journalist with a military background.

Intelligence gathering is highly classified.

We could do a mock interrogation but that's a whole other ethical bag.

I don't know what that ethical baggage is, but is anything ever at stake in a mock situation?

He gives me the soda straw analogy, based on his experience in Iraq.

A war zone is a very big place. Going in is like looking through a soda straw – that's how tiny your view is. Someone in another part of the war zone will have an entirely different story to tell. If you talk to the young American soldier who's training the malnourished, uneducated men that pass for Iraqi soldiers, he will tell you the war is lost. If you go to the army general who took out a host of enemy combatants earlier that day, he'll tell you it can definitely be won. And they're both right. Every story is incomplete. Afghanistan will be no different.

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Psychological Operations. PsyOps. This is the area he's leading me to explore. People think, because of the name, it's some kind of brainwashing or mindfuck department. I say fuck but CT doesn't. I don't think he curses, or at least he doesn't in front of me. Southern decency.

Shit. I left the electric kettle on in my studio.

Wars are won through perception.

But PsyOps isn't about winning the American public over to support the war.

That's important, too. You have to protect your haunches – you don't want to get hit in the back. But, most importantly, you have to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqis or the Afghans.

CT's PsyOps contact in Iraq thinks the division should be called something else. As we walk into another deli I suggest Community Relations.

Wars today are purely psychological. They're all about changing public opinion, influencing the local population.

We're back at my studio. CT is sitting across from me at my glass desk, on the robin's egg blue chair. We still have our coats on.

My general friend in PsyOps is just a marketer. He's selling the American Dream.

CT says it with an ironic smile, like a cheesy slogan.

He's trying to convince the Iraqis that even though, yes, we just destroyed your town, we're here to help you and build you a functioning democracy. The Taliban are gone; the American system is ready to be slotted in its place. We are talking to people who read the Koran and believe that, through their system, they'll go to heaven. Can they still get to heaven through the American system? That is the essential challenge – making them believe they can.

CT will go with me to Afghanistan. He can get us through the loopholes, open the doors that would take a hell of a long time for me to pry open alone. I've never had access like this simply offered to me on a plate. He can make sure my passport goes right through. He'll make sure they don't Google me, or research my past. He can call in favors from the AP. Under normal circumstances, just getting Kevlar helmets and bulletproof vests can be difficult.

Bullets can get through the sides of the vests.

He lifts his arm up and points to just below his armpit.

You always hear the horror stories of the random bullets that slip between the ceramic chest and back plates, where the organs you need to keep safe are located.

What about my legs?

They're not protected. Neither are your arms and face.

I think about not being able to run again and then banish it from my thoughts. I feel like a false person. I don't know the reality of war. How can you from a book or a film?

The PsyOps guys are the ones who go to destroyed towns and hand out soccer balls to little boys.

A group of little Linuses. Ball was my son's first word.

Little boys love balls.

The US army prints messages on them, he explains. They're like advertisements for the US army, for the troops and for democracy.

One of the most successful PsyOps cases in Iraq involved a large truck of contraband cigarettes. The US Army stopped the truck and confiscated the cargo. The Army then

stuck a sticker on each pack that said, 'If you see an IED, call this number.' It worked extraordinarily well in Baghdad. The phones rang off the hook. The locals might still see Americans as the bad guys but that doesn't mean they want their children exploding at intersections.

Saturday June 5, 2010

In Austin, Texas. CT and I are driving to borrow guns to use during my Hostile Environment Training – one-on-one instruction for my embed with the US Military in Afghanistan.

We drive to his friend's place to borrow guns. We pull up to the small house of a guy in a Texas T-shirt with a weird mouth (some type of birth defect, I think). He lives there with his wife who is storing her dad's guns. Once an avid gun collector, her father's now a sad lonely man who lives in Mexico with the women he pays for because it's cheap. In the car after we leave, CT and I discuss how there's something indescribably sad about a 60-year-old single man pretending to live the life of a playboy. Mouth guy's wife works for a senator at the capitol. Some months ago, a young man drew and fired a gun on the south steps of the capitol building – an incident I, weirdly enough, witnessed. She's taking a concealed handgun course. Everyone in the office was advised to do so.

She has two guns to lend us, both cop guns with string ties around them so they can't be fired accidentally. Her father prepared them for her – carefully, like this – when he left for Mexico, even though she did not want them. They make her nervous – she has a child in the house. CT is impressed by how safely the guns are kept. We will borrow them for shooting practice at the ranch tomorrow. He casually mentions as we step off their front porch that, at some point tomorrow, he is going to abduct me. He just slips that in.

It will be a three-hour process, he tells me. And even though I know it's going to happen, I will have an emotional reaction.

It seems very late when we get back to his house.

The one thing about being married is that I cannot sleep alone, he tells me as we say goodnight. It doesn't sound like an invitation. He is upstairs alone and I am down here awake and alone and Linus feels so far away. Jonny doesn't. I feel Jonny. If Jonny knew exactly what we were up to here – shooting guns, learning how to treat a sucking chest wound, prepping for an abduction – he'd wonder why I am even doing this. Sometimes I wonder the same. Is this where my work with the Dutch secret service left me? I think I preferred the distance.

Sunday June 6, 2010

CT's house in Texas. We sit at the table in the living room.

Abduction and Interrogation. Rule one: Try not to get abducted.

I laugh. He doesn't.

Unit cohesion and unit Integrity. It's a romantic idea. Stay together, don't leave dead bodies on the battleground. Only four people have gone missing in Afghanistan and Iraq combined. That's how seriously this rule is taken. Well armed, large units; always at least two vehicles in a convoy; always an even number of people.

Sometimes, though, ambushes are complex.

That's when they come at you from more than one place.

He arranges the objects on the table to demonstrate: A large fold in the tablecloth is a mountain ridge, a wide book is the road, a smaller book the convoy.

The IED detonates with the first vehicle but then there's a boom on either side and suddenly the convoy is boxed in, people are shooting from the mountain ridge. You fear this. Am I entering a kill zone? No matter how well you prepare, you just can't rule out the possibility of a complex ambush. There are always possible kill zones. Try to be ready.

Situational Awareness is sometimes referred to as SA or Sierra Alpha.

I'm going to teach you the military alphabet.

My homework is to learn the phonetic alphabet.

Do you know what Whisky Tango Foxtrot means? What the fuck. You'll hear that a lot.

So what you do is get everyone together and drive the hell out of the kill zone. Don't stop. Flank: try to maneuver through and push past. Always turn around and fight – never just flee. If one of the vehicles is dead, you have the dangerous job of transferring the stranded soldiers into an active one. That switch is a highly vulnerable move. That's when bad things can happen. The insurgents want to grab you, or capture the vehicle with you inside of it.

I think the first option sounds worse.

They know the power of a US hostage. Danny Pearl was a huge success for Al-Qaeda. Jill Carroll, too. 'I don't want to be in a beheading video.' 'I don't want to be seen in an orange jumpsuit.' You'll hear the guys say that a lot.

I imagine Jonny and Linus and feel like I'm going to vomit. And then I remember this really fucked up scene in a movie that was, perversely, extremely sexy. What movie was that? I saw it on TV, on a good cable channel, like IFC or something. A woman is being held hostage. The man who brings her food doesn't speak her language but an attraction grows. She's kept tied by her hands to a wooden ceiling rafter, standing on a white bed, a beautiful old one with white sheets and a matching white bedspread. He comes in and puts down her tray of food. I'm not sure how she's supposed to eat since she's tied up like that or if he's meant to spoon-feed her or what, but he lifts her skirt – she's naked underneath – and goes down on her until she comes. He leaves the room straight after, no words are spoken. I can't recall if he left the tray on the bed or if he put it on the floor or if it just disappeared during a jump cut.

I ask CT if he's ever seen one of those beheading videos. He calls them snuff tapes. He's watched them when he's been required to for a story. He doesn't like to watch violent Hollywood movies.

No gore, he says. Horror movies like that are real.

I have always known that.

CT's personal wish is never to be a hostage.

Don't bite, kick, or fight. They will kill you immediately. Some men want that, just to be killed right there, to avoid the orange jumpsuit and the horror their families will endure. So they bite and kick. It's suicide.

I ask why the snuff tape is created in the first place.

It's a terror tool, **he says*****. The image strikes fear, demoralizes the enemy, sows the seed of low morale back home.***

As a journalist he is obliged to report on other journalists killed by insurgents.

Those are important stories. But the challenge is how to do so without furthering the enemy's goal. Does the video need to be seen by the public or can it be communicated with words alone? Words are powerful but the image is a hundredfold more.

I feared this. I've always wanted words to be just as powerful. I want my words to be powerful.

You have to get the news across without doing the enemy's propagandist work for them. The US military produces official US army videos shot from Apache helicopters. The other side releases videos showing US soldiers being killed by Juba snipers. To counter this, the US releases gun camera videos. It's tit for tat.

CT chooses to describe videos rather than redistributing them.

It's not smart to resist if you are taken hostage. The longer you survive, the better your chances of getting out. A hostage scenario is a mental game of wits. 85 percent of survival is mental.

I ask him if he feels invincible after seeing so much, and he says:

No, the opposite has happened. I realize my fragility and how human I am.

I don't believe him.

You have to have a strategy for being abducted. The first stage, the shock of capture, is predictable. Resistance is pointless. Bite and kick and you're pretty much committing suicide. If you're too much work they will simply shoot you. Or you could have the worst of both worlds, where they beat you up and keep you without medical treatment. But you'll be roughed up no matter what. If you're captured in a group they'll pick out whoever seems to be the leader and make an example of him. Fade in and be colorless. Go limp, become grey. The other guy they kill is the one who has a complete breakdown, because that guy's annoying.

You are not a leader, you obey and cooperate. They are assessing you. They will take your press card and passport and look you up. Say yes, say no, don't expand. Remember, their adrenalin is pumping. They are scared, too.

Next comes the interrogation phase. You tell them, I am not a combatant. I have no obligation to the military, no obligation to keep secrets. I am a mother.

Your main strategy, if you are kidnapped, is being a mom. Having Linus and Jonny. They will want to know about your family. If you're not a journalist, not a spy, what are you? Why are you here without your husband? You're going to have to lie about your name. They might have the resources to Google you. Be prepared to lie about being Jewish. If they ask about your name, Magid – what type of name is Magid?

It's Jewish.

No. It's Lebanese Christian.

I guess I'd better start researching what it is to be Lebanese.

No no no. **He waves away my words.** ***They don't know shit about Lebanese Christianity. What does Majid mean in Arabic? It's probably the same in Hebrew. Look it up.***

(I just looked it up as I type. It means 'glorious' in Arabic. In Hebrew, which I know, it means 'itinerant storyteller.' I love that, but glorious isn't bad, either).

Look it up because I'm sure it's a common word in both languages. As a journalist you have to make up your story and know it. You don't want a complicated story.

He makes one up for me.

OK, so your family left Lebanon in the early 1900s. Don't even mention the word Jewish – do not plant ideas! You're not even remotely Jewish so not a thought in your head about it. You're fourth generation American. Anything factual – volunteer it. And tell as few lies as possible. Physical abuse is most likely if you're impatient or if they know you're lying. Always maintain eye contact when you're lying. If you look down or to the left, they'll know. Whenever you have to tell a lie, take a breath and look straight into their eyes. Don't blink.

Tell them whatever you know about the army to show them you're not useful. Let everything out because you don't know anything important.

Jesus. If that isn't humbling.

You're not hurting anyone. Your knowledge isn't deep enough.

What, I wonder, if I want it to be?

You'll have the same interrogator for the long term. He will establish himself as your alpha male.

I think he actually said your alpha leader, but I imagine him to be male.

Remember you are powerless – including over your future. This is what they want you to think.

If you were the enemy and this was a US interrogation, you'd be stripped naked. Clothing is emotional armor. It provides psychological protection. Being stripped works on everyone but especially Muslims, for whom it carries added insult. Your captors will control your whole environment: your room temperature, your food, your sleep. The interrogator manipulates everything so that you'll submit. Adding physical pain only damages the process. The interrogator does not want you to emotionally collapse. You don't want people to shut down on you, like a rose folding in on itself, back into a bud – excuse the metaphor.

I think for CT referencing roses feels emasculating.

It's like this.

He folds his arms, locking his elbows across his torso, and hollows his chest, his head dropping forward and his chin hitting his collarbone.

If you reach this point they'll know you've mentally disengaged, that you can't answer any more questions. Take the slaps on the face when they come. They will. Hardly react to them. But don't do this too early otherwise they'll know you're faking. Wait at least eight hours.

Eight hours?

A bad interrogator might still try to torture you even then. Hope for a good one. And foremost in your mind: I will survive. I will walk out of here back to Linus.

There is something dirty about him using Linus's name. It's just a word to him, completely detached from the boy Linus who is also – secondly – my son. To CT he is an anchor, an escape tool for me from a bad situation. Linus is only language in his mouth, coming out as strategy, and somehow it spoils the boy to whom it is attached and I feel gross that I let it happen.

Back in Brooklyn, a few nights after I'd returned from my training, I asked Jonny if he felt his life was his own. No, he said, he did not, almost before I'd even got the question out.

Did that change when you got together with me or after Linus was born?

Linus* – he pauses – *and maybe a little with you.

He thinks some more.

I don't express myself so much anymore.* He is thoughtful. *But I do express myself through Linus.

That's interesting. You interpret the question of whether your life is your own in terms of self-expression?

He looks at me, confused, so I continue. I was thinking about how everyone always warns you when you have a kid that your life won't be your own anymore because you're responsible for another person's. The purpose of your life becomes to serve the needs of your child.

Oh, well yes, that is also part of it. That is also true.

He breaks eye contact with me and is quiet for a moment. That's depressing. He looks back.

But your life is always your own. Your life is always yours. Who else's could it be?

Jill Magid seeks intimate relations with impersonal structures. She is intrigued by hidden information, being public as a condition for existence, and intimacy in relation to power and observation. Magid is a visual artist, performer and writer. She lives and works in New York.

Tags

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