

Global Journalist: From Kansas City to Kabul: Reflections on 9/11 and its aftermath

SUMMARY: On this episode of Global Journalist, reporter Sean Brynda ('22) talks with veterans, journalists, and experts on the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the impact on the lives of Americans and Afghans.

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Afghanistan, Taliban, Kabul, Pentagon, Veterans, 9/11

SPEAKERS

- Byron Bagby
- Ted Bridis
- Sean Brynda
- Kathy Gannon
- Latavia Gibson
- Trevor Hook
- Shawn Lee
- Victor McFarland
- Saeed (last name withheld for security reasons)
- John Seesengood

Sean Brynda 00:04

From the KBIA newsroom at the Missouri School of Journalism, this is Global Journalist. I'm Sean Brynda.

Shawn Lee 00:22

I'm a fairly older man in a younger man's body.

Sean Brynda 00:27

Shawn Lee served in Iraq in 2004 and later returned to serve in Afghanistan in 2010. Lee is now 36 and is a lawyer in Kansas City. But over the last few weeks, he's been plunged back into the conflict in a very personal way. On August 15, as Kabul was falling to the Taliban, Lee received a frantic email from

Saeed, an Afghan who claimed to have served as his Translator 12 years ago. Lee's translator remains stranded in Kabul.

Saeed 01:00

Two nights ago, I heard the gunshots just across our street. And it was late night, it was 12. When I woke up in the morning, I asked people that 'What was there...' actually, I just stepped outside of my door. And I asked someone that what was that gunshot for? They said, "They have killed one of the one of the American employee."

Sean Brynda 01:24

On this special edition of Global Journalist, we look at the fallout of America's two-decade involvement in Afghanistan through the eyes of Missourians whose lives have been changed by it. Most Americans would say the war in Afghanistan began on a day seared in the memory of anyone who is old enough to remember exactly where they were on September 11, 2001. That's the day a terrorist based in remote Afghanistan turned four hijacked planes into missiles aimed at symbols of American power in New York City and Washington, D.C. Missouri School of Journalism graduate, Ted Bridis was stuck in traffic near the Pentagon on his way to work at the Wall Street Journal's Washington bureau, when one of the planes hit the southwest corner of the building.

Ted Bridis 03:08

Over the years, I've seen hundreds of planes landed national, I knew what the flight route looked like this was not at all a normal flight path. It was coming in much faster, it was coming in much lower. The you can tell the landing gear was up was retracted. It was up. It was just it was roaring in. And I had this, this moment of gloom. This you know, sort of, oh my god, it's gonna it's gonna hit the building. And you just you know, you're just in shock. And I was close enough that when the plane crossed the road in front of me It literally filled the windshield. That's how close I was. The building just swallowed the plane in its entirety. I mean, it's a big reinforced concrete structure. You know, there was a there was a fireball. And I remember just punching the dashboard on my on my car just out of sort of seething exacerbation that this was happening and you know, right in front of me. \

Sean Brynda 04:37

For native Byron Bagby was inside the Pentagon, when the twin towers were hit.

Byron Bagby 04:42

We knew that our nation was under attack. And about 30 minutes later, a co worker and I were standing in his office, watching CNN as it showed the second World Trade tower being struck by the hijacked aircraft. And my friend commented that we are lucky that hadn't happened here in the Pentagon with 27,000 workers 40,000 computers passing through every day. Five minutes later, we heard this loud blast. And we felt this huge buildings shake. And we thought it may have been a truck bomb initially.

Sean Brynda 05:23

Bagby is now a retired Army major general. He says he can't shake the memories of that day.

Byron Bagby 05:30

I will never forget the events that took place 20 years ago on September 11 of 2001. And in fact, I keep a, an actual limestone fragment from the Pentagon, that was on the outer face of the part that was destroyed. I keep that on my desk, as a reminder of what happened on that horrible day.

Sean Brynda 05:52

Bagby lost two colleagues when the plane hit, it fell to him to notify the next of kin for one sergeant. She was single mother. He and army chaplain had to tell a six-year-old girl that her mom wouldn't be coming home.

Byron Bagby 06:09

I have never done anything harder in my entire life. And I'll actually physically, mentally are emotional. That was the hardest thing I have done in my life.

Sean Brynda 06:36

It did not take long to identify the perpetrators. In Kabul, Associated Press reporter, Kathy Gannon received a call from the wire services international editor in New York City as the attacks were taking place.

Kathy Gannon 06:49

It was evening, my time on September 11. And I got a call from the desk in New York. Sally Jacobson was the international editor, and Sally said there's been a plane that's gone into the World Trade Center. We don't know yet what it is, but we wanted to... So clearly, they were thinking immediately about Afghanistan and Osama.

Sean Brynda 07:12

Within a year, Bagby, the general who lost two staff members at the Pentagon would deploy to Afghanistan, he would be followed by many young Americans, some of whom made up their minds to go because of what they saw on September 11. Shawn Lee, the veteran who is now a lawyer in Kansas City, was a high school student in Jefferson City at the time.

Shawn Lee 07:33

I remember being in class and my teacher just wheel in a TV and saying, "You have to watch this." And it was not a class about the international news. In fact, I think it was biology. But it was so important that our teacher went and got a television wielded in and made us all turn on the news. And that's when we saw it. Watching the towers fall, I I felt really, really upset. And after that, I felt really impassioned. I felt like you know, I was a young man who did not have a whole lot of direction in my life, and I felt very much like I wanted to participate in world events.

Sean Brynda 08:14

Seven days after the attack on America, then President George W. Bush signed into law the joint resolution, which authorized force against Afghanistan, while the US bombing offensive began targeting Taliban assets on October 7 of 2001, it wouldn't be until one month later that the Associated Press' as

Kathy Gannon would witness the full brunt of us as offensive against Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. On November 13, a US bomber blew up a building diagonally across from the AP Bureau's office in Kabul.

08:46

It was empty but it used to be belonging to (unintelligible) Abdoula, which was a Taliban leader. But a 2000 pound bomb that was kitty corner to us, so it blew in all our windows and doors and frames and blew me across the room. And I thought because I was on the satphone at the time, because we only had sat phones to communicate that maybe they had traced the sat phone signal and thought it was you know, Taliban communicating or something. I didn't know, you know, and so I ripped out all the sat phones and, and everything.

Sean Brynda 09:25

While the October bombings of Afghanistan were the first acts of retaliation against the terrorist groups. It was not the first time the US had engaged in Afghanistan. According to MU history professor Victor McFarland, the idealistic Americans who went to Afghanistan in the wake of 9/11 are walking into a quagmire created by decades of US foreign policy missteps.

Victor McFarland 09:45

US leaders didn't visit the country until the 50s. Vice President Nixon and President Eisenhower were the first Vice President and President to visit Afghanistan. The US started giving foreign aid to Afghanistan and And a big reason for that was the Cold War competition with the Soviets, that the US and the Soviet Union were both giving aid to Afghanistan. Neither one wanted the country to be totally under the influence of the other superpower.

Sean Brynda 10:15

Once the Soviets installed a puppet government in the late 1970s, US official started funding a rebel movement. But there was a problem with that aid, McFarland says.

Victor McFarland 10:24

United States basically delegated a lot of its local policies in Afghanistan, a lot of its support, or at least the details with support for the insurgents, the US delegated that. Pakistan decided, and often the most brutal, conservative Islamist groups that did not share the kind of values that the United States profess to support in its own foreign policy.

Sean Brynda 11:08

And its eagerness to oust the Soviets in the 1970s and 80s. The US may have empowered the very forces that ultimately ousted Americans from Kabul earlier this year.

Victor McFarland 11:19

It's also important to recognize that from the very beginning, the Taliban had major ties with elements of the Pakistani government and the Pakistani intelligence services, which had been intervening in Afghanistan and supporting various Mujahideen groups and Islamist groups all the way back even before the Soviet invasion back into the 1970s. Some of those people and Pakistani intelligence services and Pakistani military supported the Taliban.

Trevor Hook 12:01

It's Trevor Hook from the KBIA newsroom, and you're listening to a special edition of Global Journalists on KBIA 91.3 fm. To listen to past episodes, you can visit [Global Journalist.org](http://GlobalJournalist.org). You can also find episodes on kbia.org, Spotify, Apple podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. Now, back to the show.

Sean Brynda 12:33

St. Louis based veteran John Seesengood says that while serving in Afghanistan, he always felt uncertain about who to trust. This is most apparent during the mission he recalls in which his unit and Afghan National Police also known as ANP came across an armed Taliban fighter in a ravine.

John Seesengood 12:52

This bad guy was in there trying to draw us in and he had a bomb strapped to his chest, the look like his gear, and he's just trying to shoot at us to get us in there. We're working with the ANP. Well, the ANP told us about this guy. Why would they know about him just randomly? Brings us over there. And he's like, trying to get us to go in there. So there's there's distrust there. Now. I don't trust them anymore. We knew what's going on. We're smarter than this. We're trained on this. What ended up happening? The guy clacked off, ba-boom. No one got hurt, because we didn't get close enough. He could have hit the button, or we could have had a bullet that had his thing. We don't know. All I know is every time we were working with the ANP. They didn't respect us.

Sean Brynda 13:38

While situations like that put Seesengood and his unit in extreme danger. they relied heavily upon their interpreter who went by the nickname 'Doc'.

John Seesengood 13:49

I trusted him because he would he would, he would he carried this radio... Ever been a little kid and you're, you have a walkie talkie and you're listening to your friends? And you pick up other people and you can kind of speak to them? We could do that to the enemy and he would carry that radio. We would get ready to get into these situations and Doc would say, "Hey, they're talking. They're getting they're getting there, they see us, they see us." and he would stop us. And I'm telling you, stuff will kick off right after that. And he was like, "Hey, they see us." because he was listening to them. We gave them a radio and he just walk around listen to them we're all patrol. That is super crucial. And he would say... You have an interpreter that makes a difference when you say, "I want you to relay this message word for word exactly how I'm saying it. Exactly how I'm saying it. Not, don't make up your own narrative to be a nice guy, say it how I want you to say it because this is the message I'm trying to convey. Doc would do that.

Sean Brynda 14:46

With interpreters like Doc, an armed US unit could afford to feel secure. Without a way to bridge a gap between languages, US soldiers could feel a very uneasy, very quickly, Sean Lee experienced the same uneasiness when he arrived in Afghanistan in 2010, as part of the surge that President Barack

Obama ordered, over the objections of his vice president, Joe Biden, to battle a revived Taliban. He says the Afghans he interacted with were desperate.

Shawn Lee 15:18

The thing that I learned in my tours overseas, is that hungry people are desperate. And so, anybody can be turned into Taliban, if they're in fear for their safety, or they are starving, or their family is starving. I mean, what I learned so often in those regions, was that I was fighting hungry, poor people who just had been fed a bunch of propaganda by a very small group of extremists.

Sean Brynda 15:54

Columbia native, Latavia, Gibson served in Afghanistan from 2008 to 2012.

Latavia Gibson 16:00

It makes you feel like time has stopped. And you're just, you don't even know what's going on outside of that bubble that you're in, and whether or not you are going to make it back. And if you don't make it back, did I get to say anything that I want to say to friends and family? Did I get to do everything that I wanted to do? Is this gonna be the last time you know, I get to drive a car down the road or something like that, it just really makes you appreciate life more. Just the little things like, when you see people over there in that country, struggling, it just makes you appreciate what you have here in America.

Sean Brynda 16:43

Shawn Lee is still trying to get some of those struggling Afghans to America. Like as his interpreter Saeed, but so far, he remains stranded.

Saeed 16:52

I am disappointed, you know, at the start of our job when I was start start working with Americans, they have promised me personally, me when I pass the test and stuff... They have promised me that, "if you support our mission, we will definitely stand on your side and we will save you." But you know, for the last 10 days, I haven't received any, any email or any phone calls. Before that the embassy sent email to the interpreters that stay away from the airport. We will let you know we're not we're not leaving you behind. But I think they just broken the promises. And no one reached us. No one here hears us, so we are in extremely danger.

Sean Brynda 17:43

We at Global Journalist reached out to government officials such as a senator or Roy Blunt and members of the US State Department on whether they could provide an update on Saeed's case, neither provided a comment.

Trevor Hook 18:09

It's Trevor hook from the KBIA newsroom, reminding you that you're listening to a special edition of Global Journalist on KBIA 91.3 FM. You can find previous episodes on Global Journalist.org and on kbia.org. While you're there, you can also find other podcasts and special projects from KBIA, such as the station's weekly Bicentennial oral history series, Missouri on Mic, the Health Focus Missouri Health

Talks, and more. All this is available again at kbia.org or wherever you get your podcasts. Now back to the show.

Sean Brynda 18:57

The 20 years since 9/11, the Pentagon and the New York City skyline have been repaired, but will take longer to repair the spirits of the Americans who sacrificed so much in Afghanistan, only to see the Taliban retake the country.

Latavia Gibson 19:12

I guess I learned that we're the kind of nation that we try to help as much as we can. And I think now in these times, it's more of an issue of whether we should help. Is it our business to help? And is it worth it to put our own soldiers in danger to go over there and help these people in these situations?

Sean Brynda 19:42

As for the thousands of people left in Afghanistan, women have become the most scared of what their futures may hold.

19:50

I think that absolutely, there is a tremendous fear among women, and especially among young women. You know, I mean, it's been 20 years. If you're 25, and in living in Kabul going to coffee shops, you you don't remember you don't know, the Taliban and all, you know, where all the stories and you're terrified at the very thought, you know,

Sean Brynda 20:13

Hundreds of citizens who supported US and NATO coalition forces, fear for their lives as well as Seesengood can attest.

John Seesengood 20:22

Anybody that was ever associated with coalition forces, all these commandos are trained all these people, these good people, they're being they're, they're they're surrendering to the Taliban. "Hey, we're sorry...." The Taliban is executing them and their families right now, as we speak. What do I feel about it? Devastates me. What if you did all this hard work, and something I don't worry about that? That's nothing. We've let it go. We've let them win.

Sean Brynda 20:54

For retired Major General Bagby, the US made the right decision for withdrawing from Afghanistan.

Byron Bagby 21:01

President Biden, some Americans think that was a good decision. Some don't. I will tell you as a person who served there, I know that I did my job while I was there. And those of us in who served in there in the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, as well as our coalition partners. We did the military part, right. We were called to go over there and fight and try to make Afghanistan more secure. We did that. And I think that tactically, we did a very good job of performing our military duties. I think that the one flaw in the overall strategy would have been, in my opinion, is trying to nation build in Afghanistan, where one

of our main themes was to make Afghanistan, a country that had a western style democracy. Afghanistan, is a very tribal and provincial country. They've never had a real central government. They, the 34 provinces, and the tribal regions, is basically how Afghanistan is organized. And we go in and try to make them in my view, a western style democracy. We've been there for 20 years, we spent \$2.2 trillion. We've lost 2,461 Americans killed, and over 20,000 that were wounded, in Afghanistan. And my view is that in 20 years, it's time for us to to stop the nation building and withdraw.

Sean Brynda 22:45

Shawn Lee is happy the war in Afghanistan is over.

Shawn Lee 22:49

Violence begets violence. You know, you you go and you win a battle and shoot some people. Well, those people got friends, they got family. Now there's footage of it all over the internet, that's going to be used as propaganda tools. I mean, I'm not criticizing, you know, the justice that was dished out. But I do want to call attention to the fact that this is a cycle of violence. And I'm very cognizant of that because I don't want my son to have to fight my wars.

Sean Brynda 23:53

That's it for this edition of Global Journalist. Thanks to audio engineer Trevor Hook for producing this episode. Thanks to KOMU 8 reporter Jessica Fitzgerald for helping with this project. Our program is supported by executive producer Kathy Kiely, Lee Hills Chair and Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism, music was provided by blue dot sessions. If you would like to listen into more programs such as this, please head to our website, [www dot global journalist. org](http://www.dotglobaljournalist.org) or look for us in the NPROne app. for all of us at Global Journalist. I'm Sean Brynda. Thanks for listening.