

Review – Allies

Written by Sarah Pedigo Kulzer

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SARAH PEDIGO KULZER, NOV 19 2022

Allies

**By Lawfare and Goat Rodeo, hosted by Bryce Klehm
Podcast, 2022**

In the two decades following the events of September 11th, 2001, the United States has been engaged in an illicit global war on “terror,” a vendetta which has resulted in the loss of an estimated 900,000 lives (Brown University, 2021). Approximately 387,072 of those lost were foreign nationals, most of which were citizens of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs, 2021). In Afghanistan alone, there are an estimated 300,000 nationals who have been associated with the United States’ campaign (Jordan, 2021), often in the hopes for a future free from violence and oppression; a future which U.S. propaganda marketed itself to provide. As a direct result of this affiliation, these nationals, many of whom served as interpreters, translators, and cultural ambassadors, along with their families, face intimidation, persecution, and even death.

In an ill-fated attempt to remedy the dire situation faced by those once considered to be allies, the U.S. government recommissioned the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program with intentions to provide safe harbor via prioritized U.S. admission as well as legal permanent residency. Unsurprisingly, there was a catch. Bureaucratic red tape made it virtually impossible for qualified applicants to successfully apply. After a hasty U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, these allies, our “eyes and ears,” those who sacrificed their identities, their safety, and often their lives to further U.S. geopolitical goals were unceremoniously left behind. *Allies*, a podcast hosted by Bryce Klehm, seeks to understand how the U.S. government failed so spectacularly in Afghanistan. This series takes the listener inside the lives of Afghan interpreters and translators, outlining the threats they faced, their attempts to escape, and, ultimately, how the SIV program “collapsed under the slow churn of bureaucracy” (#1, 12:00 – 12:03).

Before one can fully comprehend the immensity of the failure of U.S. policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is imperative to understand just *how much* the United States depended on Afghan and Iraqi translators and interpreters (affectionately referred to as “terps”) to accomplish its mission in the region. The first two episodes, entitled “Faithful and Valuable Service” and “A National of Iraq”, set the stage for the recommissioning of the Special Immigrant Visa program. These episodes provide a critical emphasis on the sheer dependency of the United States on foreign nationals during the initial invasion. Klehm makes abundantly clear the complete lack of cultural and language competency by U.S. military and agency personnel, some of whom, the listener comes to find, struggled to locate Afghanistan on a map. While initial “victory” in the region was swift, the type of military tactics utilized by the U.S. were poorly suited for holding territory, stabilizing an area, or providing a protective force for a population, ultimately resulting in the undertaking of a new mission geared towards “nation building.” This new mission, which would span decades, further increased the demand for Iraqi and Afghan nationals to serve on U.S. frontlines.

Episodes 3-5 highlight the voices of Fred and Janis, two Afghan interpreters who, between themselves, served with U.S. forces on the front lines for upwards of a decade. Despite their invaluable service, neither applicant was able to successfully navigate the application process without the explicit help of former U.S. military colleagues, politicians, federal agency employees, non-profit organizations, and a host of actors with significant political and social platforms. It is within these episodes, entitled “Ongoing Threat”, “Numerical Limitations”, and “Extreme Vetting”, that the series compels the listener to comprehend the sheer immensity of the crisis being discussed. Klehm provides a

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scathing critique of the application process, taking meticulous care to outline the ways in which eligibility requirements, ripe with xenophobic contingencies, actively work to exclude the very people the program was intended to protect. While the cases provided are provocative and robust, there is a noticeable lack of representation regarding Iraqi SIVs as well as those who qualify for SIV status under Section 602(b) of the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009 (i.e., those who did not act as interpreters or translators, but were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in other capacities).

By utilizing the voices of “Shocker” Jeffery, Jeff, and Janis, *Allies* successfully convinces listeners that the application process is, at best, woefully inefficient. Yet, within these episodes, the authors simultaneously leave room for less-critical consumers to fall victim to the fallacy that the program was, while not ideal, a technical success. Episode 6, “Allies Refuge”, actively works to amend this conceptual gap by painting a riveting, and at times grotesque, picture of the chaos that ensued during the United States’ hasty withdrawal of Afghanistan, and, ultimately, its final feeble attempt to remedy decades of broken promises and failed policy. As former Marine Recon officer Elliot Ackerman remarked, “If you’re Afghan, whether you live or die ... comes down to what’s the contact list in your phone?” (#6, 39:04 – 39:12)

On a surface level, *Allies* provides an invaluable overview of the critical failure of the SIV program itself, yet it falls infinitely short when taking into account the immensity of the impact of U.S. intervention on the lives of applicants *after* the hurdles of the application process have been cleared. While life after arrival in the United States is briefly mentioned in Episode 7, “Adjustment”, the authors seemingly reverse course, focusing primarily on the asylum process for those who have yet to be granted SIV status. While a worthy endeavor, this leads listeners to believe that the failures stop at the application process, while in reality, “successful” resettlement in the United States presents an entirely new, and unrelentingly infinite, fight for survival.

The Special Immigrant Visa Program in Iraq and Afghanistan is arguably one of, if not the greatest policy failure of the twenty-first century. Yet, it remains to be a topic that is distinctly omitted from mainstream political, humanitarian, and academic conversations. Through its robust and critical analysis of the SIV program, specifically in Afghanistan, *Allies* provides a crucial basis of discussion regarding U.S. policy failures in the region. The series clearly aims to depict the United States as the primary antagonist, but they fail to frame its actions as inherently *criminal*. Describing the impact of the failed program, one of the many Afghan nationals who was ultimately left behind recounted, “this life is like dying gradually every single moment” (#6, 54:44 – 54:48). Presenting the failure of the SIV program using a criminality of crimes of states (Kulzer and Friedrichs, 2019) is paradoxically important if the United States stands any chance of being held accountable for the lies, deceit, and perpetuation of violence against those who were once considered “allies.”

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About the author:

Sarah Pedigo Kulzer is an Assistant Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Shenandoah University. She received her Ph.D. from Old Dominion University, focusing her dissertation on “Abandoned Allies: A Case Study Analysis of the Special Immigrant Visa Program.” Her research interests include state crime, social inequality, and forced migration, with an emphasis on the Special Immigrant Visa Program. Some of her recent publications have appeared in journals such as *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* and *Human Rights Review*.