

# CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

## Ethics Matter: A Conversation with Sebastian Junger

Ethics Matter, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

**Sebastian Junger, James Traub**

### Transcript

#### Introduction

**JAMES TRAUB:** Welcome to Ethics Matter. I'm your host, James Traub, and our guest today is Sebastian Junger.

Sebastian is one of the great narrative journalists who is writing today, and I think there is nobody who writes more beautifully and more thoughtfully about how people, including very brave and often very competent people, react to situations beyond their control.

His first book that many of you will know is the deserved best-seller *The Perfect Storm*, made into an extremely major [motion picture](#). He is also the author of an extraordinary book called *WAR*, about a distant American outpost in the eastern edge of Afghanistan. Sebastian also directed the documentary that many of you may have seen, called *Restrepo*, which is really I think an incredibly eye-opening look at what the reality of combat is. *[Editor's note: Check out Junger's 2011 Council talk on WAR.]*

Thank you very much for being here, Sebastian.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Thank you.

#### Remarks

**JAMES TRAUB:** Maybe you can just tell us first what was the path by which you wound up becoming this chronicler of extreme situations? Is this what you always did?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Well, I first had to get through my twenties as a really mediocre waiter in several restaurants.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Were those the dangerous situations that set you on your path? Did people throw plates at you?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Almost. I was a really bad waiter. I was fast but really not very elegant.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So you realized that's not what destiny had prepared you for?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** No. I graduated college. I had studied anthropology. I was really interested in human society and how groups work, how people work. I did my thesis on Navajo long-distance

runners. I was a good runner in college and afterwards. I spent a summer out on the reservation training with their best runners, and I wrote a thesis about the tradition of running in Navajo society.

After that, I just wanted to be a writer. I didn't quite know what that meant, but I really wanted to be a writer. So I started doing odd jobs.

I tried to write for magazines. That really didn't work. I just couldn't quite get it together. But, meanwhile, my twenties were going by.

I finally got a job as a climber for tree companies, as an arborist. So I worked 60, 70 feet in the air on a rope with a chainsaw.

**JAMES TRAUB:** That sounds like closer preparation for what you wound up doing.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** You know, it was really interesting. A lot of people get hurt or killed doing that kind of work. No one ever died in a tree, I don't think, without making a mistake. You kill yourself in trees. Not on a highway—I mean someone can run into you, whatever. But in a tree—

**JAMES TRAUB:** This doesn't strike me as reassuring at all. I guess it should.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Actually, it teaches you an amazing attention to detail, in fact. I realized I could be 120 feet in the air taking the top off a pine tree with a chainsaw, and if I do it right I'm perfectly safe. It really got me into this sort of Zen focus.

I've got to say I was a kind of lost young man. When I started doing this job, I suddenly felt kind of mature and courageous, and it did wonders for my self-esteem, and suddenly I was a better writer. I mean it really translated into writing.

I actually did get hurt. I hit my leg with a chainsaw and tore off the back of my leg right there. I was living in Gloucester, Massachusetts. It was right before this huge [storm](#) hit the New England coast, and a local boat named the [Andrea Gail](#) sank with six men. I thought, "I'll write about dangerous jobs," because I got hurt doing a dangerous job, people die all the time doing them. It's usually low-paid work, work that the country needs done but doesn't really think about or respect very much. Sort of [John McPhee](#)-like, I wanted to honor the people in these kinds of work.

**JAMES TRAUB:** But I take it part of this is you realized you had a real yen for these high-risk situations, that you saw that in yourself as well.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I felt that situations where the stakes are that high illuminate how we work as people, as human beings and as groups.

I know I'm skipping ahead to probably material that you might ask about—

**JAMES TRAUB:** That's okay.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** —but one of the things I've thought about and tried to write about is why soldiers miss war. They miss brotherhood, and you can't reproduce brotherhood back home because the stakes aren't high enough. You don't need brotherhood when life and death is not in question.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Though I assume those five, or whatever there were number of, guys on that ship, that was a similar situation. A few guys on a ship facing an unspeakable storm is about as close as you can get to combat.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think probably. You know, the way things work on a ship, as I understand it, everyone has a job, everyone needs to do their job well, or you're all in danger. That's very much like combat. So I would imagine they felt that same kind of bond.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Let me just go back one step. You mentioned McPhee.

I should just say to everyone who has not had a chance to read Sebastian's work, he writes a beautiful, rosy, muscular, dense, tasteable, tangible prose style. He really writes very beautifully.

So who were you reading when you were thinking, "I want to be a journalist"?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I grew up reading John McPhee, an amazing nonfiction writer for *The New Yorker*, who I'm sure most of you know—just unbelievably clear prose, clear as water, I mean just gorgeous writing.

Joan Didion—I just love Joan Didion, a very different kind of complex, sort of inverted prose style. Amazing mind.

Peter Matthiessen, Barry Lopez. I read Michael Herr when I was 18, *Dispatches*. It was right after the Vietnam War had ended and I was pretty blown away by that book, and I've re-read it every decade or so since then probably.

**JAMES TRAUB:** I was saying to you before that I thought about McPhee when I was reading you, and I realize maybe one reason for it is that you write about incredibly turbulent settings, but there's a certain level of dispassion in your own writing, a certain level of remove, a little bit like McPhee in that regard. Michael Herr was kind of hallucinatory. You're not like that. That's not how you write.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I feel like there's a great power and understatement and literality, sort of literalness.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Hear all that, all of you writers and would-be writers. There is a great power in understatement and just saying "the thing," whatever that word is.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I learned that through McPhee. I mean McPhee is kind of the master of it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So let's talk a little bit about *The Perfect Storm*. A storm, unlike a war, there's no evil, there's no human, there's not even like a *Moby Dick*, which somehow incarnates malevolence. You're writing about a situation where people just have unbelievably bad luck and then try to deal with it.

Is there a moral to this story? Is there a moral core to this story? What is it?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** That's a profound question. I think people caught in forces beyond their control—a hurricane, a storm, a tornado, an artillery bombardment—I think it actually feels evil.

I've never been caught in a tornado, but my guess is if you're in the basement of your house in Wisconsin and it's coming through, it feels evil. I know an artillery bombardment feels the same way.

There's a funny expression, "there's no atheists in foxholes." I was trying to think about that. I'm an atheist.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You're an atheist in a foxhole?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I'm an atheist. I grew up without any kind of religion at all. As an atheist, I think about that phrase and I think, "What is it really about an artillery bombardment that leads you to the conclusion that God is involved in this?" I really see it the other way around: clearly, God has nothing to do with what's going on today.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It takes a lot of theological rationalizing to explain earthquakes and hurricanes and other things that nobody deserves having happen to them.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Right.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So you're saying there is a kind of moral drama to even these stories about people trying to cope. But was my original thought, that what you're trying to get at is how people react to situations that go beyond their control even if they think they have a lot of control—is that kind of the center of it?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** What interests me is how they react with each other, what they do with each other. Either the human relations fracture or, I think more commonly, they are reinforced. I mean people need each other, and the worse things are, the more they need each other. That feeling of mutual need and seeing that need honored and fulfilled is almost intoxicating.

I remember, when I was a kid, I knew a lot of people who had experienced [World War II](#). I remember friends of my parents who had been through the [Blitz](#) in London saying that they missed those days, they missed the Blitz. They were living in the subway, in the Underground. But they missed it. What they missed was all of a sudden—they were an urban population—they were living in this extremely interconnected way that I think probably duplicated our human evolution.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You know, one thing I thought when reading *WAR* is that if there is any cure for the selfish individualism, which is just our lives, it's war, because, as you say again and again, it's only if you are willing to submerge yourself into this group endeavor that you survive and the others survive.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** That's right.

The most frightening thing to soldiers was the idea of being alone. When you're in an environment like that, that's that deadly and dangerous, the only sense of security and control that you have comes from the fact that you're with 30 other guys in a platoon and you're all operating in a mutually committed way, and you're pretty well trained, and you're going to do this.

The idea of being alone—I found that too—those guys were on that hilltop for 14 months with no television, no women, no cooked food, no running water—nothing. I mean it was sandbags and ammunition. No Internet, no phone, no way to communicate with home. Fourteen months.

Think about it. They were never more than probably five or six feet from another person for a year. For them, the idea of being alone, even for a few minutes in the scrub brush or outside of the outpost—like, "Wait! Where is everybody?"—was just terrifying.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You make that sound almost worse than combat.

I want to just go back. Before you wrote about that extraordinary scene in the [Korengal](#), you spent a lot of time in wars everywhere. The wars of the 1990s that you began covering—[Sierra Leone](#), [Liberia](#), [Kosovo](#)—these are not wars in the way that most of us imagine it. They're more like barely organized murder. They're anarchic situations. What was that like for you as a journalist?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** My first war was [Bosnia](#) in 1993; I was in [Afghanistan](#) in 1996, right before the [Taliban](#) took over; and then, as you said, on through those other wars.

I guess, first and foremost, it's quite a stressful task to figure out if you can trust the people you are with.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Especially in a setting like that, where the answer is most of the time you can't.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Yeah. Particularly in West Africa, the combatants were sometimes pretty deranged, mostly young men, sometimes young women, a lot of drugs, a lot of trauma.

**JAMES TRAUB:** When you were in Sierra Leone, for example, were you embedded or with the rebels or were you mostly with peacekeepers or government troops?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I was with government forces. I wouldn't call them troops.

**JAMES TRAUB:** I'm sorry. People wearing government uniforms.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Government fighters.

We were with the [Kamajors](#), which was basically an armed tribal group that the government had hired to protect Freetown. They were as scary as the guys they were fighting. I mean they were completely out of their minds. You just didn't know at what point—I don't know. It was absolutely terrifying.

The one thing about being with a Western military is that they're not going to just decide they don't like you and shoot you. You know, it's just not going to happen.

In the West African wars I've been in, you're never quite sure exactly what is going to happen. It's not because they're bad people; it's just because the combatants are young, they're on drugs, most of them have been extremely traumatized in the war themselves, they're very damaged people, and they see enemies everywhere.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So that inevitably raises the question of why a person would want to do this. Now, I've been a post-war correspondent, I've been a pre-war correspondent, but I haven't been a war correspondent. But I've read a lot of the literature of war correspondents—by [Anthony Loyd](#), by a number of people. One of the themes is, as we all know, this is an incredibly glamorous, macho thing to do. Also, there's just people absorb a lot of that horror. There are twisted people who do it. People become twisted by virtue of doing it, because you just spend a lot of time with demented people.

Spending so much time in those settings, how do you keep from somehow being sucked in by it?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think anyone is tremendously affected by violence. That includes seeing a pedestrian killed by a taxicab in New York City—anything. It really affects your psyche.

And war definitely does. The thing about war—it's sort of everything. It's very, very exciting, it's very scary, it's very profound, it's incredibly meaningful. It's sort of all of these human experiences all in just one complicated package.

So I would say in my experience in war, I've been traumatized by it and I can see how that trauma played itself out in me as a person.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Could you talk about that for a second? What do you mean?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I've had the usual—nightmares. And after I was in Afghanistan, all of a sudden I had a temper. I got angry really quickly, I cried a lot. I don't know why. Emotions were just coming out of me in really puzzling ways. It didn't feel particularly good, but I think it was kind of good for me. It kind of cracked me open in a way. I was a pretty self-contained person for many decades. It sort of changed that, I think for the better.

But war also really humanizes you, and you get very sensitized to human suffering.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It isn't the other way around? It isn't that you get desensitized to human suffering?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think both things happen. You learn a kind of denial. You see someone who is—you know, there are some ugly sights in war, and you learn to shut down so you can deal with the sight, literally the sight of that person who is in pieces or whatever. You shut something down.

But what happens is that later your reactions track you down and make you deal with them, and I think they sensitize you to human suffering in a way that you will never be sensitized by just simply listening to NPR back in the United States actually.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You didn't find, for example, that among the soldiers you spent time with—now we can move forward and talk about Americans—that it hardened them, or even made them pathological?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think it did everything to them. Listen, American soldiers are really well trained and they will carry out their mission pretty much despite anything. I mean they're good, they're really good. Like the police, like the fire department, those kinds of tasks that could kill you, that are really upsetting, they require the ability to shut your moral sense down, including your moral sense about what could happen to you. You have to really not care.

But I think what also happens is that later those aspects of your character that you shut down in combat track you down and make you deal with them.

One of the guys I'm quite close to from the platoon I was with, the thing that really torments him isn't the times he almost got killed, which were multiple, but the idea that he might have killed civilians by accident. He doesn't go to church, but he said to me, "What am I going to say to God when I die? What's that conversation going to be like if I killed a civilian?"

**JAMES TRAUB:** And yet, if he thought about that too much, he wouldn't be an effective warrior.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Well, if he thought about it at the moment, yeah. Those guys tried very, very hard. They were very aware of civilian casualties, incredibly responsible to that. "Stop shooting, stop shooting. There's a civilian on the roof. Stop." Partly because they're decent people and don't want to kill innocent people, and partly because they know if you kill civilians the valley turns against you in war, and you are going to die. It's pragmatic also. They were very responsible about it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** We've all read about horror stories of people who basically flipped out and wound up killing civilians on purpose. You didn't have that experience, you didn't see that?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** God, no.

**JAMES TRAUB:** The opposite.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Just to be fair, that absolutely happens in combat. It also happens here; it happens in [Connecticut](#) too. That's just a tragedy of human existence, unfortunately. I'm not sure it's that connected to combat.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Let's talk about the opposite for a second. Let's talk about courage. You write so deeply about this—both psychologically, but also at some level that is beneath, beyond anyone's calculation. One of the stories that you tell in *WAR* really struck me. It's about this patrol on the Gatigal ridge, when these guys get attacked in what you call an L-shaped ambush. Could you just talk a little bit about that incident and what that says about how it is that people wind up doing things that we civilians can't imagine a person doing?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** You have to understand about combat, squad-level combat, that it's a little bit like a football game, like everyone has a job, there's a play for every situation—you're in an L-shaped ambush, you all do that; you are in an outpost and you get hit, you do that; if you are setting up an ambush, you do that. It's quite choreographed.

When it's not, untrained combatants, for example the Taliban, they don't really have that choreography down very well. So when they walk into an L-shaped ambush conducted by American forces, they pretty much get annihilated. They just don't have a tactical reaction like the Americans would.

What happened to the First Platoon coming down the Gatigal spur was they walked right into 15 guys with automatic weapons and RPGs in an L-shape. They do it in an L-shape because if you are on either side of a trail and ambushing someone, you will kill each other. So they do an L-shaped ambush that allows for crossfire but no friendly fire.

They walked right into a shooting gallery at night, basically, on this steep ridge. Everyone in the first three or four guys got hit. I can't remember. It has been a few years since I wrote that section.

But basically, instead of cowering, instead of just taking cover, instead of running away, instead of doing all the things that would have gotten everybody killed, every single person, even the wounded, did what they're supposed to do, which was they took a position, started returning fire; the guys who had hand grenades started running forward into the fire throwing hand grenades. As a result, instead of the entire platoon getting wiped out, or 10 or 20 guys getting wiped out, there were I think two KIA [killed in action] or WIA [wounded in action], something like that.

But it's really like a football play. This guy named [Sal Giunta](#) was in the First Platoon, and he was the first living recipient of the Medal of Honor since Vietnam. He was in the front of that line that walked into that L-shaped ambush.

He realized that there were bullets coming from the area where his buddy [Josh Brennan](#) was, and that meant that there were bullets coming from that direction and Brennan was in trouble. He ran into the gunfire throwing hand grenades and found Josh wounded and, as it turned out, dying, getting dragged away by the Taliban. He killed the two Taliban fighters who were dragging his friend off, and he got to him, and he defended him until the men got there. They lost him.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So our reaction would be "What an astonishing act of heroism!" Their reaction is, when they say, "That's what we're trained to do," they mean it, that for these guys the category is cowardice and then doing your job. For him that was just doing his job.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Yes. They really resent the idea of courage—"Look, that's my brother, that's Josh." Running to save his life isn't courage; that's what friendship is, that's what brotherhood is.

The only analogy I can think of is that, those of you who have children, if your child was in danger, if your child was drowning in heavy surf, whether you're a good swimmer or not, diving into the surf to try to save your kid isn't courage really, it's parenthood.

**JAMES TRAUB:** But the difference is that for us we easily understand the biological bond—"It's our child; the child's life is more important than mine." But you're describing a situation where your brother's life is more important than yours—not your biological brother, your brother in arms.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Right. That's the extraordinary thing about combat, and I think that ultimately that is why so many soldiers that I know came home and found themselves missing the war, missing combat—not because they're sociopaths. What they miss is the intensity of that bond, because basically when you go through a situation like that, the people around you, the men around you that you are not related to effectively become the moral and psychological equivalent of your family.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It's funny that you say yes, there are atheists in foxholes and you were one, because you're describing an experience of such self-transcendence, where your own life doesn't matter to you and that of your community does. Okay, it's not religion, but it has the same sense of transcending yourself to something larger.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Absolutely. My good friend [Karl Marlantes](#), who's a wonderful writer and a very decorated Vietnam vet—he wrote a book called *Matterhorn*, an extraordinary novel about combat—we were talking once, and he said to me, "You know, the experience of combat contains all of those elements that religions seek to experience—the awareness of mortality, the transcendent loss of the importance of the self, the living in the moment." He said, "Those are things that religions aspire to, and sometimes achieve. They are all experienced in combat."

**JAMES TRAUB:** How does one square the horror of war with this joy, this almost ecstasy of war, that you are describing?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I don't know if I'd call it joy. Sometimes family isn't joy either. But there's a very profound—

**JAMES TRAUB:** All right, snickers from the audience.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** There's a very, very profound connection that makes everything else feel meaningless.

**JAMES TRAUB:** In the few minutes we have before we are going to throw it open to all of you, I want to draw outwards a little bit.

Those of you who have seen *Restrepo* may remember that there is a postscript at the end in which we are told that the Army decided to abandon this outpost and abandon the Korengal, essentially because there was a profound change in tactics and strategy, which meant focusing much more on population centers, counterinsurgency, and so forth.

Now, neither in the documentary nor in your postscript in the book is that seen as a bitter fact. It could be seen as a bitter fact, right? You could be saying "They all died in vain." But you don't say that, or at least the reader doesn't feel you say that. Is that also not what you think?



**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** As a journalist, I feel like it's a very important thing not to necessarily judge things.

**JAMES TRAUB:** That would end my career. [Laughter]

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Well, listen, there's essayists, there's editorialists—there's a lot of different things and they're all very important. But in something like this, who am I to say what piece of ground in Afghanistan is worth dying for or not?

Likewise World War II—you know, they landed in [Dunkirk](#), they lost 30,000 men, and they pulled out. We won World War II, and maybe we wouldn't have won it if we hadn't gone to Dunkirk.

I just don't know. I think it's very complicated to start making judgments like that.

I can say specifically for the Korengal, it's a six-mile-long valley in the upper reaches of the Pech River. The Korengal itself had zero importance. There are several thousand Afghans living there. It is a very rugged place. It's sort of an Appalachian valley, the Afghan equivalent of Appalachia.

The Pech [[District](#)] was extremely important. In 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, there was a big project by NATO and the Afghan government to bring government influence—paved roads, schools, government control—into the Pech. The Pech has been important since the [Soviets](#) were in Afghanistan. It is a very, very important piece of territory.

All of the attacks on these projects would really change lives—medical care, paved roads, all actually really affected the lives of the Afghans there in a very good way. The attacks on that project in the Pech, a lot of them came out of the Korengal.

So the American military was like, "All right, we'll just go in and we'll put a cork in the bottle and we'll just stopper it."

After all those projects were done in the Pech, they left. There's no reason to stay in the Korengal after that.

That's the sort of long footnote to "and then they pulled out and 50 men were killed." That's sort of the long footnote to it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So what do you think? We're now about to [leave](#) active combat in Afghanistan at the end of 2014, and there certainly is a widespread sense that the transformation that was supposed to come along with our military presence—that is to say to change civilian life in Afghanistan, to train the military and the police, to reduce corruption, and so forth—that part hasn't succeeded the way the military part has, and therefore we will not have achieved the goals that we went there for in the first place, and therefore this whole thing has been very poorly conducted and maybe even will wind up being judged a failure. Is that your sense, though, or no?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** It was truly poorly conducted, for sure. I was there in [2001](#). The Afghans were so wildly grateful that we showed up and kicked the Taliban out of Kabul. I wasn't in the Pashtun areas, but, my god, that was a city liberated. It was an incredible experience and an enormous amount of goodwill.

**JAMES TRAUB:** How soon after the liberation were you in Kabul?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Hours.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Okay, then, at that moment. I didn't mean it in that sense. I thought you were going to say months.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** No, no, no.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You were there.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I was in the back of a [Northern Alliance](#) pickup truck when they drove through the Taliban front lines. I was there as fast as possible.

People were hugging me on the street because I was an American—"Thank you for what your country has done for us." It was extraordinary. [George Bush](#) went to [Iraq](#) and squandered it. That's the short version.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Well, give us the slightly longer version, which is: Is there an original sin, looking back, that was visible at the time, or should have been, and what's that?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** The [Bush administration](#) left 15,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan and moved on to Iraq. Clearly, the Afghans, who had been through decades of this stuff, are like, "That's not going to work. There's 40,000 cops in New York City, 15,000 American soldiers. You lost 3,000 people in New York City and this is your response, that's it?"

We would not have [killed bin Laden](#) and decimated [al-Qaeda](#) without a presence in Afghanistan. You don't fly SEAL Team 6 from Virginia and kill bin Laden. You don't get the intel, you don't have the access, just for starters, just to run down the list.

I mean I'm full of criticisms of how the war was run, but just what you got for your dollar on this—

**JAMES TRAUB:** For your \$100 billion.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** —for your \$100 billion, whatever.

**JAMES TRAUB:** You want to know if it's a decent investment.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** This is what you got. You absolutely decimated al-Qaeda and killed bin Laden.

Afghanistan is completely transformed from when I saw it in 1996 and 2000, 2001. Infant mortality has plunged; maternal mortality has plunged; there's seven times as many children in school, a third of them are girls, as before [9/11](#); this is the lowest level of civilian casualties in that country by far since before the Soviet invasion.

It's a completely different country, an incredible rate of economic expansion. It may all collapse when we leave, but don't think that it's not a radically transformed country.

Now, as a journalist, I am not saying therefore we should have gone or not, I'm not offering an opinion, but you should know what you are comparing.

**JAMES TRAUB:** One last question and then I want to throw it open for all of you. As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan—and it has already [withdrawn](#) from Iraq—it appears that the era that you have been writing about, the era of American combat in large numbers, is over. Is that your sense, or is that you think just a kind of momentary pause before new theaters of combat open up?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** No one saw 9/11 coming. Nobody thought that we would be in force in Afghanistan. Who knows what's—I mean did anyone see [Ukraine](#) coming? Who knows? I have no idea.

All through the 1980s, and really even the 1990s, with the brief exception of [Gulf War I](#), the assumption was that America was not going to be in another major ground war. Then 9/11 happened.

**JAMES TRAUB:** There's a sense that that's a lesson that the Americans have decided they have learned from this experience, no more ground wars.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think if 9/11 happened again and the people who did it were in—I don't know—the mountains of Algeria, or wherever, Somalia, I don't think they would go in and try to transform a stateless society to make it inhospitable to Muslim extremism. I think they would go in and kill the people who did it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** The nation-building part would end, the combat part wouldn't end?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Right.

And I've got to say, had we just gone in and killed bin Laden and left, we would have been accused, I think, of abandoning Afghanistan and just using it to settle a score and leave. We stayed, I think, not out of a sense of empire, but really out of a sense of "Look, this country needs help. What we just suffered, they've been suffering for decades. The world needs to help this country." I mean I think there was a good impulse there. It just didn't go very well.

**JAMES TRAUB:** I think that could be an epitaph.

## Questions

**QUESTION:** I've been in trees with chainsaws, but other than that I have no real experience of the sort of risky situations you have been in. You said that they illuminate in interesting ways some of the things that people do, human behavior, and you've told us a lot about the ways they come together in close familial bonds, "we happy few." You also mentioned fracturing, I think, at one point. What other sorts of things have you found out that people do in these sorts of crucible experiences?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** When I was in [Sarajevo](#)—I mean you had a civil society, a civilian society, contained/trapped in the center of a war zone. They were getting shelled every day, there were snipers, there were street battles—a terrible situation.

You saw incredible generosity. The civilians really helped each other. There was amazing generosity and courage.

But also there was this other side of it. Every family was struggling to survive, and I'm sure people were hoarding food and they were paranoid and they could act in a very self-protective way that wasn't necessarily concerned with other people.

So you get both sides of the human character. Both sides are necessary for survival. We exist as we are today because for the last 500, 1,000 years we evolved to be this. So if there's a selfish impulse during danger, a food-hoarding impulse during the time of scarcity, that was bred into us because it was necessary. But likewise, the tremendous generosity and courage and altruism that you can see

between people who are all in need, that also is why we're here. It's both. I think there is a great dramatic tension in human society between those two impulses.

**QUESTION:** I normally don't sit this close, but this is a close thing in my life. I was born in an Army family and was an Army chaplain and did that for a number of years, and created a project and a process to bring veterans and civilians together to talk about war and its impact.

Then I discovered—you mentioned Karl—that you and Karl have talked about having citizens in this country share the burden of war in the *Seattle Times* piece you did. I'm working at that. I feel like I'd like to talk with you further about work that we are doing and get some of your guidance on that.

I wonder if you have an idea of what's at risk for civilians. I'm both Army and a civilian. I wonder what's the invitation, what's the risk to civilians, to step forward and really take on some of what soldiers have done as a part of sharing that?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Here's sort of the conundrum. You often hear the statistic only 1 percent of the country has served and the other 99 percent had nothing to do with it. That's true.

The problem is to change that 1 percent you either have to make the Army even bigger, the military even bigger, which I don't think we can afford to do or want to do, or make the country smaller, which isn't happening.

**JAMES TRAUB:** That would be a radical solution.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** So you're stuck. People say that 1 percent number as if there's something wrong with it. Actually, I think that's fine.

But what's important is that the 1 percent and the 99 percent communicate effectively and that there is a mutual acknowledgement that "we, the soldiers, are doing this for you" and the civilians understand "you are doing that for us even if we were against the war."

There are people who were against the war. It's still their war. I mean we're all in this country. Our government, who we collectively elected, chose to send young people to war. It's not "their war" any more than the fires belong to the firemen or crime belongs to the cops. We asked and hired these people to carry out national policy, and they did it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** But there's almost nothing remaining of the hostility to the soldier that would have been normal when we were younger, right? Everybody worships soldiers now.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Not the hostility. But it's really interesting that—I'm talking to vets who have come home. They say, "We come home and people talk about the war as if it's not their war, as if it's our (the soldiers') war." And, particularly, people who were against the war, what the soldiers are thinking is, "Look, we just did what you asked us to do. The entire U.S. economy paid for this war. The gun was made in a factory and paid for by taxes, etc. All of us went to war."

This is sort of an ephemeral thought—I think there really is a difference thinking, "Wow, this war that I'm against"—I don't know if you guys collectively were for or against these wars, I have no idea; but say you were against it—I think it's quite an important thing to think, "I was against that particular war, but I belong to this country and what this country does, I own."

**JAMES TRAUB:** So the gentleman's question about some form of national service—I didn't even know what you had proposed in this piece that you were referring to—but one way to abridge this 1

percent thing without creating a giant military is to have some form of mandatory national service. Does that make sense to you?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think there's a lot of merit in that idea. I absolutely respect someone who says, "I do not want to go to war, I don't want to be part of the military." But the idea that we all belong to this country and owe it something—like what do you owe your country? That's an open question. I don't know the answer. I mean taxes, but beyond that what do you owe your country?

When I turned 18, I got a card in the mail from the government saying "Tell us where you live because we may call you up for the draft." My sister did not get that card. Right there is a division in the country that shouldn't exist.

My father grew up in Europe. He got out of Europe during [World War II](#). His father was Jewish and they got out. He was very grateful for what America did in helping defeat the Germans, the Nazis.

But I grew up post-Vietnam. I grew up basically in Cambridge, Massachusetts, very liberal family, liberal everything, I was a complete pacifist, etc., etc. I said to my father, "I'm not sending this in."

He said, "Yes, you are. You don't know what you owe your country. You may owe your country your life. If it's a war you don't believe in, then go to Canada. But right now you belong to this country. It's a big project involving 400 million people. Really, it's a great honor to be able to send that card in."

That's a profound thing. I feel like there should be more of that in this country. And it's not militarism; it's participation.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Isn't that the kind of idea of national service?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Yes.

**JAMES TRAUB:** That we owe something, there has to be a thicker contract than just "I pay taxes and I vote."

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Right. That's right.

A question to take home with you, if you choose, is: What do you owe your country? I don't know the answer. I have no idea what the answer is. But it's a really, really good question that I don't think many people ask, and I wasn't asked until my father pointed it out to me.

**QUESTION:** Just incidentally, I think that's a great idea. I'm going to vote for mandatory national service, be it in education, in medicine, or military, whatever. I think that's a great idea. Various parts of the world have mandatory service programs that work very effectively.

My question is about intelligence. In a number of the places you have been throughout the course of your career, a number of the conflicts we have been hearing over the last decade have happened so far off the radar of the American intelligence community that it's kind of astonishing that we have a million people in intelligence. I think [Maureen Dowd](#) this morning in her [column](#) said that maybe if Langley weren't so busy [investigating](#) Congress we might have seen the Ukraine crisis happening. Could you talk to that, please?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I know very little about the intelligence community. It's like predicting the weather. Human affairs are extremely complex. I think it's actually pretty tough to get things right.

I think if you had asked people in Ukraine a year ago, "Is **Crimea** going to secede?" I think they would have looked at you like you were crazy. I think it's just a very, very tough thing to get right.

But I think once a crisis happens, a very deep knowledge of the world obviously is crucial to formulating an effective policy or an effective military response.

I don't think much was known about Afghanistan when 9/11 happened. I think precious little was known about it. I remember I got calls from people in government saying, "What can you tell us?" I didn't know a hell of a lot either.

**JAMES TRAUB:** So one answer, I suppose, may be we don't need to increase the size of the NSA [National Security Agency] by 50 percent; we actually need to increase the kind of human intelligence that we have that's not so far from the anthropology that you studied, for example, because it's true that the number of Pashto and Dari speakers either in the intelligence community or in the diplomatic community when the Afghanistan War began was vanishingly small. That kind of ignorance is a curable kind of ignorance.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Absolutely.

**QUESTION:** I'm currently a student at Columbia, but I am actually a Canadian military lawyer who was in Afghanistan in 2009, but I was at a big base, KAF [Kandahar Air Field], and one or two excursions to smaller places.

In *WAR*, you indicated at one point you visited a larger base—it might have been Bagram; I'm not sure—and you indicated how, for instance, the deployment in that is a little more formal.

But that led me to the question: What can you say about leadership, leadership particularly when you were in the Korengal Valley at the outpost, because you talked a lot about the soldiers and the commonality, the brotherhood; but within that dynamic, what was the role of leadership and what was effective or not effective that you witnessed?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I think the effective leadership partly was the result of the leaders demonstrating that they are willing to undergo the same level of risk as the men that they command.

I keep saying men. It was all men out there. There were no women in Korengal when I was there in uniform.

At one point, we were on a very messed-up operation and were on the Gatigal spur, where the First Platoon got ambushed. They intercepted radio communication from the Taliban that they were going to hit us from both sides. We were on the top of this ridge and there was no correct side to get on to take cover because they were on either side of us and we were completely screwed. Fortunately, some air power showed up and saved us.

But before that happened, everyone was out of water. They were drinking the fluid in their IV bags because they were hallucinating from dehydration. It was very, very bad. The lieutenant, Lieutenant Piosa, stood up to sort of figure out where his men were and where he wanted to put them to try to salvage this situation. Sergeant Rice—you know, Piosa is 23, Sergeant Rice is 25—Sergeant Rice, an enlisted officer, stood up and said, "Sir, sit down, take cover. It's my job to get shot at. It's your job to lead the men." I don't think he would have said that—he wouldn't have needed to—to a leader who he thought was not willing to take those same risks, or even greater risks.

The next lieutenant, Lieutenant Gillespie, they kept having to pull him down in fire fights—like "Get down, take cover, you're going to get hit."

There's a corporate equivalent that, unfortunately, doesn't happen very often. But I think effective leadership is basically saying to your men, "If bad stuff happens to us, it's going to happen to me first. In exchange, I hope you will trust my judgment and follow me anywhere."

**JAMES TRAUB:** Did you see bad leadership while you were there?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Where I was was so bad, they didn't put bad leaders there.

**JAMES TRAUB:** During your whole time when you were embedded with American forces, you never saw bad leadership, you would say?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** No. I mean, look, combat is complex and complicated and you're getting orders from above and decisions get made that don't sound like they make sense and they look like bad leadership. You're not seeing the whole chessboard.

The thing is that what you are doing is not about you. I mean you put a platoon on that hill because there's a company position over here and there's a battalion position over there. It really isn't about you. So what you are doing might look incredibly stupid and look like bad leadership, but actually you don't matter. What matters is the chess game. I just don't have access to that information to really judge it.

**JAMES TRAUB:** Probably at higher levels of the chess game it would mean a very different thing. I mean Obama actually believed an active duty senior commander, [David McKiernan](#), in 2009 when he took over because he thought, "This guy is not running an effective war."

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** I wasn't with generals. The highest up I got was captain. I was really far out there.

**QUESTION:** First of all, thanks for being with us tonight. I'm a naval officer and also the manager of the program Scott was addressing a moment ago between veterans and civilians.

My question in that regard is: Were there any stereotypes from your anthropological and reporter's point of view about the military folks that you were embedded with, with the 173rd, that got shattered because of your time there, something that you walked in with, and once you left that experience you said, "This is not what I thought it was"?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Yes, absolutely. I grew up as a complete pacifist in an extremely liberal community. I didn't know anyone, literally a single person, who served in Vietnam, or at any point in the military. I mean I was just completely divorced from the military. I had been handed my opinions about the Vietnam War by my parents. I was pretty much anti-Vietnam and, by extension, sort of anti-military. I hate to put it that bluntly, but that was the truth when I was 12, 14, 16, 18. And we had a lot of pretty sordid misadventures in Central America that I was very judgmental about.

When I finally started covering U.S. forces in 2005, I had an idea of the U.S. military that came out of Vietnam, that soldiers were unthinking robots basically, they just did what they were told and marched in lockstep, and probably not that bright or why would they be in the military. I don't know.

That changed within an hour. I couldn't believe. I was in Zabul Province in Afghanistan. I had been in Afghanistan a lot. I really cared about that country. In 2005 it was the first time I was actually with

U.S. forces. I just couldn't believe how motivated and how smart and how amazing these guys were. I wasn't quite prepared for it.

One night we got attacked immediately after I got there. I got dropped in with a food and ammo re-supply by a Blackhawk. Immediately we got attacked. The next night—I can't remember if it was that night or the next night—it was mid-winter and we had to walk. We did a 10-kilometer movement. The guys were carrying up to 150 pounds, and most of them didn't even weigh that much, right? They're carrying their body weight. It was 6 degrees, 8 degrees—it was incredibly cold. We walked all night, 12 straight hours, over a 10,000-foot mountain pass, to get into the next valley so they could pull us out by helicopter because they were afraid that if they went into the valley we were in it was too narrow and they were going to shoot the helicopter down.

So we moved all night carrying these. And it was 6, 8 degrees. The guys were in T-shirts and soaking wet, they were working so hard, soaking wet from sweat, which meant they couldn't stop because it was so cold that they would immediately get hypothermia. It was the most brutal thing you can imagine. And they were doing it for each other, they were doing it for Afghanistan, they were doing it for this country.

I went to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, a wonderful school. I didn't go to school with one kid who would have done that for any of those entities, including myself. I was absolutely amazed by them.

Now, it's not that there aren't problematic soldiers. They're not all noble and heroic. But collectively I was just absolutely astounded by what they were doing.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. My name is Josh Gaccione.

Sebastian, I just wanted to thank you first because I bought a copy of *WAR* for everyone in my immediate family, which is about six. It made it easier to explain my own combat experience from the brotherhood aspect and from the reintegration aspect. So I wanted to say thanks for that.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Thank you.

**QUESTIONER:** Secondly, in your book, in *WAR*, you talk about one time in particular when you were receiving small arms fire and you debated dropping your camera and picking up a rifle. I'm paraphrasing, but it's something along these lines. When I read it—you know, I thought you were a pretty bad dude, and when you didn't, it got me kind of questioning that. The more I thought about it, the more I respected your journalistic integrity.

Can you talk through that decision, especially being a pacifist, and how you were able to keep that line or distinction?

**JAMES TRAUB:** I take it you would not call yourself a pacifist today, but you were then.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** No. My understanding of pacifism is a little more nuanced than it was when I was 18. We can go into that if you want.

Basically, there was no moment where I debated that. If there was a free weapon lying around, that means someone is dead or badly wounded and it's a desperate situation, and you have to abandon your journalistic duties because you have to help keep the group alive. That never happened.

But I did give a lot of thought to it, because Chosen Company, one valley to the north, got into a



360-degree ambush and took 100 percent casualties. The wounded fought off the enemy. Six men were killed.

[Tim Hetherington](#) and I, my colleague I was there with, talked about it. We were like, "Damn, had we been with Chosen Company, (a) we would both be wounded probably and (b) we would be helping fight or we would be helping the medics deal with the wounded. So we should know how to operate the weapons and how to stop catastrophic blood loss, whatever."

So we got the platoon medic to train us up a bit and we got medical kits so that we could at least help and not stand there like an idiot while someone was bleeding out. And we got trained on all the weapons in case it came down to that.

I really thought about it. I don't want to kill anybody, of course—who does?—but I even less want to die or watch people I care about die. Absolutely, had it come to that, I would not have had a moral problem with using a weapon.

I felt so connected to this platoon. The only thing that kept me slightly outside of it is that I was not participating in our collective self-defense. I found myself thinking: "Wow, if something like Chosen Company happens, it would be kind of an extraordinary experience because I would wind up having to cross over that line and become completely part of that. For a moment or for an hour or a day or whatever, I would no longer be a journalist, I would be part of that group in an extremely profound sense that I had never anticipated."

What I examined in my book is why that was appealing to me. And again, I don't want to kill someone, I have no desire to do that, I didn't join the Army for a reason, etc. But what does it say about me, about men, about humans, that that is partly a horrifying idea and partly an appealing idea? Let me just be really honest about it. Why is that appealing in any way? I really thought about it very, very deeply. It confused me.

**JAMES TRAUB:** It seems the thing you have actually done is the other side of that; that is, helping reporters be prepared for medical emergencies. Could you talk for one second about this organization [RISC](#) [Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues] that you have created?

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** My colleague Tim, who was out at Restrepo with me, he and I were supposed to go on assignment to [Libya](#) during the [Arab Spring](#), right after the Oscars. Our movie *Restrepo* went to the Oscars. We didn't win, obviously. Right after that we were going to go on assignment to Libya to cover the civil war. At the last minute I couldn't go for personal reasons.

He went on his own. On April 20, coming up on three years ago, he was [hit](#) by a mortar fragment in the town of Misrata. A wonderful photographer, named [Chris Hondros](#), was mortally wounded, hit in the head, and Tim was hit in the groin and bleeding very, very fast. Chris was beyond help, but Tim was just bleeding out. They put both of them in a pickup truck and raced to the Misrata hospital. Tim died en route to the Misrata hospital of catastrophic blood loss.

None of the journalists—there was a bunch of journalists in that area; some were wounded, some weren't—had any idea what to do in that situation. I realized that had I been with Tim and unwounded, I probably would have watched my friend die because I wouldn't have known really what to do either.

Then I thought, "Probably 90 percent of the frontline reporting is done by freelancers and probably about 100 percent of those freelancers don't have any medical training because they're just

enterprising, courageous young people who get some camera gear and get a plane ticket and they go over and do it." I just thought, "Okay, I'm going to start a medical training program for experienced freelance combat journalists."

It's called Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues (RISC). We do three sessions a year. We depend completely on donations. Our website is [risctraining.org](http://risctraining.org). We do two sessions a year in New York and one session a year somewhere in the world.

It's completely free. The hotel, the training course, the medical kit, it's completely free. We have a long waiting list, unfortunately. We can train as many people as we can raise money for. So if you're feeling generous, please check out our website.

**JAMES TRAUB:** I think on that plug, thank you so much, Sebastian. That was really a fantastic education.

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Thank you.

### Audio

Journalist Sebastian Junger knows about war from the inside: the horror and pain, the excitement and heightened awareness, and the fierce brotherhood between soldiers. In this moving conversation he talks about his life and work, and ponders on what everyone owes their country, whether they choose to fight or stay home.

### Video Clip

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### TV Show

Best-selling author Sebastian Junger knows about war from the inside: the horror and pain, the excitement and heightened awareness, and the fierce brotherhood between soldiers. In this moving conversation he talks about his life and work, and his experiences covering the war in Afghanistan.

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