



AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

**LOST IN TRANSLATION: THE UNSUNG WAR HEROES
OF IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN**

DISCUSSION:

**DAVID H. PETRAEUS, PARTNER, KKR & CO. LP; CHAIRMAN,
KKR GLOBAL INSTITUTE;
PAUL WOLFOWITZ, AEI**

PANEL DISCUSSION

PANELISTS:

**SALWAN AL TOKI, FORMER IRAQI TRANSLATOR;
JANIS SHINWARI, FORMER AFGHAN TRANSLATOR;
MATTHEW ZELLER, NO ONE LEFT BEHIND**

MODERATOR:

PAUL WOLFOWITZ, AEI

**2:30 PM – 4:00 PM
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2017**

EVENT PAGE: <http://www.aei.org/events/lost-in-translation-the-unsung-war-heroes-of-iraq-and-afghanistan/>

**TRANSCRIPT PROVIDED BY
DC TRANSCRIPTION – WWW.DCTMR.COM**

PAUL WOLFOWITZ: Well, welcome everyone, including everyone in, I think, adjoining rooms. I'm told this is the largest turnout we've had for a gathering in our new building since we've moved in here, which is lovely to think of. And I guess we have to thank not only this amazing general sitting near me, but also whoever thought up that executive order. So we're grateful for that.

But, believe it or not, this was not a spur-of-the-moment planning. We've actually been talking about doing this event for — in two weeks, it will be the one-year anniversary actually. It won't surprise you, General Petraeus is a very busy man. It's not easy to get on his schedule. We managed to do it. Our timing could not have been better. And we thank you very much for taking the time to be with us.

Of course, when I say our timing couldn't be better, I am alluding to the executive order, but our goal today is not to critique that. But I do think the executive order makes the discussion today important in two very big ways.

First of all, our main topic is going to be the fate of the interpreters that were left behind in Afghanistan and Iraq and the special immigrant visa program, which is supposed to take care of them. But that program has been broken for at least six years now.

Six years ago, an Afghan translator named Sakhidad Afghan, who had supported US forces for many years, applied for one of those visas. He waited four years but, sadly, he's waiting no longer because in 2015, the Taliban kidnapped him, tortured him, shot him in the back of the head, and threw him on the side of the road so people would know what happens to people who work for the Americans. That situation should not be allowed to continue. And, hopefully, the current environment gives us an opportunity to revisit the problems that have been causing obstacles in that whole program.

During our recent presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump was asked about his view of prospective immigrants who wanted to serve in the US Armed Forces. His reply was this: "I think when you serve in the armed forces, that's a very special situation." He's right about that.

The people we're talking about today are veterans in almost every sense of the word except the legal sense. They have supported US forces. They have participated in US combat operations. They have risked their lives supporting US military personnel, including in combat.

The biggest difference between them and legally recognized veterans is that their lives are in danger if they stay in their home country when their service is completed. Fortunately, as I mentioned, there are already signs the administration's working to modify the implementation of the executive order to accommodate interpreters who worked for us in Iraq. And the Congress is reportedly discussing something they're calling a No One

Left Behind Act — I could not have come up with a better name if they'd asked me. I love it — which could provide a chance to unblock much of what has been stuck for years now.

Second, the program we're discussing today could provide a model for the kind of strict vetting of immigrants that the president has promised and the American people obviously want. The participants in the SIV program have perhaps the largest stake in keeping out questionable people who might be coming here to try to target them. Already they go through the most strict vetting of any US visa program. They could be an excellent source of ideas for how the vetting process could be made more effective and more efficient in the future.

With those opening comments, let me introduce the principal speaker of the afternoon. Fortunately, I can do that both very briefly and very easily because General Petraeus literally needs no introduction. If you don't know who our speaker is, then you might as well leave right now. (Laughter.)

The extraordinary deeds that were accomplished under his leadership by tens of thousands of brave American military personnel have earned him long chapters in military history books already. So I'd like to ask you to show your appreciation for what all those men and women accomplished under his leadership by welcoming him with a strong round of applause. (Applause.)

GENERAL DAVID PETRAEUS (RET.): Thank you all very much, but first we're going to have to get the microphone working so wherever the wizards are back there — it's working now.

Reminds me a little bit of that moment to remember: we're six months into the surge, and we had to come back. Ambassador Crocker and I were testifying before the combined House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs Committees. It was a huge circus, an incredible gaggle of photographers, quite emotional speeches to begin it all. And I remember they said, "Now, General, if you will begin your opening statement." And I lean forward, began speaking, and we realized that the microphone was not working. It did cool down emotions a tiny bit.

Look, this is a privilege. We did indeed start working on this almost a year ago, trying to find the date and so forth. And, again, I feel very, very privileged to be able to sit up here with the former deputy secretary of defense, former under secretary during the Gulf War as well, to say thanks to you not only for what you're doing here and what you've done with the whole SIV effort, but what you did for veterans for many, many years when you were in the Pentagon, after that. Remember the weekly steak dinners, the incredible number, years and years of that, the incredible number of visits to Walter Reed, support for the GI bill, support for a whole host of veterans benefits that we now actually take for granted but which at the time were not always the easiest of votes for folks on the Hill for some reason to pass. So thanks to you for that, Paul, and thanks for hosting this.

I want to start actually by asking first of all those who served in US uniform or as a development or aid worker or contractor or CPA or whatever it may have been, if you would just stand up so we can see who we have here please. I thank every one of you. (Applause.)

And then I want to ask those who served as translators for some of us or others who are here and came to our country under the special visa process. Please stand up as well. (Applause.) Thank you. And then, Matt, why don't you and No One Left Behind in your band of merry men and women stand up because you have done such great work. Thank you. (Applause.)

What Matt's organization does is, frankly, is not just work with folks on the Hill to try to get, again, language right, support right, and all the rest of that. It's about much more than legislation because the job really just begins when individuals who served by our sides, who shared risk and hardship, who put not only themselves in harm's way but their families and their extended families as well. We were talking about some of the really tough stories. Paul recounted one of those, but there are many, many more like them.

But getting individuals here is just the first step. Then it's a question of how can we help them transplant, how can we help them integrate into a new culture, a new country, a new society. They do generally arrive with pretty decent English skills practiced over many years in places like the Korengal and Jalalabad and Kandahar and the Euphrates River Valley and the Tigris and so forth. But at the end of the day, that's the beginning of their experience. And what your group has done with churches, with various groups in society and a host of others to try to make that transition as easy and as successful as is possible I think is really a huge tribute to you and what you are trying to promote and really to our great country.

It is a country of immigrants at the end of the day. Virtually everyone in here — I'm the son of an immigrant. We all have our own stories about that. And as I testified before the House Armed Services Committee the other day, one of the great qualities of our great country is that the best and brightest want to come here. It's interesting even that foreign leaders who sometimes seem to make their living criticizing the United States, nonetheless, quietly send their sons and daughters to our universities and invest in banking, houses in New York, and our universities and all the rest.

So, again, my hat's off to you and my thanks to you as well, and thanks for sort of leaning on me to do this, encouraging me. I'm delighted to do it. Thanks.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Thank you for doing it.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Sure.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: I thought maybe a good place to start is if you could give a little personal recollection of your experience working with translators and if there are any particular stories that leap out in your mind.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Sure. It's interesting because I had translators all the way back in the Central America days; in Haiti when I was the chief of operations for the UN mission there, had a local translator. Again, I often insisted on a local translator at least until Sadi Othman came into my life and then I realized that, you know, we were bound by destiny, and so he was with me for the final, gosh, four or five years that I did Iraq and then Central Command.

But even in Bosnia, I had for a year there a local translator. Happily, I can still see him in his country. Because the truth is, as I was thinking about this on the way over here, in an ideal world we don't have to have an SIV because in an ideal world we'd be able to help these countries do sufficiently well that we wouldn't have those who, again, share risk as interpreters, as translators, and so forth have to then come to the United States — an obligation that we absolutely have. But in Bosnia, I see him every time I go to Sarajevo, which is a couple of times a year. We have a big investment there.

And then, of course, in Kuwait, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Iraq, I initially — when we were up in Mosul, I hadn't yet realized how extraordinary Sadi was so one of the one stars got him. I had a local translator there, Bashar Abdela (ph). He's phenomenal.

You know, he didn't just translate from Arabic to English. He was telling me about the individuals with whom we were going to meet. He was telling me about the culture. He was explaining to me, you know, I had a reasonable idea for what Islam was and the difference between Sunni and Shia, but up in Mosul, in Nineveh Province, we had the Yazidis, Christians, Sahwa, we had Kurds, Shia and Sunni, and then different political parties, different movements, different districts and so forth, tribal elements. And he was an incredible window into Iraqi society for the first year that I was there. Again, I was very, very privileged to have him.

Tragically, the situation up there deteriorated, as you'll recall, a year after we left and so forth. And, ultimately, he did have to come to the United States. We got him here, and now I see him out every time I'm out in Los Angeles or when he's in New York because he's now a manager of several different banks. He's at that level a regional bank manager and doing exceedingly well, as is the rest of his family.

Again, you feel an incredible kinship. We talk about the bonds of those who serve together in war. You've heard our great friend Jack Keane loves that phrase, the brotherhood of the close fight. It's a very, very special fraternity — maybe the most special and select fraternity of all. And, of course, now there are women in the brotherhood of the close fight.

And then you have others. You do form very close bonds with your coalition partners, the diplomats, the aid workers, all of the others that join such an effort. And then obviously your host nation partners, some of whom, again, are by your side as translators. And, ultimately, the best of those really become you.

In Afghanistan, I had a tremendous translator. He was a former Mujahedeen. He had actually already come to the United States, and so he is back there as an Afghan-American, and his family was safe in Omaha, Nebraska. But just as with Sadi in Baghdad, you know, I gave Sadi my cell phone. I didn't want to have it. These guys will call you in the middle of the night, at 2:00 a.m., you know, when they're stopped at the Green Zone because they forgot their badge again or something else. I mean, one time he called — he told the op center they needed to send an AC-130 down to Qud (ph) or someplace, and they actually did and rescued the Special Forces who only had Sadi's cell phone number from when we'd visited down there that day. Their TACSAT radio had gone out.

So, again, these individuals take on extraordinary importance in the lives of those leaders who are trying to interface with a host nation, with its citizens, with community leaders, religious leaders, tribal elders, and all of the rest of that. And, again, they have an immense responsibility because not only do they have to translate correctly and not skew it one way or another, they also have to pull you aside later on, as some of mine did, and say, "you know, that guy was lying to you today" or "that was complete hokum" or "that was not in line with what we think is the real message of that particular segment of society." So it's a big deal.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: It's not a skill set that even an American fluent in Arabic could provide, right?

GEN. PETRAEUS: No. You want that knowledge that comes from someone who has lived in that world. I mean, you get the best of all if you can have a former Palestinian Jordanian, the Michael Jordan of Jordan, the first guy to dunk a basketball in Jordanian basketball history who then comes to America, studies with Mennonites, goes back, plays pro ball so he's got fluent, obviously phenomenal Arabic, and then owns two delis in New York so he's a businessman and an entrepreneur and even drives a limo in his spare time. I mean, that's what you want.

So he's accomplished at all tasks, and he's been back many times and still is employed now as an adviser. Because it's not just translation. It's not just interpretation. It is adviser, I think, that is actually hugely important.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Are you hearing these days particularly or in the last months from interpreters back in Iraq that — or Afghanistan — that you dealt with about the anxieties they may be going through?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I think, you know, you hear about it. It comes and goes depending on the security situation in a country, in an area. Obviously, we heard a great deal out of Mosul tragically when the Islamic State swept in and imposed this very barbaric form of — extremist form of government and interpretation of Islam. Certainly I've heard again from Afghanistan as the security situation has eroded. And so, yes, you do hear that.

You know, there are other groups also beyond No One Left Behind. There are a number of other very, very wonderful folks who are trying to look after those who we

know from when we were there. And it does bubble up and bubble up. And, obviously, the events of the last week, needless to say, have put this into higher relief I think than before.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: What do you think was the implicit or explicit promise for these people when they came to work for us?

GEN. PETRAEUS: You know, I don't know that people sat down at the beginning of these and said, "you know, if you'll serve at my side and share risk and ride around and get hit by IEDs from time to time or, you know, save somebody's life, as Matt's interpreter did literally — again, I don't know how you ended up with a weapon in your hand but it sure was nice that you plugged the two Taliban that were trying to kill him when he got wounded.

So, again, I don't think there was ever an understanding that if you'll do this then we'll get you to the United States or we will do this, but I think there is an implicit, moral obligation to those who, again, share risk. And I think it's very important for the future as well.

You know, there's a great — there's a quote that I've used over the years about veterans that comes from George Washington. And I think it's very applicable in this case. And because you think about it here, he was, again, talking about veterans: a willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by our nation.

And, obviously, you could just strike out veterans and just say host nation partners, translators, advisers, whatever it may be because I think others will reflect back on how did we treat — I think a lot of people from the Vietnam era still feel that we left individuals behind. I know at the CIA there were host nation partners and there are tributes to them, and again, we left a number of them behind.

And I think that sense of having failed in our moral obligation is very keen with those from that era. And it's one reason that I'm pleased to see the attention that has been given to this, even though, obviously, you need a larger number of these special visas, even though, again, we need to ensure that the process is as expeditious as is possible while still at making sure that every safeguard is observed.

So, again, I think it is both the right thing to do for those with whom we have served in our most recent conflicts. I think it's also the smart thing to do if you think you might end up having to do this somewhere else, perhaps not in the same scale but where individuals are going to have to decide whether or not they're willing to support a US or coalition endeavor, and you know, will they take care of us if things turn south?

MR. WOLFOWITZ: You know, when Matt Zeller goes to foundations looking for financial support, if it's a refugee foundation, they say, "Well these aren't refugees. They're

veterans.” He goes to the veterans’ organization, they say, “Well, these aren’t veterans; they’re refugees.” Which do you think they are?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I mean, you actually highlighted this earlier when you said that they’re a veteran in every way except for the legal sense of the term. And, unfortunately, that is a pretty important term, which is why, again, I think you need that special attention to them and why there have to be these special processes for them.

I thought it was very important that you highlighted up front that, you know, they more than anyone want to make sure that those who are able to take advantage of this opportunity are those who are going to come here and become contributing members of society, pillars of communities, and obviously, the antithesis of what it is that we’re concerned about when it comes to extremists mingling in with various streams of people coming to our country.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Your time is scarce, and I don’t want to monopolize it. Can we open the floor to a few questions?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Sure we can. Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Sure.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: In the back. Ground rules: state your name, your affiliation. Ask a question; don’t make a speech.

Q: Kim Dozier of The Daily Beast.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Let me ask you a question if I can, Kim. How many host nation translators did you have when you were in Iraq, as an example?

Q: At least a dozen over the time that I was based there in my time in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many, many times translators, usually Muslim, risked their lives and in some cases saved me from harm.

GEN. PETRAEUS: When you got hit, did your translator survive?

Q: When we were with a 4th Infantry Division Patrol, and we were hit by an al Qaeda car bomb in 2006. It killed the captain and his Iraqi translator who was serving as a translator for us all. They were closest to the blast, as well as my camera crew and four of the soldiers were injured.

So they’re almost — they’re always next to the people taking the most risk and helping us understand the culture, in your case so that you can conduct military policy; in my case so that I can understand what’s happening in front of me and report it back to everyone here.

But can I ask you a question?

MR. WOLFOWITZ: The two of us know who you are but — (inaudible) — yourself.

Q: Sorry. I'm Kim Dozier with The Daily Beast. And I was with CBS News in Baghdad from 2003 to 2006, and we were hit by a car bomb there. And translators were our lifeline in everything that we did.

So my question is, a lot of Americans haven't met a Muslim — a Muslim who served with the military overseas. There's a lot of distrust in the country right now between the various communities. Do you see a way to use this force of translators who've come here, who served with US forces, to help bridge that gap? And also, there was a lot of heated rhetoric during the campaign. Do you think that some of the things that were said, from comparing Islam to a cancer, need to be rolled back and restated and focused just on Islamic radicalism and terrorism as opposed to tarring the whole religion with that brush?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yes. First of all, I do think that individuals like this can help bridge the gap. I would contend that they probably already are in many cases. Certainly they do that more in certain communities, where communities have really welcomed individuals, where there are already families and so forth. But, clearly there are a lot of communities, as you say, that just have perceptions not the reality of contact with those of another faith, in this case of Islam. And so I think they can.

I think in truth that there are many segments of our society that can do that as well and that are attempting to do that. You know, we have the ambassador from Iraq is here somewhere, a great ambassador who's taken risk as well. Where is Saed Safir (ph)? Thank you. Fareed is someone we all know well. He went back to Iraq with Adnan Pachachi. He's got both Shia and Sunni blood, brilliantly educated, Ph.D., time at MIT and all the rest. Al Abdul Mahdi (ph) also, a number of the other major diplomats, the minister of foreign affairs and others.

You know, this is a kind of individual who knows our country well, knows his country well. I think literally is an ambassador not just in name, but an ambassador of his faith, of his country, and so forth. And I think we have in many cases in the diplomatic community here individuals who do that exceedingly well, Yousef Al Otaiba of the UAE comes to mind, the Kuwaiti ambassador, many of these I think have worked very, very hard to promote this.

And I do think that in the wake of any campaign that inevitably gets to be fairly partisan and with pretty heated debate and discussion, that clarification afterwards is useful. And I think we see some of that taking place as we see clarification of the executive order itself going forward. It was great to see Secretary Mattis immediately start to work on exemptions to this. And my understanding is from the Iraqi ambassador that the SIV for Iraq and I think the SIV for Afghanistan — both are now in that exempted category, although I haven't seen the actual language on that.

So, again, yes is the answer to that, without question I think. And, you know, the process of coming together as a country in the wake of an election is the macro-context. And this is an element of that macro-context.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Over there. Stand and wait for the microphone.

GEN. PETRAEUS: And I think we need to have your microphone come to you here.

Q: My name is Mahmoud Al Sharwi (ph). I'm with the American University. My question is the war in Iraq started like 2003 and, actually, the withdrawal of the forces completed at 2014. So why do we have like translators and interpreters still behind and still having process to come here to the States and just we're blaming now like Mr. Trump and he has been in the office like for 11 or 12 days?

GEN. PETRAEUS: No. I mean, this is not something that you can pin on this administration, clearly. I mean, the reason is quite simple. We just haven't done enough. The SIV numbers have not been adequate. When it comes to Afghanistan, I think there are 7,000 roughly still waiting — those working with some of those in the Senate in particular. There's some tremendous champions. On the Hill, Senator McCain I think would probably be foremost among them. And, again, the reason is that it took us a long time to get to the SIV legislation, and then it has taken a long time to get the numbers up to where they ought to be.

And, with respect, you know, we're obviously back into Afghanistan and, you know, in a much more modest way certainly than when I was privileged to command 165,000 Americans in uniform during the surge. It's under 6,000 or so, although doing a very, very fine job of enabling the efforts of our Iraqi security force partners who they helped reconstitute, retrain, reequip, expand, and get back into the fight and who now are very much taking the fight to the Islamic State and taking away from the Islamic State that portion of the caliphate that spread into Iraq and had such a terrible, pernicious effect.

And, frankly, the way forward now in Iraq will depend a great deal on the battle after the battle. There has never been the doubt that the Iraqi security forces supported by the US and the coalition would be able to defeat the army that is the Islamic State, keeping in mind that there are terrorist cells and also now nascent insurgent elements that will have to be dealt with also and could be more difficult in some respects. It's a different type of fight.

But what all those of us who have served in Iraq, and a number in here have at considerable levels, have emphasized that this is about the battle after the battle. It's about whether politics can be inclusive or not. In Mosul, we were successful in building a provincial government that was actually representative of all the different elements in the most diverse human terrain in all of Iraq up in Nineveh province, and of the governments that was reasonably responsive to all the different elements within the means available. And, most importantly, guaranteed minority rights, not just majority rule. Right?

If that can be reestablished, then the prospects are good for Iraq. If it cannot be, not just in Nineveh but then for the country writ large, then you will see fields that will once again be fertile for the planting of the seeds of extremism and rise of ISIS 3.0. And obviously, a lot of people are working very, very hard, not just those in uniform and, in fact, even more so those in State Department and elsewhere, to try to help our Iraqi partners as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who, by the way, stood in the way of retaliatory action, as I understand it, Ambassador, when others sought to use this to drive a wedge between the United States and Iraq.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: It was a gutsy performance.

GEN. PETRAEUS: And, again, he knows that inclusive politics are required. He knows that the big achievement in the surge was to bring the fabric of society back together, to bring the Sunnis back into that fabric — the Sunni Arabs. And it was sustained for a good three and a half years after the end of the surge, and it wasn't until that was undone by highly sectarian actions targeting Sunni Arab leaders that it began to unravel and gave us an opportunity for the Islamic State to get back off but drift into Syria, gained all kinds of additional power resources and sweep back in as an army.

Q: Thank you. Rend Al-Rahim, president of the Iraq Foundation. First of all, I'd like to ask if in the exemptions people who work for the embassy in Baghdad are also included because they are also vulnerable. Or is it just limited to people who are working with the coalition forces?

GEN. PETRAEUS: What does the legislation say on the SIV? I thought it was people that worked for — I believe that is the case, but please look at the language. My understanding was it was. Yeah.

Q: My question is: do you believe that the recent executive orders and not just the one freezing, if you want, the coming in of refugees and asylees, do you think it is going to put people in Iraq and presumably Afghanistan — especially in Iraq — at greater risk inside Iraq? Are those executive orders going to radicalize even more some people in Iraq who can retaliate against Iraqis who work with the United States?

GEN. PETRAEUS: I think that will depend on the speed of the ironing out of what the processes will be. Again, there have been halts in the past occasionally to some of these processes.

At the end of the day, though, if you go back and look, we used to have a sign on the operation center — in fact, you saw it up in Mosul. We had it wherever I was privileged to be a commander, and there was a question up there that stared us in the face all day long, and it was: will this operation or policy create more bad guys than it takes off the battlefield by its conduct? And if the question to that was that it will create more bad guys, then you probably want to pause a bit. Again, depending on how quickly this is sorted out, that's a policy that could run afoul of that particular question.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: In the back.

Q: Hi. And thanks, Paul, for your foresight in hosting this event and thinking of it so long ago. General, obviously in — Paul O'Brien. I'm with Oxfam America. I was in Afghanistan for five years. And I saw over that time — I think is the impact of some of your thinking — an evolution in how US military, diplomats, and development workers worked on the basis that the vast majority of Muslims had yet to make their mind up about what their future with the United States ought to be, and we were going to do everything possible to align them in all forms of behavior. I saw the soldiers taking the sunglasses off and on and on. No speech.

I want to ask the American corollary of that question. Do you think these recent decisions and the executive orders are going to have an impact on US security to the extent that they will help Muslims to make their minds up around what relationship they ought to have with the United States? And if so, what should we do differently to assure the security of the United States?

GEN. PETRAEUS: Again, I think it depends a great deal on how we clarify as we go forward, on the speed with which we resolve what additional steps are required, the logic that's behind all of that, and then, frankly, at the end of the day, the communication of all of that as well. And if that is done in a manner which, again, recognizes that 99.9 percent probably of most any faith want to just get along together and provide for themselves and their families and help their kids do a little bit better than they did, then I think we'll be in good shape.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Yeah.

Q: Sir, Major Mike Covington. I'm an infantry officer in the Army and a grad student up at Princeton right now.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Are you really?

Q: Yes, sir.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Wait a minute. Please. You might say that again one more time. Princeton in the nation's service. Do you any of you know how tough it is to be — how many serving officers are there in your year group at Princeton?

Q: It's just me, sir.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yeah. Got that T-shirt and it's terrific. Thanks. I'm delighted. (Applause.) I hate to take this, but when people would ask me up in Mosul where, in Iraq later on, in Baghdad, you know, what was it that seemed to give you some insights that helped you as you were grappling along here with not much guidance from above. And, you know, that first year, we were the occupying authority. We had all power, right?

And, indeed, I was the sheikh of the strongest tribe in Northern Iraq. And, you know, we were trying to figure out how do we do this and all the rest.

And when folks would say, you know, was there anything — what experience helped you? And I said it was doing graduate school at Princeton, where I learned that there are a lot of smart people in the world that don't see the world the same way that I do, that have different beliefs, that have different backgrounds, that have different fundamental assumptions about the state of nature in the absence of government.

And to get out of your intellectual comfort zone is I think the greatest of experiences that you can have, especially if you're living what otherwise it's acknowledged as a fairly — we used to call it the grindstone cloister existence that, you know, you're working, your nose is to the grindstone, you don't look up very often, and you're living a somewhat cloistered existence. You may think you're having big debates with your comrades in uniform or what have you, but the truth is that they're about like this. And when you go to Princeton, you learn that there are debates like that.

So my hat's off to you, first of all, for actually selecting that, something that probably people told you, like they told me, that you were committing professional suicide when you embarked on that course of action, but at least for some of us, that hasn't always been the case. And then, second, congratulations just on getting in. That's terrific.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: So what do we want to hear from the Ivy League cloister?

Q: Sir, just wanted to put in a plug and say thanks to Matt Zeller especially. No One Left Behind was instrumental after a four-year, four-month fight. My linguist finally just came to the United States in late November of 2016, and they were instrumental in making that happen.

My question to you, sir, is, one, if they meet the requirements, why should there be a cap of the numbers on the SIV program? If we have this out there for them and they qualify, why are we capping the number? And then, I participated in a panel on refugees and spoke specifically about SIVs at Princeton in the fall. And I couldn't tell you the number of Vietnam veterans that were in the crowd that came up and talked to me about the moral injury that they still deal with to this day of thinking about leaving their comrades behind.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Yeah.

Q: And so how could we potentially program this into future planning for the military if we go into a large-scale war where we need these people? How could we make that happen so it's part of the planning process like phase four or phase five type stuff? Thank you, sir.

GEN. PETRAEUS: First of all, I mean, obviously, I don't know what was in the minds of the architects of this program of the legislation and why the cap was — why there is a cap or why it was what it was.

I mean, I can surmise that, at the end of the day, if you're really forthright about government, government rations certain activities. If it doesn't, then costs are endless and so forth, and I suspect there's some of that kind of thinking that went on here that if we open it up too wide, you know, the next thing, we'll have every Afghan will be here because they will all claim to have worked — you know, there would be some logic perhaps like that in the mind of some staffer. And that's all I can surmise.

Again, I should note that, you know, I — when the translator I had in Haiti, and I asked him, "So where do you want to be five or 10 years from now?" I mean, I'm concluding my term, put our heart and soul into this. I mean, that was a tour where I'd sleep in the op center at night. People don't think it was very violent. We were launching ops all the time. I was the guy that launched the QRF.

And, you know, I wanted him to say, "I want to be the mayor of Port au Prince. I want to be the president of Haiti." He said, "I want to be an American." But it struck me. I mean, we didn't go to Haiti to allow everybody to come to America. We went to Haiti to improve the conditions in that country so, in fact, they wouldn't be getting on rickety boats to come to America. So, again, there may be some of that if we're just honest with each other about that.

And the truth is I suspect that certainly a large number if not the majority of the translators and interpreters would have loved to have just been able to stay in their own home country, where their families are. And, you know, bringing them here is one thing. Ultimately, a lot of them will have to bring their parents here because they're in harm's way and having to move around constantly and everything else. But they don't speak English the way our translators do. They didn't spend years listening to Americans and immerse themselves in our culture and have that same kind of shared experience that binds them with a subset of our population. So I suspect, again, there's some of that.

Again, and that's also to program into future planning. And, I mean, you're almost saying that we're not going to do well enough that they're going to be able to stay in their country. And so perhaps that is prudent. Perhaps there should be, you know, a branch plan or something like that if we're honest with ourselves.

But at the end of the day, we want to go into that thinking that we're going to help this country improve the situation, and they'll be able to prosper. In fact, they'll be able to do even better as a result of having worked with us because they'll have these great language skills and know how to navigate our bureaucracy and business world and everything else. So I guess those are the thoughts in the back of that.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: I'm going to seize the last question. I can't give up the opportunity —

GEN. PETRAEUS: Sure. Please. Yeah.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: — to have you advise Congress about what should be in the No One Left Behind Act if they have one.

GEN. PETRAEUS: Well, actually, I think what they should do is sit down with the head of No One Left Behind who, you know, has now given up everything else he's doing and is doing this full time. And I think he could give them a really nuanced understanding of what's the appropriate role of our government in helping those that come here.

Again, we don't want to do everything for them. We want to do enough to help them survive to prosper. Again, we don't want to be providing everything. But what is that minimum essential support that is necessary? What is the responsibility? What is the moral obligation? How should that manifest itself in the assistance that we provide to them?

And I think, again, no one can speak about that better than those who are doing this, again, full time, and a number of others who are engaged in this as well. And then, undoubtedly, let's hear from some of the different interpreters, the terps, translators, and others, by the way, again, not just — who also had to come here because of the risks that they incurred by soldiering alongside us for a number of years.

And let's remember that — our son was a lieutenant on the ground in Afghanistan. And I remember him talking about the bond he had with his interpreter. And this guy had been doing this for five or six straight years and had sort of lost count of the number of IED strikes his vehicle had encountered. Just kept doing it, providing for his family to be sure, away from his family a lot because they were living, you don't want to be in the neighborhood where actually your family lives and so forth and so on.

So the hardships that he was enduring were very much comparable to those of our soldiers who were deployed away from loved ones, in harm's way, risking it all together, and knowing that they can always count on that individual on their right and left, even when that individual is an interpreter.

And so we're very pleased to see some of those individuals here; more importantly, really pleased to see everyone else who's here because that reflects the kind of interest in what is a very important obligation that we have and that we must meet. Thanks, Paul.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: We're going to have to do a quick change of scenery. Please don't leave your seats unless you have a desperate need to do so. Please join me in thanking General Petraeus. (Applause.)

So thank you for staying for part two. I didn't give you an option to leave so I'm glad you didn't take it. I could not do a very good job of introducing our next two speakers. I can do a little bit better with Matt. So I'm going to mostly let them tell you their own stories, but I'll just give you a very brief thumbnail beginning.

First, on my left, the first to speak first will be Salwan Al Toki, who served as an interpreter for five years. He worked with the US Army, the USAID, and the US Marine

Corps. He's credited with saving the lives of at least four Marines during his service. He's a graduate of the University of Baghdad, where he earned a degree in civil engineering. He's quadrolingual, I believe. That's a word. English, Arabic, French, and Russian. He's a native of al-Kut City in Southern Iraq. He served with various American organizations and units from 2003 to 2011. And he waited two years to get his SIV.

Salwan, maybe just begin a little bit by telling me — how did you get involved with these crazy Americans, and are you crazy also to do so?

SALWAN AL TOKI: Well, it's a long story. I'd like to stand because I'm not comfortable with seats. I'm a civil engineer, so I have to be on the field.

So let me ask you this, guys. Anybody accused to be a traitor? On this hall, is anybody accused of being a traitor? Raise up your hands. Don't be afraid of the (pant ?). I am only the one pant here. Of course nobody. My colleague.

So another question is, how many of you guys here was standing between his fellow citizens and the Americans, which is their — (inaudible)? Of course, not to the people of the customer service.

The third question is, what makes you sacrifice with yourself to the person just eat with him in one dish? And you have a good story with him. What makes you sacrifice yourself for him? You don't know him. Just you eat with him in one dish and you drink him a local drink, right? And not like somebody who is sitting in a fancy restaurant with his fiancé, with his girlfriend asking for a date.

We are the SIV guys. We did everything. We sacrificed ourselves. We put ourselves in troubles, and then we are here as SIVs.

On May 2003, some Americans come to visit my shop in Al-Kut City, which is 100 miles to the south of Baghdad, near the Iranian border. And they were asking for some real food. I told them, "What are you eating in the military?" They told me MRE, which is meals rejected by everyone. (Laughter.) And this is a message to General Petraeus. (Laughter.)

So, anyway, they get involved with me with a speech, and they were very interested to have me as a translator. I told them I don't have any idea about the Americans' intentions in Iraq so I need to see your general. At that time, he was Lieutenant Colonel (Gabreski ?) and Mr. Jay Garner, which was the first beginning.

Their intentions were very satisfied, and they get involved. First step was the United States Marines Corps at the quarter — (inaudible) — which is called 4th CAG. CAG means Civil Affairs Group, right? We get involved to renovate schools, water station. They used my engineering skills. We get involved to teach the young judges, teach the police officers. We get involved in everything to renovate the infrastructure in Iraq and to make the local

government — elected local government — qualified by sending them to training, and we train them also.

Then I worked with the United States Agency for International Development as a program development officer. At that time, we were involved to get women centers, children centers, Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, and I was proud that I'm the first one to establish the Iraqi-American Chamber of Commerce. But they forget me.

And then I worked with the company as a subcontractor called ECC, which is Environmental Corporation Company. This company worked with the United States Air Force. And I am a proud — I was the establisher of the first police academy in Iraq. This police academy trained lots of Iraqi police and national guard; every six months about 1,500. That was in the south.

And, finally, I am here as SIV, and thanks for the American people, and thanks for Ambassador Wolfowitz, and thanks to the gentleman. He was my guest in Baghdad, and now I am his guest. But the only thing that I'm getting older, and he's getting younger. So, guys, I am proud to be with you here.

And the last thing I want to say is I served the United States loyally and to the best of my ability. So I am not afraid of death. We faced the death shoulder by shoulder with the United States Marines Corps and with all Americans. But for this reason, I am not afraid of death, but I am afraid of somebody left behind. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Just before I introduce the next speaker, just a quick question. What was the first thing you did when you got to Washington?

MR. AL TOKI: A good question. The first thing I did here was to visit the grave of Lieutenant Colonel Zengas (ph). He's the first civilian targeted at the war. I was working with his unit, and then he worked with the CPA, which is Coalition Provisional Authority, as a civilian. He was targeted and killed. And I visited his grave here in Marines Corps cemetery.

And also I feel myself proud because I have good friends here like Lieutenant Colonel Zengas, Colonel Kuvian (ph), and others. They support me. They put me with their families. They consider me as a member of the family. Thank you so much for them. (Applause.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Our next speaker is Janis Shinwari, who served as an interpreter for the US military in Afghanistan for eight years. He's credited with saving the lives of at least five US soldiers in combat. He's received numerous US military commendations for his extremely honorable service. He's a graduate of Khana-e-Noor University in Kabul, where he earned a degree in business administration. He's a native of Jalalabad and supported US forces from 2005 to 2013. He spent four years waiting for his SIV. He speaks six languages, Dari, Pashtu, English, Russian, Urdu, and Hindi, but he'll address us in English.

Janis, can you just also begin by describing what got you involved in this dangerous venture?

JANIS SHINWARI: Thank you so much, first of all. Thank you everybody for coming, and thank you for having us here.

Actually, there were a couple of reasons why I became an interpreter. The first thing was because we just came from Pakistan. When the Taliban attacked Afghanistan, we moved to Pakistan. That was the only place where we could hide from the Taliban.

When we heard that the Taliban is no more in Afghanistan and then there's a lot of opportunity to go work and at least we can go back and support our country. And I came back to Afghanistan because my English was not that much good because I learned my English from one American movie, and that's all. And I just went and I got a couple of classes. After a couple of classes, I became an English teacher for a couple of years.

In 2005, I decided to go and work with the US military as a translator. And I went there to Camp Phoenix in Afghanistan and passed the test, and I became an interpreter. The first day was — I do not remember when I was there the first day, but I did my job honestly. As the general said before, the translators were not allowed to carry a gun, but I don't know — I was allowed to carry a gun. (Laughter.)

MATTHEW ZELLER (?): Sorry, sir.

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah. They gave me an AK-47 with American pistol. I could take it everywhere because they know that I'm one of their trustworthy interpreter, and I was in each fight with them, shoulder to shoulder, on the first line and fighting against the bad people.

And one day, I was really mad at the American commander. I was like, "Sir, why are you sending me to each war, to each fight? Whenever something happens, if even that's not in my team, but you guys are selecting me to go. Do you guys want me to get killed? Why?" Like he looked at me for a couple of minutes, and he said, "Janis, no. That's not what you think. Because we trust you. You are one of our trustworthy interpreters. That's why we are sending you to any danger mission. We know you are a good person and you can look after our soldiers." And I was like, "OK." And we trusted them because we were waiting for some people to come to our country and save us from the disaster.

And, finally, when we heard about the US military, and that's why I went because I could support my country. I could support my people. And the other thing, I could get some good benefit salary to support my family.

And Matt Zeller, he was the fifth person that I saved his life. I didn't know him. I didn't do it for the reason if I saved his life, he will take me to the United States. That was not my goal to come to the United States. He asked me a couple of times if I ever go to the

United States, and I said, “No, sir. I’m good here. I want to support my people, my country, and I don’t want to go to the United States.”

When I saved his life, as I said, I didn’t know him. I only met him for a couple of minutes or seconds in our chow hall. When their unit came to Afghanistan I just met him for a couple of minutes. He said, “Hi, my name is Matt Zeller. I’m looking forward to working with you guys.” I was like, “My name is Janis Shinwari. I’m one of the translators, and I’m looking forward to working with you guys.”

Ten days after this, I was at the TOC, the tactical operation center. We received a radio call that the unit went to assist the district center is — they lost a truck by IED. The same thing. I was not in his team at that time. Somebody called, “Janis, go pack your — put your body armor and get your weapon. Let’s go.” And I was like, again me.

MR. ZELLER: Thank God.

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah. I put my body armor, I got my pistol and my AK-47, ready for a fight. Long story short, after 30 or 40 minutes, we got to the objective. And first thing I saw from the windows of the Humvee, the big MRAP truck was destroyed by the IED and the engine, the first tires were all gone. And I thought somebody is dead in this truck because the truck is damaged.

And I jumped out of the truck. Even the driver didn’t know. I left the truck, and the first question I asked Captain Dean (sp), I was like, “Everybody’s OK?” He said, “Everybody is OK.” And I started shooting at the enemy direction. I know where the bullets are coming from. Somebody called me, “Do not shoot in this direction.” I was like, “Why?” He said, “We have a friendly guy stuck over there.” I was like, “Is he dead or alive?” They said, “We don’t know.” But I was like, “I’m going to see. If he’s already dead, I’ll bring his body, God forbid. And if he’s alive, I will bring him alive.”

I start moving and when I got close to him, he didn’t see me but I saw him from his behind. And I said, how to go and bring him, if I go and — because I had a different uniform, if he sees me, he would shoot me, and he will think I’m Taliban or somebody. I was thinking for a couple of seconds, and I saw two things are moving from behind him. When I passed, my eyes saw two Talibans were coming a couple of meters behind him to get him, kill him or get him alive.

And I was like, now I should make a decision. I can’t go back, I can’t leave my American friend here, and there’s two more guys that are about to kill him. And I did what I supposed to do. I just shot those two guys and I run at him and I was like, “Brother, you are not safe. Let’s go back.” And he was like, “Who the hell are you?” (Laughter.) Because he didn’t remember my face. And I was like, “I’m Janis, one of the translators. You are not safe. Let’s go back.” And long story short, we got back, and we came back to the base.

The next morning, I went to the chow hall to get my lunch. He came with his plate, and he was like, “Brother, can I sit here?” I was like, “Sure.” And he hugged me. He said, “Thank you for saving my life.” And he said he was going to ask me a question. I was like, “What?” He said, what I did — what I did to him, he said he was expecting this from one of his own friends, one of his own Americans, but nobody came to rescue him. Why I did? Why did I put my life in danger and saved his life?

I looked at him, I said, “Brother, you know you are a guest in my country. And this was my responsibility to look after my guest, and that was my responsibility to save your life, and now you are alive, you can go back and that’s all I did.” And that’s how Afghan people, generally Muslim people do. They don’t want their guests to get hurt by anybody. We will put in our life in danger, but save our guest because he was my guest in my country and that’s what I did. And I put my life in danger and saved him.

Still, he asked me, when he was leaving at the end of 2008, he told me, if I come to the United States, he gave me his phone number, email address, everything. I can talk to him. He will help me come to the States. I was like, no, brother, I will be fine because I love my country, I love my people, and I want to be here with my people.

In 2009, the Afghan National Army, the intelligence officer, he came to me and he said, “Janis, do you know, now the Taliban have your picture, your name, your address, and you are not safe here in Ghazni anymore?” You have to quit your job or you have to get transfer from here to anywhere else.” I said, “OK. Let’s talk to my American commander because he is my boss. If he tells me, stay, I can stay. If he tells me, go, I will go.” We talked to him. He contacted the MEP Company, like he emailed. In 24 hours, I was transferred to Kabul.

When I came to Kabul, I said, now I am in the safest place because the ministry of defense is here, the ministry of interior is here, like 100,000 or so troops are here. I will be safe here. But I didn’t know those people were coming after me even to Kabul City. When I came to Kabul City, I was in Camp Black Horse. They assigned me as a terp manager. I was managing like over 250 interpreters.

I started phone calls — like getting phone calls in Afghanistan, said, “Hey, we are here. We know where you work. We know where you live. And we’ll kill you or your son, anybody from your family.” I was a couple of miles away from my home, but most of time I stayed at the military base because I was safe there.

And in the meantime, I talked to my brother, Matt Zeller, and I said, “Brother, now I am in high risk. What should I do?” He sent me a letter, and he said, “Submit this, send it to the SIV, apply for visa.” I sent everything to the SIV and — it was 2010. But I never heard anything back. In 2013, I did my interview, but they still — they told me to wait for your visa.

In this time, I received the worst news in my life. One of the US commanders said, this base is going to be shut down at the end of the year — not end of year, but in September.

And because we didn't get any replacement, you guys should go home because we don't have enough troops to assign you guys with.

In that time, I contacted Matt and I said, "Brother, now I need your help. You should get me out of Afghanistan because now I lost my protection, and I don't want to die or I don't want my son to get kidnapped and" — because I saw a lot of translators, my friends that were kidnapped by Taliban, they were tortured, killed, and they send their body parts to their family and friends to see and stop working with the Taliban. And I said, "I don't want to be one of them. And I want to go because now I'm married. I have children."

And my brother, then he will tell his part, but good thing I received my visa after two months. And now I'm here, I'm safe, and once again I thank my brother. He helped me a lot, got my visa, my family. I owe him a couple of lives now. And thank you so much. Thank you for everyone. (Applause.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Janis, two quick questions. What was the movie you learned English from? Must be a pretty good one.

MR. SHINWARI: Actually that was an old movie. I don't know if you guys watched this movie. The movie stars Arnold Schwarzenegger. The movie is "Commando." That's how I learned fights and English. (Laughter.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: So then how did you get rid of your German accent? The other question —

MR. SHINWARI: My accent is like Arnold Schwarzenegger, like broken English.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Serious question. I'm told your mother had a lot to do with the reason you helped the Americans. Can you elaborate on that? Your mother.

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah. Because in a Muslim culture, especially in our country, if a mother is not educated, then their sons can go to the wrong ways. Most of the — I'm telling you, most of those Taliban and al Qaeda, because their mothers — in our country, if I go do anything, I will get my mom's permission first to do it. If she says no, that's no. If she says, yes, that's yes. Without her blessing, we don't do anything.

And the one who is like Taliban, because their mothers, they're uneducated, even they don't know about Quran, what the Quran says. They say, OK, I'm going to fight and I'm going to kill Americans, anybody who works for the government because the mother's uneducated, she says, OK. Go ahead. God bless you, my son.

But if I say the same word to my mom, trust me, she will slap my mouth and say, sit down. But when I told her I'm going to support my country, I'm going to help the US mission in Afghanistan, she was like, OK, my son. That's good. Go ahead and do it. And that's how I started working with the Americans. If my mother said no, I wouldn't be able to save my brother's life.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Let's hear it for your mother. That's great. (Applause.)

So last but by no means least, Matt Zeller. He's a cofounder of No One Left Behind. He, as I understood it, abandoned a promising career with Deloitte and Touche to take on this mission. Hopefully, you can accomplish the mission in the next six months and go back to something else, but, at any rate, whatever length of time it takes, Matt, just say a little bit about how you got — we already know some of your story but this part of the story.

MR. ZELLER: Thank you all for being here. Thank you to Ambassador Wolfowitz and to General Petraeus. Another round of applause for them. I can't thank you enough, sir, for your time. (Applause.) And to AEI, obviously, for hosting us. And to my amazing team who all stood up before. You know, the only reason we've been as successful as we've been for the past four years is because of them. They followed me down this sort of crazy endeavor when it was a labor of love.

To understand how this got started, you have to understand that the guy sitting next to me is not just my guardian angel. He's a saint. I'll spare you the long story of what it took to ultimately get him his visa. But when he arrived here, we had made such a stink about it in the press that CBS News had actually sent a prominent journalist and a camera crew to cover our reunion at the airport. And they ended up showing it nationally the next day on TV on their morning program with Charlie Rose.

What a lot of folks didn't see is what happened after the cameras turned off. The camera crew was packing up their equipment. We were saying goodbye to everyone. And I turn to Janis, and I said, "OK, brother, let's go get the rest of your luggage. And I have no idea where you're going to stay tomorrow, but tonight you can stay with my family and I."

And Janis turned and he pointed to these four small rollaway suitcases, you know, the size of carryon bags. And he said, "Brother, this is all we have. We were only allowed to bring one suitcase per person. And it had to be under 50 pounds and fit in the overhead flight deck." And I realized at that moment that he had arrived with the clothes on his back and whatever contained inside those suitcases. It wasn't large sums of cash or bars of gold or even perishable items that they'd sell. It was the family Quran, the only black and white photo of his father that he owns in life, the tangible items of his heritage and his culture that are the precious family heirlooms that will never get sold because he and his children can never return to their homeland.

And when I realized at that moment that that's all that they had — that they didn't have linens for a bed, that they didn't have any sense of what it was going to take to survive in our country and our culture, I was dumbfounded at just about how extensive the challenge was going to be to try to get him and his family integrated.

And so I turned to look for someone else to help me, and that's when I realized it was on me. I was going to have to figure out where he was going to live and find him a job, and I'm just not a wealthy guy. I didn't have the ability to do it independently, so I grabbed the

news reporter and I said, “Would you do me a favor? Would you let folks know that I’m going to start a GoFundMe page and try to raise him some money?” And she said, “Sure.”

Three days later, I’d found him a modest two-bedroom apartment in Alexandria, Virginia, just down the road from where I was living at the time. And thanks to the generosity of friends and family throughout the DC area, we were able to furnish it with wonderful donations of a bed and a couch and so on and so forth.

And I had gone over to his house to have chai. Every night in Afghanistan, we used to have tea together and talk about our country and our cultures. And I don’t know if you’ve ever gotten a chance to play the Beatles for someone for the first time, but it’s pretty cool to watch them see how they take to it. And we went over to have chai. And he was so proud to have me in his home.

And I took out a check because I had been to the bank on the way over to his home to see how much money we had raised. And what I found shocked me. There was \$35,000 from the American public — from complete strangers to support him and his family. As I sat down at his dinner table and I pulled out the check and I said, “Janis, I have here a gift from the American people. And it’s in thanks in exchange for your eight years of frontline combat service.”

You see, the only difference between me and him is twofold. One is stupid, and that’s I won the birth lottery and he didn’t. The second one is the one that’s important. I’m a one-tour combat vet. He’s an eight-tour combat veteran. And so despite the fact of our difference in service, I happened to win the birth lottery so I get to go to the VA for the rest of my life for health care, and if I walk into a Walmart tomorrow and show them my honorable discharge, company policy is I get a job sight unseen. He walks into a Walmart and asks for a job, he has to plead his case and hope he gets considered, otherwise they ask him to buy something or move along. And I just didn’t think that that was right.

And so I wanted him to know that the American people were standing with him, and that, more importantly, that that money was going to cover the next year of his life. It would have paid for rent and food. And so I said, brother, this is the first night in your life I’m sure that you’ve had a chance to rest. He was born in 1978; the Soviets invaded the next year. He’s been facing a war ever since. And so I tried to give him this money, and he thought about accepting it for maybe all of half of a heartbeat.

He said, “Brother, I can’t take this money.” And I said, “What do you mean you can’t take it? There’s no a refund button. What do I do?” (Laughter.) And he said — he got really serious. He looked me right in the eye and he said, “Well, what about Hasan (ph), and Latif (ph), and Jamshi (ph), then Mywan (ph), and Habib (ph)? Don’t they deserve to be here too?” He was naming off all the other translators who were still back on our base in Afghanistan at that time.

And he had a really good point. Even Habib, who I didn't like, deserved to be here. And it's not — and Habib was a good guy. We just didn't get along so well personality-wise. But he gave faithful —

MR. SHINWARI: He's here now. (Laughter.)

MR. ZELLER: He is here now. (Laughter.) And so I said, well, but what do you want to do with the money? And he said, well, can we use it to start an organization to do for them what you've done for me, to help them get their visas, and he's like, you can clearly find someone a house and furniture in a couple of days. And I thought, year, sure. Six guys. We could probably do that over a couple of years.

And what ended up happening was as we found out about more and more translators — Asmal (ph) here, who's done a brilliant — was Secretary Robert Gates' personal translator. And when he arrived in our country, no one was there to greet him at the airport except for a police officer, the San Francisco Airport. And when Asmal asked where he was supposed to go, he was directed to homeless shelters in downtown San Francisco. His wife, himself, his four-year-old son, and his two-year-old daughter walked up the 101 freeway from San Francisco Airport to Fulton Street where we found them four days later where they had remained homeless that entire time. He spent seven years in the Korengal Valley fighting on our behalf. That's a veteran. And on the day he got here, we allowed him to become homeless. That's simply unacceptable.

And when I realized the challenges that these people were facing and that there was really no other organization out that there was stepping up to meet that problem, you know, my Army training kicked in, and I just — I started calling Jason, our COO, who is an Army veteran as well as both wars, and he's been a friend now for a decade. And I said, "Can you help me out with this?" I called Bill Shugarts, who's standing in the back, and Keith Saddler here are both Vietnam-era veterans and asked, "Can you help me out with this as well?" And we started putting a team together. And here we are now almost four years later, we're in eight cities, and we've helped resettle over 4,000 people in that time, but that's just a drop in the bucket. There are still tens of thousands of these people who are left behind.

And so our goal is simple. We want to get them all their visas that they were promised. When they arrive here, we want to give them what we call an honor flight welcome at the airport and present them with an American flag and thanks for their service. We want to find them a place to live, we want to pay for it for 90 days, furnish it at no cost to them, find them a car, buy them that car and give it to them because a car is ultimately the most transformative thing we can do. It opens up a world of employment. Help them to find and retain a job and then, as we call it, find them a first friend, an American to help mentor and guide them.

And after we've done this for all the people that we made this promise to in Iraq and Afghanistan, we don't want to be in business. I mean, how many organizations that you hear that say that they don't want to exist? If anything, we'd like to see DOD take on

this responsibility in future wars because, quite frankly, the nation's solution to this problem shouldn't be a 35-year-old with a nonprofit in the startup phase. But that's what it's become.

And I think that, you know, together, if we unify as a country and throw some resources behind this, we really could solve this problem because, otherwise, this is going to be one of those never-again moments that we ultimately regret. And all you have to do is ask a Vietnam veteran about the half century of moral injury that they've lived with to understand, you know, what that's going to do to not just to our generation of veterans.

I'll finish I guess with this. I enlisted first right after 9/11. I'm a New Yorker, a proud New Yorker. And I was a sophomore in college on 9/11. I had no intention of going to the military, but I walked up to the first recruiter I saw in a mall a couple of weeks later and said, where do I sign, and enlisted. And I went right into the infantry.

And then, right at the end of AIT, there was a recruiter for ROTC that said, you know, the Army has seen a lot of leadership potential. We'd like to send you back to school and finish your degree and get a commission. And so, two years later, I commissioned as Lieutenant Zeller. And when you commission, there's a ceremony that you do where you get your first salute from an NCO.

And the gentleman, the sergeant who gave me my first salute afterwards pulled me aside and he said, sir, do you know what your responsibility is now that you're an officer? And I thought about it for a minute. And I say, "It's to lead." And he goes, "No, it's to take care of your soldiers. You take care of your soldiers; they'll take care of you." It's the best piece of advice anybody ever gave me in the Army.

Twelve years later, it came time for me to take off the uniform for the last time. And my commander at the time pulled me aside, and he said, "Do you know what your responsibility is now that you're taking off the uniform?" And I thought it was to drink beer and get fat. He said, "No. It's to take care of soldiers." See, just because you take off that uniform doesn't mean that you abdicate that responsibility. It's your job now to leave it better for the next guy.

The only reason I'm alive today is because of him, and it's because, at some point, he believed the American who recruited him, that we keep that promise. So what happens to our brothers and sisters like the major, you know, sitting in the back who might end up fighting in a future war in, say, Syria — a recommitment back in Iraq or Afghanistan. Is it not our responsibility to make sure that he goes off to war with exactly the same resources that I have if not better. And to me, that means locals who are ready and willing to stand with us because they know that we honor and keep our word.

And that's the goal of our organization is to keep our nation's promise, to ensure that no one is left behind. Thanks. (Applause.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Just to give you a warning, Matt, before we end, I want to ask you to tell the congressmen what you will tell them if they follow General Petraeus' advice and come ask you about this act.

In the meantime, if I can spring a surprise question on both of you because we didn't discuss this before. It's about the vetting process.

Suppose someone would come to you and say, "Look, we've got this bunch of not interpreters who've been through the kind of experience that gives you a lot of information, but sort of unknown refugees from Iraq or from Afghanistan." What would be the most important things to find out in order to know whether they were safe to admit? Do you have any ideas about that, either of you? It's a tough question, but it's what we're supposed to spend this next 90 days figuring out. So it's your chance to offer ideas.

Just to coach you just a little bit, I heard recently from someone who has a friend in New York who was an immigrant from Sicily in like about 50 or 60 years ago. Sicily is the home of the mafia in Italy. Apparently, in order to get into the United States, he had to do something like four interviews with the consulate in Palermo. They went and interviewed all of his family. They had to check with people because he had the same name as a certain mafia family to make sure they weren't actually related. They checked on which of his relatives were communist, because at that time being a communist meant you believed in the overthrow of the US government.

So it was a pretty — I mean, this idea of extreme vetting wasn't invented yesterday, but it's much more difficult to do in a place where we know so little. We knew relatively more about Sicily than we know today about Iraq or Afghanistan perhaps. So, anyway, how would you think about it?

MR. AL TOKI: Well, if you want to compare a refugee with a veteran, I think what you call us a refugee — we are not refugees.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: I'm not comparing. No.

MR. AL TOKI: So we are most like veterans. We served in the United States Army. We served in the United States Marine Corps. We served in the Navy. We served under different circumstances, and sometimes we were allowed to carry weapons. So to be a veteran is more than to be a refugee.

And we don't ask for privileges. We don't ever ask for any privileges. And when we first hired, we didn't ask for any privileges. We just asked that our country will be strong enough after the Saddam Hussein regime. We didn't ask for any privileges from the Americans. Only we keep together, get united, and build our new country.

I would like to tell a short story of this. My uncle said that "Are you working for the Americans?" I told him, yes. And you know what? I will get the last version of ACI code,

I will get the last version of ISTM (ph) and maybe they will get me work with Bechtel or Halliburton or at least the United States Army Corps of Engineers because I'm an engineer.

He told me, "Don't expand your dreams. They failed – they let us down on 1991." So I told him, "No, uncle. Don't be so mean. 2003 is not 1991." So now I am in America and I am waving to my uncle from Washington. Last day, he told me that as the Americans find you a job at 7/11. I told him, what is 7/11? Seven 11 is 7/11.

Anyway, we want our friends to be here as soon as possible. I have friends fighting in Mosul now. I have friends fighting in some specific and dangerous area in Mosul fighting ISIS. So we need them all here. No one left behind — no, there is someone left behind. Our memory is left behind. But now we are looking for the future.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Janis? Is this an unfair question, but what's your thoughts about the vetting process?

MR. SHINWARI: Actually, I don't want to say about this.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: That's fair enough.

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Matt has some ideas, I know.

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah. He might.

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Matt, my question for you is what do you want to tell the Congress should be in this new bill?

MR. ZELLER: A couple of things. First off, we need to begin accepting new applications in Iraq, where there has been a — we have not accepted a new application since 2014, which might shock a lot of people in here because we have 4,800 military troops currently fighting in Iraq and another 7,800 contractors. Most of those people don't speak Arabic or Kurdish, and they're likely relying on the support of local nationals on the ground who, by the way, once they've served with us have fundamentally excommunicated themselves from the society around them. They are going to likely need some type of pathway to get here.

In addition, there is a pocket — it's not large, but it's enough that should warrant consideration. Iraqis who are not able to submit their applications because ISIS showed up at one point and prevented them ever from getting to Baghdad in the first place to actually file the application in time. In addition, in Afghanistan, the backlog is in the thousands. It's anywhere from seven to 10,000 depending on what month the State Department is reporting. There's only a current allocation of 1,500 visas to cover that backlog, and we're still accepting new applications so every visa we get out, we essentially receive a new visa application in its place. If we don't get these people here, simply put, they're going to die.

And so what we feel is that the Congress ought to restart the program in Iraq, remove the cap, and basically say service, if you qualify through your service and you can pass the most extreme form of vetting that we ask anyone to pass, because that's what this actually entails, they ought to earn the visa that they have in fact been promised because of their service.

And then, finally, what we believe is that they ought to be called veterans. We don't have to get them VA benefits, but shouldn't we at least give them an honorary designation as veterans? And this is not a bridge, by the way, too far. In World War II, it turns out that the quarter million Filipinos who fought with our forces in the South Pacific were declared as honorary veterans. We actually gave them VA benefits. We built a hospital in Manila for them. So we've done this in our past before.

And in designating them as veterans, not only would I think the world of philanthropy finally opened up to support them — getting back to the question that you asked the general before — but in addition, think of all the employers who like to pride themselves in hiring a veteran. Well, now they could actually make a public commitment to doing just that for a population I would argue is just as vulnerable. And, again, Janis, how many times have you been blown up, six?

MR. SHINWARI: Yeah, five, six times.

MR. ZELLER: I mean, he doesn't ever go talk to anybody about that. He doesn't get to have his head checked out, which I'm sure there's probably some, you know, lingering TBI issues. Anybody who's exposed to a concussion like that repeatedly might have some medical things. There's a guy we know up in Maryland right now who has a bullet in his arm the Taliban put there nine years ago. And the only way he's ever going to get it out is if he gets pro bono surgery. I mean, they're coming up with the signature injuries of our war, but with no access to the facilities and the specialists to help them out.

So if the Congress would just simply designate them as honorary veterans, I think that would go a long, long way in changing how our country integrates them and how they're perceived to be fellow veterans of our wars. (Applause.)

MR. WOLFOWITZ: Well, that's a great note to conclude on. We have to end it. It's past 4:00 p.m. I think if our interpreters are willing to stick around a little bit, the audience may want to come up and talk to you and ask you questions personally. Thanks everyone for coming. It's been a great audience, a great discussion.

MR. ZELLER: Thank you. Thank you. (Applause.)

(END)