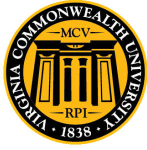

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US of Al Review

Jonathan Pucci

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In Which an Afghan War Veteran Contemplates *The United States of Al*

Jon Pucci

THE WAR

On April 15, Joe Biden became the second president to announce a timeline for military withdrawal from Afghanistan. He's said we'll be gone by September 11 this year. Donald Trump's deadline had been May 1 of this year, as the Taliban have been enthusiastically reminding anyone who will listen. We are living in the twilight of "boots on the ground" in Afghanistan.

If you're one of the many extremely casual observers of the Afghan War, here's an update: the Taliban remain strong and are making military gains against an impotent Afghan government. Allegedly tripartite negotiations between the US, the Taliban, and the Afghan government have not really included the latter since the Taliban, holders of all the leverage, all the time, and all the political will, usually only consent to engage directly with the US. One reason for this decision is the handy way it reinforces the Taliban narrative of a puppet government in Kabul. At the moment the Taliban are declining to attend further negotiations, citing the US' violation of the Trump-negotiated May 1 deadline. Expert consensus is that the US withdrawal will leave the Taliban in fine position to destroy the Afghan military and either take control of the country or start a period of multiparty violence among Taliban factions and regional warlords. Now you're up to speed.

American chatter about Biden's new timeline has rightly centered on the effect American withdrawal (and Taliban resurgence) will have the Afghan public. Every Afghan, but especially those who served in the security forces, worked with the US or NATO, or actively worked to rebuild society after 2002 could find themselves in danger as the Taliban raise their flags again. Much of the media oxygen on this topic has been taken up by concern for Afghan military

interpreters, many of whom now find themselves on the Department of State's special immigration visa waitlist, which numbers some 18,000 applicants and moves glacially.

Widespread interest in the fate of Afghans who stood alongside US forces, or the legions of Afghan civilians who find themselves refugees or asylum seekers, is overdue. Media churn prompted by the withdrawal announcement may energize the class of international affairs professionals and career humanitarians that have always kept the fallout of the Afghan War front of mind. But in strange coincidence, two weeks before Biden's announcement, a different kind of media event attempted to engage not just the DC foreign policy clique but the American public in a conversation about our relationships, and particularly obligations, to Afghan people.

This effort came, somehow, bizarrely, in the form of a multi-cam laugh-track network TV sitcom. Twenty years after American bombs started dropping near Kabul, two weeks before the President of the United States announced a plan of unconditional withdrawal, Hollywood began telling stories about the people whose country we've been fighting in for one fifth of a century. The charge was led by the guy who brought you *Two and a Half Men.*

THE SHOW

The United States of Al is a CBS product about Awalmir ("Al"), an Afghan who served as an interpreter for the US military, moving into the Ohio home of Riley, a former marine and Awalmir's old partner from the war. It airs Thursdays at 8:30 EST. It is very much a sitcom. There are canned laughs. There are maybe like four or five sets. The show is photographed in warm browns evocative of a red-state *Big Bang Theory.* Speaking of which, *US of Al* is produced by Chuck Lorre, the TV demigod/producer behind *Big Bang Theory* and *Roseanne*. There are jokes about men cooking poorly. There is a blustery dad whose provincial ignorance belies a golden heart. The female lead is, of course, played by a supermodel. Do you get the vibe?

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Review: Not very funny, but interesting if your bag is theorizing about representations of Muslims, brown people, veterans, wounded masculinity, Trojan-horse schemes to bring Othered demographic slices into the mainstream, racial biases that undergird the whole idea of a mainstream, cross-cultural relationships of any kind, grief.

US of Al's origin story is more interesting than the show itself: the creators (David Goetsch and Maria Ferrari, probably familiar to fans of the Chuck Lorre cinematic universe) were inspired to create an Afghan-interpreter protagonist after learning about the aforementioned massive backlog in special immigration visa applications from interpreters who served in the 9/11 wars. This dovetailed nicely with executive producer Reza Aslan's desire to put a Muslim protagonist on a major network TV show.

Also (unfortunately) more interesting than the show itself: the surrounding internet discourse. Long before the April 1 premiere, critics were throwing darts over the casting of Indian/South African Adhir Kalyan as the titular Afghan character while Kalyan was taking pains to assure everyone his casting was not a representational disaster. The show's trailer and critic screenings brought allegations of orientalist minstrelsy, but these were complicated by the writer's room including Afghan American talents Fahim Anwar and Ursula Taherian, plus renowned Afghan-born Canadian writer Habib Zahori, who served as a military interpreter. If Zahori writes a joke about a hapless Afghan overcome by the sight of an American waitress's bare legs and says the idea for the joke came from his life, two things are occurring at the same time: 1) we are being fed the ancient trope of a man of color impotently lusting after a white woman and 2) we are watching Zahori, Fulbright scholar and war hero, try to use humor to unpack his lived experiences. This would all be much easier to wrestle with if the show was funny.

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That *US of Al* leaves much to be desired in terms of humor is not a hot take. Reviews have run the narrow gamut from disappointed shrugs to the majestic hatchet-job run by Al Jazeera, which panned the show's humor while raising worthy questions about the ethics of comedy that comes from an occupying power.

US of Al's serious aspects are less cringeworthy, but not better. As you'd expect in a show that centers two alumni of the Afghan war, there are attempts to explore combat's effects on families and lives. The casting of Dean Norris as the marine Riley's father is fascinating in this regard. Norris is most famous for his turn as DEA agent Hank Schrader on AMC's *Breaking Bad.* Schrader was the prestige-TV OG of swaggering white machismo running headfirst into crippling trauma. The Hank Schrader arc took a humane look at what happens when someone steeped in bourgeois-cowboy culture encounters pitiless institutions like Mexico's cartels. The take resonated with at least some veterans circa 2013. *US of Al* is obviously not operating in a part of the media cosmos where unflinching looks at violence are appreciated. It's hard to see how a twenty-five-minute sitcom that aspires to funniness (someday, maybe) would handle the kinds of psychological evolution that made Hank's *Breaking Bad* journey compelling.

This is not to say that the sitcom form precludes making insightful statements about war. In fact, when I reflect on the Afghan war and Hollywood's various attempts to say something about it, I think sitcoms might come the closest to evoking the war's place in our culture and the experience of serving in it.

For most Americans, sitcoms align more with historical eras than discrete moments (I'm getting sick of hearing people use *Leave it to Beaver* as shorthand for a giant set of political/cultural sensibilities). September 11, 2001, aside, the same is true of the Afghan War, which hummed along as a quiet part of the early aughts and teens zeitgeist of this century.

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Sitcoms, as a rule, do not disrupt anyone's life. Sitcoms are low-stakes, low-intensity, easy viewing. The start date of a sitcom is obvious, but the actual TV product is a self-perpetuating system that will continue as long as it is profitable enough and not overly offensive to anybody. If a sitcom must end, narrative closure is secondary to the simple cessation of the thing in order to make room for other programming. The endings, if they are written at all, have a track record of falling short (*Scrubs, Gilmore Girls,* to name a couple high-profile clunkers).

The Afghan War hasn't worn us down so much as integrated into the enduring reality of public life. For twenty years, Afghanistan has been the most reliable referent for any public tribute to "our men and women serving in harm's way"; a constant "issue" compared to our in-or-out misadventures in Iraq, Somalia, the Philippines, Yemen, etc. As we went from Bush to Obama to Trump to Biden, the routine of regular Afghan policy reviews and congressional testimony on "progress" became its own semi-scripted beltway ritual, like each new president's outline of their North Korea policy.

Hollywood products on the Afghan War, mostly movies, reflect this normalization: the stories are almost all about the stasis of the "normal" war being interrupted by some crisis before stasis is reasserted through heroic action. By the end the heroes have achieved a return to the normal war of potshots and improvised explosive devices.

The heavyweight champion of the canon is *Lone Survivor*, the Mark Wahlberg-led 2013 film adaptation of Marcus Luttrell's eponymous memoir. The war is in full swing at the start of the movie, in which Navy SEALs attempt a routine surveillance mission, disaster occurs, and various acts of heroism return the surviving SEAL and the Afghans who helped him to the status-quo ante (*ante* the disaster that is, not the war itself). In 2020's *The Outpost*, about the battle of Kamdesh, the routine of an American patrol base is disrupted by a massive Taliban

offensive, which rages until enough bombs have been dropped. The personal stakes for the film's heroes are, of course, immense, but the film ends with just one more small valley changing hands.

It's natural that filmmakers angling to highlight the greatest tales of heroism from Afghanistan will zero in on the rare (if spectacularly violent) disruptions to what has otherwise been, for the American public, a boring slog full of confusing names. Even films posturing themselves as critical of the war or military adventure find their possibilities so circumscribed by the War's long-haul reality that they inevitably partake of the there-and-back-again-ism that describes the arc of films like *Survivor.* The Tina Fey-led *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* leaned all the way into the trope of the Afghan War as an enduring field upon which Westerners can adventure and prove themselves by adapting Kim Barker's correspondent memoir into a bizarro-Orientalist *Eat Pray Love* in which, let us never forget, Alfred Molina plays the attorney general of Afghanistan.

The semi-exception to the canon's there-and-back-again-ism is 2018's *12 Strong,* about the US Special Forces working alongside the Afghan Northern Alliance to topple the Taliban regime after 9/11. This is weird to say about a movie in which Thor leads his bro-squad on horseback against a terrorist army, but *12 Strong*'s placement of 9/11 as the prime-mover of the American intervention, plus the way it (gently) hints at the difficulties of building and maintaining alliances through its subplot with American ally and bloodthirsty warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, makes it one of the only films that addresses the big why behind the Afghan war; treating it as a choice as opposed to mere setting. In chronological terms, *12 Strong* starts the decades-long arc inhabited by films like *The Outpost* and concluded in the suburban tedium of *The United States of Al.* It's weird to imagine that they are in fact the same story: the

swashbuckling tale of black-ops horsemen trading quips with warlords as they gallop across the steppes morphs into paranoid infantrymen squatting in a dilapidated camp for yet another rotation, and finally ends in Ohio with a Pashto man excited to finally visit a COSCTO.

THE WAR SHOW

The cycles of stasis-crisis-stasis seen in films like *Lone Survivor* were built on larger, older cultural cycles that determined the experience of war in Afghanistan. Most prominent in the region where I served was the agricultural cycle of cash crops, and particularly the poppies who's processing fueled much of the global trade in heroin. The two annual poppy harvests (the *nesh*) prompted massive movements of itinerant labor throughout the Taliban's heartland in Kandahar and Helmand Provinces; poor men who would fight against the Afghan government if fighting paid better than picking and processing. Fighting, like rain or *Malcolm in the Middle*, had a season. The emergence of this regional institution prompted a perverse show-business analogue: Taliban commanders, eager to impress sponsors in the Gulf and Pakistan, actually got in the habit of planning fighting season-premiere offensives that were designed for spectacle as much as anything else; the important thing being to remind the world that the war was still worth watching and funding. If you could synch your season opener with a bulge in available itinerant labor, you could guarantee a big, sexy fight with plenty of media coverage.

The US brought its own cycles to the war. It is by now a cliché that due to regular American troop rotations we repeated the first year of the war twenty times. This cliché only became truer as the war went on: a new US commander going to Afghanistan in 2017 had sixteen years of precedent in which commanders basically maintained stasis and their careers did not suffer for it. Such a commander had a script. His superiors had a picture of what a successful rotation looked like based on the prior decade. There were roles to play, and failure to play them

became more unthinkable as the war went on and the conflict developed into a system that yielded career-enhancing combat tours for military personnel, fat profits for Afghan contractors, status and wealth for government-aligned local notables, drug money for many.

The calcifying of roles in the Afghan War affected all players, and particularly those at the edge of the effort to advise a Western-modeled Afghan military into existence: US and NATO advisors, their Afghan partners, and interpreters like Awalmir from *US of Al*. The uncertainly of cross-cultural interaction was compounded by the stressors of combat, and all involved grasped at cultural touchstones they thought could assure their partners that we all knew who we were dealing with and what was going on. New American officers, seeking credibility, mimicked the affectation of a patrician Afghan *reesh safeed.* New interpreters, subject to scrutiny and suspicion, strenuously performed harmlessness and flattered their American principals in the interest of survival and continued employment.

This is one way in which *US of Al* scores a direct hit, though perhaps not intentionally. The character Awalmir has been criticized as a neutered, weirdly flimsy person. He sometimes seems to chirp more than speak. It seems not to register as condescending when Dean Norris' character wryly asks, "You're an optimistic little guy, aren't ya?" Yet Awalmir's backstory would not be out of place in the *Rambo* series: Afghan born and raised, working with the marines for six years, he casually explains his frequent relocations with, "The Taliban were hunting me." He is, objectively, a badass.

My first time in Afghanistan I found myself talking through a bull-necked interpreter who had been helping people understand each other for many years, while getting shot at. His family, proud citizens of a country that has been in some kind of conflict for around forty years,

lived in semi-secrecy due to his affiliation with Americans. He had patrolled, dozens of times, with US Special Forces. He was, objectively, a badass.

He was also a perceptive man who understood that Americans like to feel at the center of things, in control, and a little bit bad-boy dangerous. He understood that though he had seen more action in his life than I ever will, the role of "sidekick," a set of expectations and norms forged mostly through Hollywood products, would be risky to abandon. He adjusted his self-presentation accordingly, speaking loudly and often about how lucky Afghanistan was to have tough guys like the US Marines as friends[1]. Not wanting to disappoint, I did the converse: a little more macho, a little more swagger. I was part of a generation of marines who got our goalposts for acceptable marine-ness through pop culture before we ever spoke with a recruiter. I have met more than one person who can recite the good parts of *Full Metal Jacket* from memory. It appears Awalmir's friend Riley, who slides into the role of brooding and chiseled Serious Veteran on *US of Al*, got all the right memos.

When the writers' room for *US of Al* concocts the cuddliest possible version of a Pashto war veteran, is some version of the above code-switch taking place? Awalmir may sincerely be written as an impossibly buoyant person. Is he actually carrying the pain of six years of fighting and a childhood under the Taliban? Are the Afghan writers on *US of Al* concerned about scaring away audiences the way my interpreters were wary of letting the full gravitas of their experiences fall on me?

The family sitcom, in which audience expectations are shaped by the crushing normativity of the form, is an ingenious way to explore these questions in a way that is just as cyclical and directionless as the Afghan War was in its twenty-year run time. *US of Al* has

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[1] I am not a political expert, but I know with 100% certainty that the problem with Afghanistan is not a lack of tough guys.

already showed that it deserves low expectations, but if enough people watch to keep it on the air, we may simply be forced to *sit* with it, year after year, watching ads for Awalmir's show interrupt NFL games just like the Afghan War used to.

The duration of a sitcom is the form's superpower. Time is the one thing sitcoms have, at least in theory, that other forms do not. What will a writers' room of Afghans want to say in season three, when in the real world the US will have been out of Afghanistan for two years and we will have a very good idea of whether or not Awalmir's family, left behind in Kabul, would have been likely to survive whatever follows the US withdrawal? This is the worthiest thing about *United States of Al*: it invites us to imagine a future where Afghan storytellers, having adequately hit the cycles and roles of the sitcom form, have the social license, the resources, and the time to work through the relationships we built with the Afghans, and what those relationships might mean after the war. I hope that work can become programming as routine as the war used to be.