

## Policy 360 podcast Episode 127 Inside Military Training Villages

Judith Kelley:

The villages are designed to look real. There are people in them. Many of the people were born in the Middle East and immigrated to the United States. Now, they play pretend versions of themselves in pretend Middle Eastern villages, in the very real forest and deserts of the United States. I'm Judith Kelly, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Welcome to the 2021-2022 season of policy 360. My guest today is, one of the newest faculty members here at the Sanford School, Christopher Sims. He has been photographing these villages and he joins me now. Welcome Chris.

Chris Sims:

Hi. Thank you, Judith. Good to be here.

Judith:

So, Chris. First, what are these people doing?

Chris:

Well, it's really an extraordinary set of circumstances. So, we find ourselves, for example, just 90 minutes away from Duke's campus down near Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in a place that in some ways looks somewhat like the Middle East, Afghanistan or Iraq, or another country. But also, partially looks of course, like North Carolina, because we're here in pine forest. And it's a kind of mashup of different cultures. So, we have different groups of people. One are American soldiers who are, maybe about to deploy. This is 2005 to 2018, when I photographed in these villages, who are about to deploy in those places. We have another group of individuals who are perhaps recent immigrants or even refugees from those places, who have found employment, essentially playing a version of the lives that they've left behind in those countries. And then, we have a third group of people who are also playing the part of Afghan or Iraqi villagers and they were locals from around, who may live around the base for a part-time job, essentially our extras, sort of backstage here in these forever wars.

Judith:

But why are they doing it?

Chris:

Well, it's essentially the type of training and even cultural immersion. So the idea is, as the US military has shifted the type of war fighting capabilities that they need... So in the cold war, they were preparing for tank battles in Germany. That's no longer... Since, for quite some time, the type of wars that we've been fighting. So, essentially this shift began as I understand it, soon after Mogadishu in which, we are the American military was sort of unprepared for that type of close quarter, urban combat type of mission. And so, they began to then realize with the wars in the former Yugoslavia and thereafter, they really needed to sort of train their soldiers in a different way. That's much more on the ground, interacting with the local population.

Chris:

So, it's almost giving the military a suite of new type of missions they've had to become in some ways, social workers and engineers and sort of solve all these on the ground problems, to win over the hearts and mind. So, these villages are meant to immerse the soldiers or the troops in these environments, so they can have these practices and essentially to figure out and make mistakes here. Ideally, as they told

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me, before they would be overseas and make mistakes in those environments, which would be much more lethal potentially, for themselves as well as the villagers they may encounter.

Judith:

Most of us who live here in North Carolina, have no clue these things are there. These places. So, how did you first hear about them?

Chris:

I would say that, that's true. Even today, I show these images and people have no idea that this exists so close to us and such a massive amount of resources go into these places. I was down at Fort Bragg, working with a colleague of mine at the Center for Documentary Studies, who was doing an NPR radio episode on Fort Bragg, about the family members of soldiers who were overseas. And when I was on the base, making images that would accompany that story, I was on the part of the base where the soldiers lived, but through a fence line, I could see into this training area and I became intrigued-

Judith:

All right.

Chris:

... and I wanted to explore further.

Judith:

Was it difficult for you to gain access to them? And presumably, the common folks can't just walk in.

Chris:

Right. So, this is not that long after nine 9/11, that I began the project and you can't just simply walk on a base and wander around.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

So it becomes in a way, a lot of the project is figuring out access. And there's certainly a lot of bureaucracy involved, a lot of writing letters to various folks in command and essentially what happens is, you get there and you can spend maybe an hour. And then, the work of the documentarian is to develop the relationships with people on the base, who could then help me come back for longer visits. So, that really unschooled over a number of years to gain that trust and access, to be able to go in these spaces.

Judith:

What was the convincing argument that you made, Chris, that made them go, "Okay. This makes sense. He should be in there taking photos."

Chris:

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So one of the reasons I think that worked is, they do have people that do come in for an hour and make some quick photos and they tend to be the same type of images over and over again. I argued that, I was coming from a university background, I wanted to create a long-term archive to really comprehensively show what these places are like. And having worked as a photo archivist myself at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and I think there was a certain level of seriousness to the project that they responded to and they ultimately decided to open up these spaces for me.

Judith:

So, what are they like? In Denmark where I'm from, originally, we have got these Viking reenactment places where you can go and there's people there who basically are embodying folks from that time and going about their business and grinding up corn and doing their thing and it's like life at that time. Is that what's going on? Or how does it... What does it look like?

Chris:

It's a really strange brew of experiences. I was never a high school theater type kid-

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... but I feel there is some aspect of that. There's a little bit of aspect of kind of Disney world kind of theme park experience. And yet, underneath it all, of course, it's incredibly serious. These are young soldiers who are scared, who have maybe never even left their home state before. So, they're about to go to very dangerous place. So, there is that current that is buzzing there in the background. And then, you have on the other hand, this juxtaposition of something that seems incredibly realistic. You're hearing Arabic and Dari and other languages-

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... and yet, it's sort of a comedy in the sense, of course it looks nothing really like those places.

Judith:

But, do they cook there? Do they sleep there? Do they have little schools there? What parts of life are being imitated there?

Chris:

Nearly everything. It depends on the base. The ones in California, they're much more remote and people do have to stay out for days and nights at a time. Although in the other places, people tend to sleep in a dorm type environment. But folks are out there 18 hours a day, not only making meals, they actually plant crops. So months later, they'll come back and harvest those crops and use those to make, actually quite delicious meals, because they have plenty of time to do lots of home cooking in between exercises. There's no children-

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Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... understandably for labor laws.

Judith:

I see.

Chris:

But otherwise, it is a fully functioning village with a mayor and a police force and it starts to become very Truman show ask in which, it is approaching real life. In that you have cliques of people who do different things and pretend to do their actual businesses.

Judith:

What sort of people are taking these roles? I think, some of them are former American military personnel or current personnel or who are they?

Chris:

So broadly speaking, there's two categories. Maybe 30% tend to be folks who have the native language skills, often immigrants. Although in some cases, they may have been in the country for a couple of decades.

Judith:

Sure.

Chris:

And there are folks who are largely doing this for the... It's relatively good pay for them and it may be better than their other jobs. And then, the folks who are local to the base, it tends to largely be retired folks, many of whom have had military experience and college students actually. So, it is a sort of very odd part-time job. And, I would dare say, you would find no other place in the country, that you could have such an incredible mix of people, who have the opportunity to spend hours talking with each other, as they were kind of waiting in between things. While there is a kind of dystopian feel to the whole place, there are these moments of kind of magical kind of cultural exchange.

Judith:

So, the young soldiers who are being trained, they're being sent out there, are they also are there for 18 hours? Or you said, they might be waiting in between to do things. So are they like, do they have downtime and then the soldiers come by and then they put on their little show and the soldiers move on or how does that work?

Chris:

Yeah. If you can imagine, for example, in Louisiana, you have a 100,000 acres.

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Judith:

Wow.

Chris:

Like a huge swatch of land. There's 16 fake villages spread out over that land and so, it could be a good half an hour drive in between villages. The soldiers are there 24x7 for three or four weeks at a time. So, they're sleeping in the field and they don't go anywhere to get a shower or do anything.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

Just like if they were in theater. The villagers do take breaks and sleep elsewhere. But, they're generally out 16, 18 hours in the villages and there's a skeleton crew that sort of sleeps in the villages at night. So the idea is that, this is a 24x7, 360 kind of live theater environment, in which stuff happens at night too. And yes, because the soldiers are kind of moving through those environment, they're not going to be in every village every day.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

So, you could be in a village and not see soldiers for three days, but they still take taxis between villages and sort of carry on life as if a soldier could appear any moment.

Judith:

I see. So, it's not like the people will go from one village to the other to populate them when the soldiers are there?

Chris:

At the height of the wars and maybe 2008 to 2010, you had that all 16 villages were populated.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

And just like anything else, as there's budget cuts later on, they did tend to move folks around more and you would have a reduced experience. But, it is something that you can just imagine, the resources and price tag, because you have kind of a Hollywood movie that is filming in 16 locations, 24x7 for weeks on an end. And then, it sort of repeats itself for the next group of soldiers that come through.

Judith:

So speaking of Hollywood movies, are there storylines? Who writes the plots? How does that work?

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Chris:

So, there is in a bunker, in the corner of this pretend country, a set of script writers, who essentially, they're not writing individual dialogue for folks, but they're plotting out the story for the entire three weeks and they're also plotting out day to day. And they may say, for example, six villages are hostile to Americans and six are friendly." And they may introduce, "Okay. Let's pretend there was an incident in which villagers were killed. And now the soldiers have to drive through the village and let's plan for a mob to happen." And then, that gets filtered down, where certain key players in the village, like a mayor or a police chief, they may be given specific directives about how to act. And then, these folks who of course have really no acting training, have to figure out a way. They do have actual spoken interactions. It's kind of live improv, in which they play out these scenarios.

Judith:

It's like extreme gaming of some form.

Chris:

It is. It does take a village to make it all work. There are these soldiers who are invisible. In the sense of, they're not actually role players themselves, but they're there, these are experienced soldiers who have served overseas already.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

And they're sort of controllers. And they'll step in if the improv is not going in the direction that is helpful, they can come in and adjust. There's also very interestingly, folks from Iraq and Afghanistan, who are from those countries, who are mainly professors or anthropologists, who will advise about how to better calibrate what's going on to make it seem more realistic.

Judith:

Can you pick an image for us that you took and describe it and tell us why you chose to capture that shot?

Chris:

Sure. So, let's imagine it's early morning, we're in Louisiana in Fort Polk. It's a very cloudy, misty scene. And, we're in a space that's probably not unlike the Danish village from the middle ages you described. In which, we're in the middle of the village. And in the background, you see essentially those outside backyard storage units from Home Depot. Well, at some point in 2005, the military bought all of them and they populated the village with them. So, you see dozens of these structures in the background. And then in the foreground, you see a six foot plastic table. And on the table, is arranged a cornucopia of brightly colored fruits and vegetables. So, this is the marketplace. And behind the table there, are sitting two Afghan women dressed in black, full length clothing. We can see just their faces. And there's also an Afghan man standing there as well.

Chris:

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This is a scene that might greet a soldier who's entering the village. So every fifth time perhaps, there is an explosive device that's hidden underneath the table and it may or may not go off. This is a sort of Tableau that they set up. We also see in the background, villagers going from shop to shop, going to their business.

Judith:

And what drew you to that image? Why did you take that?

Chris:

Well, what really attracts me to these places is, not to explain as my main goal, the mechanical details of exactly how this training works and you which weapons are being used or exactly what strategy. But, I'm fascinated by this idea that, in something like the US military, which is not something that we... Not an institution that we associate with, sort of artistry or theater, they've managed to create this movie set essentially and what they've done are, to buy the same pretend fruit and vegetables, like my kid would play with at age five. They've gone to Walmart and bought these and spread them out. And they're incredibly DayGlo colors and it's bright and really contrasts with the black dress that the folks are wearing and the kind of scene overall.

Chris:

So, it's just impossible to imagine scene, that is again, like I said before, somewhat very realistic, but also incredibly fantastic. And you really feel you're in this realm, that is neither a place and yet, stands for me as kind of our imagination of what other cultures are like. Which of course, are kind of inexact and not perfect and sort of maybe idealized and simplified in a way. And so, I think that's a way to look at these images.

Judith:

I also imagine that, if there was even any inkling for a second, suspend, disbelief and go, "Yeah. This feels real", you got all these Home Depot storages in the background. That must just be unreal too.

Chris:

It is. I have to say, your mind can't quite put these things together. It just doesn't register and you're not totally sure what you're looking at. That's maybe another aspect of why I chose this project. I was interested in photographing and documenting these wars, but I didn't want to go to Afghanistan or Iraq myself. There are many photographers who do that and do that job well. But, I also find those images are often quite predictable and I feel like seeing them over and over again. So when I look at them, it doesn't register in quite the same way. But my hope with these photographs is that, because something feels off a little bit, you're not quite sure what you're looking at, maybe the viewer pauses and tries to puzzle through like, "What's going on here." And I think that's really the goal of the work as I see it as, can we look at something we think we know about, sort of be thrown by it and will that make us think about it in a different way?

Judith:

So, you look at it a new and maybe question even some of the policy objectives and what's going on?

Chris:

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I think, that's the role of art. I think, broadly speaking is that, the photographs themselves don't present policy solutions. But I think, they present a venue or something for people to engage with and talk to one another. So, I had a show with my work in Washington DC, it wasn't in the Smithsonian, it was in a smaller art gallery, but it attracted a fair amount of attention and it was on the front page of the Washington Post. And then, this remarkable thing happened, where people from the Pentagon would come over in groups, to look at the exhibit.

Chris:

And, I couldn't have designed that upfront. You sort of create art and offense, create documentary photographs to put them out in the world, with the hopes that people respond to them in some way. So, I was enchanted by the idea that, all different folks, people in the art world, people on a Saturday with their families going to see the photos and people from the Pentagon who are planning the wars, come together in that space and interact with one another and have a moment to maybe think more deeply about the broader impacts of our enterprises for our society.

Judith:

So, some of these villages are meant to represent Afghan villages and now that we've pulled out and that the war has concluded there, do you have any idea what's going to happen to those villages now?

Chris:

Well, they're highly flexible. The very first time I went to Fort Bragg, there are still signs that the village that I saw there, it used to have all the signs in Spanish, because it was originally built, I think in the late 1980s, around our conflicts in Central America. So, there was a moment in time in which, there were signs in two languages. And then, all this became completely either Afghanistan or Iraq. And in the latter years that I was there, I've seen a Korean simulation, I've seen Ukraine simulation. So, the role players change, the signage change, but the idea is the same.

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

It's that, these kind of recycled.

Judith:

It's like a studio set that you can change the props around and film a different movie, I guess.

Chris:

Yeah. And I think, what another thing that I was drawn to is that, of course some props from the previous movie, sort of stays behind in some way. So visually speaking, as a photographer to see these vestiges of the previous war, kind of bleed into the current one or the future one, is a fascinating thing. And I think, it speaks to our own way of understanding these wars. I, for example, would encounter people, villagers, one of whom had lost his arm in Vietnam as a young man. And then, I'm sure in a way that he found deeply meaningful, found employment decades later, playing the part of a wounded villager, as somebody without an arm, that might've been lost in an explosion, with pyrotechnics and then medic would work on him.

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Chris:

So, he's in a very direct way, participating in the story in a couple of different ways. There were also a number of women who originally were from South Korea and who had married soldiers, who had been based there. And they themselves had moved to rural Louisiana. So, they found themselves being employed as stand-ins for Afghan mothers, in this plot. So, these wars are not cleanly... They certainly don't have clean starting and end points and you get some sense of the forever wars in that. It does sort of continue on for a different season if you will.

Judith:

So, it's an interesting blending of reality and pretend. You even became aware of a situation, I think where some folks from the villages got married, is that right?

Chris:

That's right. So, I mentioned before, there're different businesses in the village. There was in one village, an auto parts store. And if you can imagine, somebody had brought in from a junkyard, a number of things just to hang up on the wall, old car parts and so on. And so, a woman was in charge of that business. And the next village over, was a young man who worked in a car mechanic shop and they actually worked on real cars.

Judith:

Sure.

Chris:

And, in order for there to be traffic between the villages, he would take a taxi each day and go over to the other village and "Buy something from the car parts store and then take it back." Well, over time, they became friendly and I'm sure flirted and then started dating in real life, the few hours they had outside of the village.

Chris:

And you can imagine, his visits to the car parts store became more frequent. And then, they actually married in real life and I believe they sort of kept it secret from their coworkers, although I'm sure everybody knew what was going on.

Judith:

They figured that out.

Chris:

But once they were married in real life, they then amazingly had this celebration in the actual pretend villages. So they got married again, in their roles because, just like in real life, there are weddings that happen in these places.

Judith:

Sure.

Chris:

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And so, they wanted that to be there. There were also funerals and-

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... every kind of every day life that happened. So, that people getting married, was a surprisingly common thing. I know of at least three cases where that happened.

Judith:

That's striking. I'm wondering, what draws you to these military topics? I know you spent time as a photography archivist at the Holocaust Memorial Museum. I think you mentioned that earlier too in Washington DC. Is that part of the reason why you're focusing on these topics related to the military? Or why is that?

Chris:

I think, there's really two or three reasons. One, I came of age in high school during the Gulf war and was confronted at that moment, what would I do if I were drafted and what is the tradition? For example, conscientious objection. And as a young person, it's something I thought a lot about. But, certainly working at the Holocaust Museum, made me very interested in the idea of war photography and how we remember war. And working there, I became acutely aware of how much was missing in the archives. We would have so many times, where people would come in and ask for images from their grandmother's shtetl in Poland and there would be absolutely nothing from that village. Visually or otherwise.

Chris:

So, despite the enormity of our collection, the largest in the world, we had just a tiny amount of probably what once existed or could have existed. So, when I started thinking about a project to do here in North Carolina, that was sort of feasible in the sense of logistics-

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... I really wanted to focus on, what's the differential, what can I do that other photographers can't? And so, I really am conceiving of the work as filling in the gaps of a future archive. So 50 years from now, if someone comes and talks to a photo archivist in the role, like I once had and wanted to find images about these wars, my goal really was to make the best collection I could of these places, which are still largely unknown and certainly not heavily documented.

Chris:

And to me, represent perhaps the best way to think of these words, it's less about combat and how do we photograph the very slippery concepts that we're engaging with in these enterprises? And I think what the photos do is, they document how we imagined the conflict would play out. And of course, it played out much differently than we imagined. But, I think to be able to capture what we were thinking-

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Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... perhaps is more valuable than say photographs of people shooting one another on the ground or something.

Judith:

So in some ways, you're playing the role of a historian as well, but you're also here in a policy school. And so, what role do you see media and photography playing when it comes to policy?

Chris:

Well, when I engage with undergraduates and graduate students at Duke and share this work specifically, it's also in the context of wanting them to understand the methodology. So for me, it was so valuable to go in person and have these experiences and see it firsthand. And you of course, learn so much by engaging with the soldiers and the immigrants and villagers. And, it was really a way for me to educate myself and pressure test, what I was reading in the media, were understood in theory, what was going on. So for students, I think it's to highlight the importance of going, getting into the spaces directly, talking directly with people who are being affected by the policy decisions that are being made in higher levels of government-

Judith:

Right.

Chris:

... and realizing that, that's a source of expertise too, it's a really be factored in. Whether they do that themselves by going and listening in the same way that a radio reporter would or looking at things in the way that I would. Or, they're going to sources of material that would give them that perspective. Because, I think there's always a danger in policy or really any kind of administration to be insular and to really have a closed circuitry. So, I think what documentary does is, remind people that expertise exists in these other places as well.

Judith:

Well, you've certainly given all of us a lot to think about. I think there are very few of our listeners who've joined today, who could say that they did not learn something new. So, thank you so much for joining me today, Chris.

Chris:

Yeah. Thank you so much for this opportunity. I really enjoyed it.

Judith:

Christopher Sims is an associate professor of the practice here in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He also serves as the undergraduate education director at the renowned Center for Documentary Studies at Duke. Here at the Sanford school, he teaches ethics and equity in media, documentary and technology. Photos from the village are collected in his new book, "The Pretend

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Villages: Inside the US Military Training Grounds." You can go to our website [policy360.org](http://policy360.org), to see some of the images and get a link to the book. Also, a large-scale exhibition of his pretend village work, will be on display beginning, October 23rd in Duke's Rubinstein library, photography gallery. That's it for today. We'll be back in two weeks with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelly.