

FEBRUARY | 2012

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CULTURE



Failed States: Embedding in the War on Terror

ON JAN. 21, 2010, JILL MAGID WAS IN Austin researching snipers when she decided to visit the state Capitol. That was the day Fausto Cardenas fired a handgun into the air six times on the Capitol steps. State troopers quickly subdued the 24-year-old man from Houston. Magid witnessed the incident and was interviewed by reporters—one of whom later agreed to train her to be an embedded journalist with the U.S. military in Afghanistan. For the next 18 months, between stints of embed training, she followed Cardenas' case as he awaited trial in the Travis County jail, initially charged with making a terroristic threat.

Thus began *Failed States*, Magid's project with Austin's Arthouse, which is presented through March 4. Magid says *Failed States* explores media representations of terrorism and "how far the definition of terrorism or war can be stretched."

Based in Brooklyn, where she lives with her husband Jonny and son Linus, Magid was commissioned by the Dutch secret service to "find the human face" of the security agency. Her 2009 book *Becoming Tarden*, the result of her work with the secret service, was later censored and confiscated by Dutch officials. In Liverpool, England, Magid acquired police video surveillance of

herself and used the footage to create a series of videos and a book, *One Cycle of Memory in the City of L*.

"In these projects I entered existing systems. Fausto, though, acted mysteriously and independently, shooting a gun into the air on the Capitol steps almost as a theatrical gesture. He then got pulled into various systems: the press, the legal system and the jail system," Magid says. "I wanted to consider the possible meanings of his action."

Her iteration of the project at Arthouse explores these ideas through the use of gallery space and the Capitol itself. The Arthouse gallery features video footage of Magid's interviews with local reporters about the shooting, and a letter she wrote to Cardenas, among other works. Her 1993 Mercedes station wagon has been armored to withstand the gunfire common in war zones, and will be parked where Cardenas parked his car on the day of the Capitol incident.

Failed States is also the title of Magid's book in progress, which is excerpted below. Chris Tomlinson, called CT in the text, helped prepare Magid to become an embed. Tomlinson is supervisory correspondent at the Austin bureau of the Associated Press and a former war correspondent and former managing editor of the *Observer*. He co-sponsors *Failed States* at Arthouse.

—SUSAN SMITH RICHARDSON

A quote from the play *Faust* on the rearview mirror of Jill Magid's Mercedes.
PHOTO BY ERICA NIX

EXCERPTS FROM FAILED STATES

Austin. Hostile Environment Training.

We are in CT's car driving by the University of Texas with its infamous clock tower. We pass the state Capitol and I relive the day in January 2010 that I witnessed Fausto Cardenas fire his gun into the sky from its steps. I'd seen him buried under a huddle of state troopers, with his back against the ground. I'd heard his voice clearly, coming from the center of the mass of men, saying repeatedly, *My hands are up. My hands are up.* They were.

I wonder what became of him.

CT tells me about the kind of cars we'll drive in Afghanistan. They are Mercedes covered with Kevlar and iron that look exactly like normal Mercedes—you can't tell the difference. I imagine treating the used, 20-year-old Mercedes station wagon my husband Jonny and I bought when our son Linus was born like this. This is how they do it: They remove the panels from the car and custom fit the Kevlar and iron onto all the body parts. The windows get replaced with one-inch-thick Plexiglas. *They don't roll down anymore.* The regular engine is replaced with an extra-large one with an extremely strong cooling system.

You have to use a big German car to do this. Blackwater uses Chevy Suburbans. The embassies use those too. But the big German cars blend in better with the traffic.

I hear Jonny echoing in my head: *You are trusting your life to this man.*

After you research crime, you look at the medical risks. Is there cholera in the water? Do you need a shot for yellow fever? Or malaria?

People get caught up in being in the war zone and forget about all these other risks. Then there are environmental risks: spiders and scorpions, weather, extreme cold and heat. If we go to Iraq in summer, we're facing 120- to 130-degree temperatures. In 100-degree weather you can walk five miles before you will collapse, and it will be 12 hours until you are dead.

Brooklyn. Trip Preparations.

It's late May. My trip to Texas for training is less than two weeks away. I have a big orange three-ring binder next to my bed full of the reading packets CT sent me, official materials on military deception, public affairs, information operations, psyops, that commanders use in the U.S. Army. The binder is so heavy and the rings so large that I cannot turn the pages of it. I take out the sections that I want to read in chunks and then rethread them when I am through. I keep the Hostile Environment Training syllabus that CT made for me loose. It's a list of things a soldier learns in Army boot camp.

I don't feel like Afghanistan exists—or Iraq for that matter. I cannot imagine living in a war zone, and I don't want to. I think about Jonny getting mad at me about this project, now that I have Linus, my beautiful little bear who is sick in the next room. He woke up about two hours after he finally fell asleep, sick stomach, diarrhea, post-Tylenol and sweating in his reggae shirt and his old striped cotton pants that now fit him more like shorts. He was standing up when I went into his room to check on him. I see him as a black shadow. Lie down, bear, Mommy

is here, and I pat down his wet hair—not as wet as last night when the fever broke and the sheet was as damp from sweat as if he peed on it and I took him out of the crib and changed his clothes, the whole time softly chanting, Mommy is here Mommy is here you are OK. The thought of not being here, of not removing the sweaty jammies from his body, is not believable. I've left before, two days here, four days there. Once I was gone for a week. And I felt it. I really missed him. Three weeks for an embed sounds like too much.

What am I afraid of? That he won't be cared for as well? That he will be angry with me or feel abandoned? That no one will be able to bathe him before bed? All of those things, irrational or not. That something will happen to me or I will be killed. Jonny and I were driving through South Williamsburg near Bedford Avenue and he suddenly got angry and said, *Jill, if you die there I won't miss you. Missing you is not what I will feel. I will be angry with you. I will just be angry.*

Austin. More Training.

We take a break for lunch and drive into Austin, the city proper. There are no clouds. The sun beats evenly down, generating an oppressive heat with no wind. Dead, hot air. The pavement is glowing a sharp white light, even through my sunglasses.

CT takes up where we left off. *Abduction and interrogation. Rule one: Try not to get abducted.* I laugh. He doesn't.

Unit cohesion and unit integrity. It's a romantic idea. Stay together, don't leave dead bodies on the battleground. Only four people have gone missing in Afghanistan and Iraq combined. That's how seriously this rule is taken. Well-armed, large units; always at least two vehicles in a convoy; always an even number of people.

Sometimes, though, ambushes are complex.

That's when they come at you from more than one place. CT arranges the objects on the table to demonstrate: a large fold in the tablecloth is a mountain ridge, a wide book is the road, a smaller book the convoy. *The IED detonates with the first vehicle, but then there's a boom on either side and suddenly the convoy is boxed in, people are shooting from the mountain ridge. You fear this. Am I entering a kill zone? No matter how well you prepare, you just can't rule out the possibility of a complex ambush. There are always possible kill zones. Try to be ready.*

Situational awareness is sometimes referred to as SA or Sierra Alpha. IED is improvised explosive device.

I'm going to teach you the military alphabet.

My homework is to learn the military phonetic alphabet.

Do you know what Whisky Tango Foxtrot means? What the fuck. You'll hear that a lot.

So what you do is get everyone together and drive the hell out of the kill zone. Don't stop. Flank: Try to maneuver through and push past. Always turn around and fight—never just flee. If one of the vehicles is dead, you have the dangerous job of transferring the stranded soldiers into an active one. That switch is a highly vulnerable move. That's when bad things can happen. The insurgents want to grab you, or capture the vehicle with you inside of it.

I'd seen Fausto Cardenas buried under a huddle of state troopers, with his back against the ground.



Jill Magid during training to be an embedded journalist with the U.S. military in Afghanistan. PHOTO BY CHRIS TOMLINSON

◀ READ about Failed States at txlo.com/failedstates

**I don't feel like
Afghanistan
exists—or Iraq
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and I don't
want to.**

I think the first option sounds worse.

They know the power of a U.S. hostage. Danny Pearl was a huge success for Al-Qaeda. Jill Carroll, too. "I don't want to be in a beheading video." "I don't want to be seen in an orange jumpsuit." You'll hear the guys say that a lot.

I ask CT if he's ever seen one of those beheading videos. He calls them snuff tapes. He's watched them when he's been required to for a story. He doesn't like to watch violent Hollywood movies. *No gore*, he says. *Horror movies like that are real.*

I have always known that.

CT's personal wish is never to be a hostage. *Don't bite, kick, or fight. They will kill you immediately. Some men want that, just to be killed right there to avoid the orange jumpsuit and the horror their families will endure. So they bite and kick. It's suicide.*

I ask why the snuff tape is created in the first place. *It's a terror tool. The image strikes fear, demoralizes the enemy, sows the seeds of low morale back home.*

As a journalist, he is obliged to report on other journalists killed by insurgents. *Those are important stories. But the challenge is how to do so without furthering the enemy's goal. Does the video need to be seen by the public or can it be communicated with words alone? Words are powerful but the image is a hundredfold more.*

I fear this. I've always wanted words to be just as powerful. I want my words to be powerful.

You have to get the news across without doing the enemy's propagandist work for them. The U.S. military

produces official U.S. Army videos shot from Apache helicopters. The other side releases videos showing U.S. soldiers being killed by Juba snipers. To counter this, the U.S. releases gun camera videos. It's tit for tat.

CT chooses to describe videos rather than redistribute them.

It's not smart to resist if you are taken hostage. The longer you survive, the better your chances of getting out. A hostage scenario is a mental game of wits; 85 percent of survival is mental.

I ask him if he feels invincible after seeing so much, and he says, *No, the opposite has happened. I realize my fragility and how human I am.*

I don't believe him.

You have to have a strategy for being abducted. The first stage, the shock of capture, is predictable. Resistance is pointless. Bite and kick and you're pretty much committing suicide. If you're too much work, they will simply shoot you. Or you could have the worst of both worlds, where they beat you up and keep you without medical treatment. But you'll be roughed up no matter what. If you're captured in a group, they'll pick out whoever seems to be the leader and make an example of him. Fade in and be colorless. Go limp, become gray. The other guy they kill is the one who has a complete breakdown, because that guy's annoying.

You are not a leader, you obey and cooperate. They are assessing you. They will take your press card and passport and look you up. Say yes, say no, don't expand. Remember, their adrenaline is pumping. They are scared, too.

Next comes the interrogation phase. You tell them, "I am not a combatant. I have no obligation to the military, no obligation to keep secrets. I am a mother."

Your main strategy, if you are kidnapped, is being a mom. Having Linus and Jonny. They will want to know about your family. If you're not a journalist, not a spy, what are you? Why are you here without your husband? You're going to have to lie about your name. They might have the resources to Google you. Be prepared to lie about being Jewish. If they ask about your name, Magid—what type of name is Magid?

It's Jewish.

No. It's Lebanese Christian.

I guess I'd better start researching what it is to be Lebanese.

No no no. He waves away my words. They don't know shit about Lebanese Christianity. What does Magid mean in Arabic? It's probably the same in Hebrew. Look it up.

(It means "glorious" in Arabic. In Hebrew, which I know, it means "itinerant storyteller." I love that, but glorious isn't bad, either).

As a journalist you have to make up your story and know it. You don't want a complicated story.

He makes one up for me.

Okay, so your family left Lebanon in the early 1900s. Don't even mention the word Jewish—do not plant ideas! You're not even remotely Jewish so not a thought in your head about it. You're fourth-generation American. Anything factual—volunteer it. And tell as few lies as possible. Always maintain eye contact when you're lying. If you look down or to the left, they'll know. Whenever you have to tell a lie, take a breath and look straight into their eyes. Don't blink.

Tell them whatever you know about the Army

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Images of Magid's Mercedes, which was armored to withstand the gunfire common in war zones. The car is parked at the Capitol in the same space used by Fausto Cardenas. A quote from the play *Faust* is on the side mirror. In *Failed States*, Magid compares Cardenas to the protagonist of Goethe's play. PHOTOS BY ERICA NIX

to show them you're not useful. Let everything out because you don't know anything important.

Jesus. If that isn't humbling.

You're not hurting anyone. Your knowledge isn't deep enough.

What, I wonder, if I want it to be?

Physical abuse is most likely when they know you are lying, when they see you lie, and when you are impatient.

You'll have the same interrogator for the long term. He will establish himself as your alpha male.

I think he actually said *your alpha leader*, but I imagine him to be male.

Remember you are powerless—including over your future. This is what they want you to think.

If you were the enemy and this was a U.S. interrogation, you'd be stripped naked. Clothing is emotional armor. It provides psychological protection. Being stripped works on everyone but especially Muslims, for whom it carries added insult. Your captors will control your whole environment: your room temperature, your food, your sleep. The interrogator manipulates everything so that you'll submit. Adding physical pain only damages the process. The interrogator does not want you to emotionally collapse. You don't want people to shut down on you, like a rose folding in on itself, back into a bud—excuse the metaphor.

I think for CT collapsing roses are emasculating.

It's like this. He folds his arms, locking his elbows across his torso, and hollows his chest, his head dropping forward and his chin hitting his collarbone. If you reach this point they'll know you've mentally disengaged, that you can't answer any more questions. Take the slaps on the face when they come. They will. Hardly react to them. But don't do this too early; otherwise

they'll know you're faking. Wait at least eight hours.

Eight hours?

A bad interrogator might still try to torture you even then. Hope for a good one. And foremost in your mind: I will survive. I will walk out of here back to Linus.

There is something dirty about CT using Linus's name. It's just a word to him, completely detached from the boy Linus who is also—secondly—my son. To CT he is an anchor, an escape tool for me from a bad situation. Linus is only language in his mouth, coming out as strategy, and somehow it spoils the boy to whom it is attached and I feel gross that I let it happen.

Austin. Aug. 31, 2010. Fausto changes his legal representation. He appears in court but does not speak.

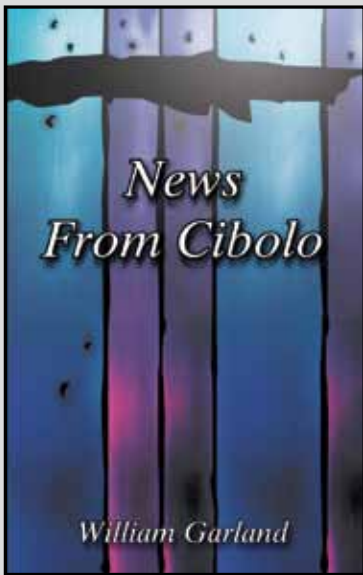
I leave the courtroom and find CT. We are driving to the border. Since Hostile Environment Training, I'm questioning whether I need to embed in Afghanistan or if there might be another type of conflict in which to embed myself in Texas. CT thinks if I don't go to Afghanistan, maybe I will find my war story in Texas, closer to Mexico. The border there is like a combat zone anyway, he tells me.

It is a two-day trip of constant driving, of me constantly driving, from Austin to the border, along the border fence—the whole time looking for a story, a protagonist, an embedding, but basically going on a tourist ride.

Why do you want Fausto to be protesting something? CT shoots me the question from the passenger seat. Why do you want Fausto not to be a paranoid schizophrenic?

I stare through the windshield at a perfect sunny

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What's it mean to be Texan? That's the ultimate question and finally the 'news' in *News from Cibolo*. A Texas reporter in Washington finds clues to his own loyalties and identity as he crosses paths with a mesmerizing leader bent on bringing Texas back from statehood to nationhood—sparked by a feud over oil, but also latent legal claims that eventually shake political foundations from Austin to the nation's capital.

News from Cibolo by William Garland

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I ask CT if he's ever seen one of those beheading videos.

sky with clouds that have a bottom, a flat bottom as if the sky has a glass tabletop and all the clouds are sitting on it like challah rolls.

If he is crazy, I say, then it's not an interesting story. It's just sad.

He disagrees and talks about the lack of mental health support in Texas. He tells me the story of the woman with psychiatric problems who checks herself into a mental institution and meets the man she marries there. They have a child and when the baby is very young she starts hearing loud voices telling her to kill the baby. So she goes to the mental hospital and says, *Check me in* and *this is why* and they turn her away. Two days later she kills the baby and eats its brain. He amplifies the story with specific details about the woman in her kitchen with the knife, the husband in the next room, what she did to the baby's skull, how she was covered in blood. I am going to throw up. I refuse to let my own reality enter into this story but it's creeping in despite my efforts, becoming a kitchen I design and keep in my head as well as the actions inside of it. I feel angry toward him for telling it to me. Knowing the story makes it my responsibility.

Tell the story of Fausto as a young man in need of mental help. Report that story. Analyze how that happened.

I am not a reporter, I protest flatly. I am not even sure I want to be a witness. That is the difference, I tell him. I want to be a participant. Fausto acted. He walked out onto the Capitol steps and fired a gun into the sky five times, or four or six.

Yes. A normal, sane man does not decide that is the way to call attention to himself.

He did not shoot at anyone.

It was a call for attention. The ramifications were the militarization of the Capitol. He was the tipping point, but at the forefront of that action was a man, possibly crazy and sexually obsessed with a woman in a white shirt, who wanted to say, "Here I am."

He's missing it. Fausto's gesture can't be parsed.

Austin. Fausto's trial. Aug. 8, 2011. Fausto takes a plea deal—five years probation, 180 days in jail with credit for time served. (He has already served three times that amount.) The charge of terroristic threat against a government institution is dropped, replaced with possession of a weapon in a prohibited place.

It's the day after Fausto's trial, late afternoon. Fausto has probably left the jail for Houston. I try to picture his family in a car, pushed together like they were on the court bench. I see Fausto looking out the window from the passenger seat, and the clean, put-together brother driving confidently without sweating, despite the 104-degree heat. His mother and his sisters are in the back seat. I am not sure where the other brother is. Maybe he's up front and Fausto is in the back, pressed against the tall, pretty sister with the thick-rimmed glasses. She has her hand on his arm. That last detail feels authentic, but the rest a lie. The truth is that I cannot picture him anywhere other than inside the story I know from the newspapers, off the record discussions, and from witnessing that day in January 2010 when something strange occurred. 📺

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