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(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with novelist and US Marine Corps veteran Elliot Ackerman for a discussion of his book *Dark at the Crossing*. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. The Syrian civil war ignited in 2011 during the Arab Spring following anti-government protests. The unrest triggered the demand for President Assad's resignation. Violence between democratic revolutionaries and government forces escalated, and soon the country was engaged in a full-blown civil war. As Syrian war continues, human rights violations, the displacement of millions of civilians, and the complex proxy war that has drawn in regional and world owners continues to impact the country and the world. According to the Syrian Center for Policy and Research, 470,000 lives have been claimed in a war that has no end in sight. Elliot Ackerman's latest novel *Dark at the Crossing* is a work of fiction based in the reality of the conflict he has observed from his home in Istanbul, Turkey. In the novel Haris Abadi is a man in search of a cause, an Arab-American with a conflicted past. He is now in Turkey attempting to cross the border into Syria to join the fight against Assad's regime. Haris is taken in by Amir, a charismatic Syrian refugee and former revolutionary and Amir's wife Daphne. Daphne is also desperate to return to Syria to search for her missing daughter. As Haris and Daphne prepare to cross the border their choices become ever more wrenching. Whose side are they really on, and what are they trying to accomplish by crossing from civilization into war? And will Haris or any of his companions be able to bring meaning to a life of increasing frustration and helplessness. Told with intelligence and compassion, *Dark at the Crossing* is an exploration of loss, of second chances, and of why we choose to believe. Elliot Ackerman is the author of critically acclaimed novel *Green on Blue*. He is based out of Istanbul where he has covered the Syrian war since 2013. His writings have appeared in the New Yorker, the Atlantic, the New Republic, and the New York Times Magazine among other publications, and his stories have been included in the yearly anthology the Best American Short Stories. He is a former White House Fellow and a marine who served five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan where he received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star for Valor, and the Purple Heart. Please join me in welcoming back to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Elliot Ackerman.

(Applause)

Ackerman: Thank you so much.

Clarke: It truly is wonderful to have you back, and you've created quite a novel here. And I want to get right into the conversation about the book by talking about the end of the book if you don't mind. Your main characters in the book find themselves on either side of the border between Syria and Turkey. Some of the characters are in the desolation in the outskirts of Aleppo and some of them are in Antep where civilization is going along like civilization does. People are playing hockey. Things--people are doing kind of normal things. And you know, these two places are about as close together as Chicago is to Evanston. So I would like to know your thoughts about the idea that we humans

seem to take peaceful civilization for granted until it's completely gone as you seem to have so amazingly illustrated in your book.

Ackerman: I think that one of the things that the setting lends itself to is to show how quickly those transitions can occur from peace to war, from stability to violence. One of the things that always struck me about spending time in Antep, which as you noted is right by the border, is when you're driving through this modern, peaceful city, you would see road signs saying forty-five kilometers to Halep, which is Aleppo. And these road signs were remnants of better times in that country. But it's a theme that I was very much interested in exploring in the book is how quickly those transitions can take place and how often life can seem very banal, and that banality is sort of central in that transition. And evil is very banal. We just sort of slide into these violent modes of existence, and that's what you see with a lot of these characters. And additionally too, something that always struck me when I first started travelling to this part of the world, particularly as a journalist, not as a member of the military. As a member of the military, there'd be, you know, four or five flights, you'd go through military depots, and it would actually make the war seem more distant, whereas for instance I did a piece of journalism just this past October where I was back in Iraq, and it was a--were in Chicago, you can get a direct flight to Istanbul, from Istanbul you can get a direct flight to Erbil. So we're sitting here this evening, we can be in Erbil in northern Iraq probably by tomorrow lunchtime, and then it's a forty-five, fifty minute drive to Mosul. So that's the world we live in, in this interconnected world, and even though these events can seem very distant, that violence can come home very, very quickly, and you see that in the book.

Clarke: There are refugees in the park in Antep, and they are living in this park. And their conditions where they're living are actually a million times better than anything they would find at home because their homes are entirely gone. I was struck by that because by all standards they're homeless; they're living in a park. Is that something that when you're--when you were there, that you had discussions about or noticed?

Ackerman: Well certainly when the book opens up this protagonist, this fellow named Haris Abadi, as you noted, who's an Iraqi American, and he's trying to cross the border to fight for reasons that are revealed throughout the novel, and he doesn't make it very far. He gets robbed at the border, all of his things are taken, and he's taken in by a Syrian refugee who used to be an activist in the revolution, a man named Amir and his wife. And so he's staying with them in their apartment which is near the main park in Antep, and so something that they continually observe which is true to form is the growing number of Syrian refugees who are basically sleeping out in the park who, kind of like Haris and like Amir, they're stuck in this liminal state where they can't really go home, but they haven't figured out what the next step for them is, whether it's going to another country, emigrating further. So that setting too of Antep was also the setting of kind of the liminal state between peace and war. And much of the book is about a real reckoning with whether or not people will leave that revolution, leave all the ideals behind and try to make a new life, or whether or not they'll stay in that metaphorical park and perhaps go back and engage in the war.

Clarke: Well let's talk a little bit about Amir, because he was deeply involved in the revolution in Syria, the uprising and the protests that basically sparked the civil war, only to see his work taken over by Dashir Jihadis. And the call for and the practice of revolutions seems to be as risky as war itself. You're putting that civilization where we live and experience maybe the banal, day-to-day of our everyday lives. But do you think that he knew what he was doing when the revolution was being called for, and he was basically propagating it and making it happen?

Ackerman: It's difficult to know. This character, I think much of the book is his search for some of those answers. But in my fiction, a lot of my fiction is informed by the journalism

I do, so I, spending a lot of time there, became close with a number of Syrian activists who'd been engaged in the revolution, one of them to whom this book is actually dedicated is a friend of mine named Abed. And something that really struck me as odd that was--I remember on a few occasions, we would go out to dinner let's say one night, and this was in 2013 when there was a lot of active talk about the US and the West becoming more engaged in this Syrian civil war. And so as we're sitting at our dinner, and we're getting our menus and picking what we're gonna eat, Abed would be leaning over the table to me saying, "Elliot, you don't understand. If the US and the West intervenes right now and supports the Free Syrian Army the revolution could be a successful. You know, Assad is on his last legs. The Islamic state will never get traction inside of Syria. You don't understand the revolution. You cannot abandon the revolution. This can still succeed." We would talk about that and debate some of the points, and then our main course would come out, we'd finish, and often times by the time when tea was coming at the end of the meal, and he'd be stirring his tea, looking in the glass and saying, "You know, I regret the whole thing. I wish I could go home. This had destroyed--the revolution has destroyed my home. I wish we could take it all back and life could just go back to how it was." And so that, you know, schism within him was something that was really palpable to me. And this was a guy who had gone out on the streets in 2011 and 2012 with really an irrefutable cause to demand democratic reforms underneath an authoritarian state, which he'd lived under his entire life. Like how can you fault him? There's sort of no pure cause, yet it led to all of this destruction in his effort to bring democracy to his home in some respects I would say, or to the Middle East, I'd say had left him ideologically dispossessed. Like that ideology had been taken away from him. But then I would look at myself and my own experiences. You know, I fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it might sound naive to say it today, but I remember in 2003 and 2004 and 2005 what the rhetoric and the discussions were about why the US was going to intervene there, and among several of the reasons was, you know, we are gonna go to a part of the world and to some countries that have lived under horrible, brutal, authoritarian rulers, and we are gonna liberate these people and bring democratic reform to their countries. Now granted we were doing it through an invasion, he was doing it through peaceful protest, but still the two of us were trying to bring democracy to the region. We were sort of trying to do the same thing. So after all of these meals and sitting down with one another, strangely we kind of came to this realization that we are on some respects veterans of the same war. And so what I also say Abed dealing with, which I have dealt with too, is what is it saying about an experience when you can be on the one hand proud of that experience and feel like you have no regrets about it, and then on the other hand have enormous regret and feel like the experience wasn't worth it. And so that's something that he wrestled with. It's something that I think many of the characters in this book wrestle with as well.

Clarke: You talked to some poets, Syrian poets, and they're in Turkey. They're exiles from their country. And they were lamenting about how when they lived in Syria they couldn't write poetry without fear of being arrested, and yet it was something that drove them to write the poetry that they wrote. And when they ended up in Turkey as refugees they were able to write whatever they want, but they found themselves lamenting the fact that they didn't have a country to write about anymore, and it just left them almost like toothless if you will in their ability to write stuff that had meaning. What do you think it is about art and that opposition that creates that scenario?

Ackerman: Sure. Well I think that the piece was specifically, it was a piece about some of Syria's war poets, and there was a moment that really struck me, and it kind of gets back to my friend Abed's, the conflict he feels, which is that so many of these poets for the first time now as immigrants were able to--this is the first time in my life that I can

write whatever I want to write, but they were also very cognizant that the only reasons they had those rights was first of all because the revolution that had occurred and the price of that revolution was being paid by their countrymen who were still trapped inside of Syria. But then also this tug they feel because--one of them said specifically, the only--as a Syrian poet for the first time I can write whatever I want to write, but the only problem is it's very difficult to be a Syrian poet without Syria. And he's right. I mean, there is no Syrian poetry without Syria. And that conflict again is something I was very interested in exploring in my writing. You know, William Faulkner has this great quote. It's from his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. He basically makes the point that the only thing worth fighting about is the human heart in conflict with itself. And that was something that was very, very evident to me. But then to the second part of your question, what is the role of poetry and art in these conflicts, I think it has a very important role. If we think about it, what does all art do? I would argue that the purpose of art is something I would term emotional transference. And what I mean by that is if I'm sitting at my typewriter working on a book, and my writing is going well, I will often be feeling something as I'm telling that story, as that story is revealing itself to me, in much the same way if someone goes to--you know, a filmmaker makes a movie, they probably are feeling something as all those ideas are coming together. And if I've done my job well, when you read the book maybe you feel some fraction of what I was feeling in that moment. And again just the same way you cry at the end of the movie or if you go to a museum and see an incredible work of art you're overwhelmed by it. Hopefully you are feeling some fraction of what the artist felt in that moment. And you think about that, that's basically, that transfer of emotion is really, it's an assertion of our shared humanity, and it's this idea that we are connected, that someone half a world away could potentially read a story about Syrian refugees in Antep and feel some of the emotion there despite all of the geographical factors and political factors that divide them. To me I think that's an incredibly and inherently optimistic act, that type of emotional transference.

Clarke: What is the comparison to a Syrian poet to an American--like, how important is poetry to Syrians?

Ackerman: I think specifically to Syrians, it's much more important sadly than to Americans. I think it's an art form there that really still has a lot of primacy, so--which was heartening to see. And hopefully there will be an easier place for Syrian poets to thrive.

Clarke: That's very interesting. Our friend and novelist Tim O'Brien has stated that those who advocate for going to war should take the body of a twelve-year-old child and put it at the middle of the table of the war room. And then for those who are deciding to go to war, they should look at the body of the child and make their decision on yes or no of going to war. Your book has two dead little kids in it. One at the beginning, and it happens before the book starts. And she is killed by the ideals of the revolution. And there's one at the end who is killed by the brutality of Daesh. What is your thought about going to war when it does seem to be that the victims of it tend to be civilians and often are those little girls?

Ackerman: Sure. I mean, a lot's been said on this topic. I mean, famously war is old men talking and young men dying. I think that specific to the United States right now and that question, I think one challenge that we have as a country is it's become very, very easy for us to go to war. And why is it so easy for us to go to war now? And I think if we look historically, it's actually been existentially uncomfortable for us as a country to go to war. And if we look at even our good wars-- the civil war was very, very difficult for us as a country to stay in that war 'cause the cost was so high. Touched everybody. If we look at the Second World War, you know, that war--also all of our wars have had a framework, and that war was also very, very difficult. We had war bond drives; we had real national

mobilization. The Vietnam War was characterized by a draft that made that war unpopular, in today's terms, relatively quickly, really within three or four years, was an extremely unpopular war. These wars have been fought by an all-volunteer military, and they've been funded largely through deficit spending. And that's by design, so we don't really necessarily feel it unless you're a service member who's opted in, then your family feels it. But people behave according to their incentive structures, so if people are not incented to care about the wars, they aren't, and then we're gonna be able to stay in wars like we have for sixteen years. And at that point I think as a country we start entering a real period of moral hazard, and it's no wonder that often times the refrain in the US is sort of this quizzical "why do they hate us so much?" But it's because people are so disengaged by frequently--the forward posture of our military in all of these countries where we've been prosecuting wars for this long. So I can't speak to Tim O'Brien's, you know, let's put the baby on the conference table, but I think maybe the equivalent of putting the baby on the conference table is maybe the realization that when decision makers say, we're gonna go to war, every single citizen knows once the decision's made that they are likely going to feel it in some way, whether it's a family member serving or, you know, through their pocketbook. And that's not the case today. Clarke: What do you think some of the hazards in that?

Ackerman: Well, I mean, I think it's just that were not invested in these conflicts. That decision makers can go send troops to faraway lands, and that most people don't necessarily care about it. That, I think, the fact that we can be fighting for as long as we've fought and with no discernable outcome, and it isn't an issue that most people are talking about.

Clarke: So kind of detachment from reality for American people.

Ackerman: When was the last time you saw a news story on Afghanistan? We're still fighting a war there.

Clarke: That's very interesting. Both of your novels explore the idea that war is one big racket or a scam. Haris is, in the book, he's been pretty much scammed twice, one time at the beginning. In the end it takes his life. And in *Green on Blue*, the brothers who the book is about also experience that. Why did you choose to make that such an essential element to both of your novels?

Ackerman: I think it was sort of --I have an interest in examining the political sides of conflict and how these wars can in some respects become regenerating. And so that was something that has always been central to my writing, and you see it in *Dark at the Crossing* where as much as there's an ideology behind the reasons that people are fighting, sort of the greatest ideology of all in the book in so many respects is the funding of the war. And so we ask ourselves, you know, how does a war in Afghanistan go on for sixteen years? It's because the economy is built out around the wars. War becomes a way of life. And Afghanistan again is the preeminent example with a war that's been going on there since 1979. Most Afghans cannot remember Afghanistan when it was not at war. And if you can't remember your country when it wasn't at war, getting to peace becomes a sheer act of imagination. But let's look at our own country. It's been sixteen years. Pretty soon we're gonna be in a state where we can't remember anything aside from the war footing we've been on since 2001. And the longer it goes on the more difficult it gets to reset to what is at least nominally a peace.

Clarke: Yet war is also about ideals, and that's something that is also a part of your books. You spent a lot of time I think in both of your novels, and particular I think in *Dark at the Crossing*, in a territory where all people are more alike than they are different. And you know, we're driven by the same needs, we're driven by the same desires, we have the same capacity for good and for evil in each of us equally. And I find that fascinating. The Pulitzer Prize winning book that was by Viet Thanh Nguyen called *The Sympathizer*,

he starts off in the book by saying, you know, "I have a talent, and I can hold opposing ideas at the same time about whatever it is that I'm doing." And it seems like your characters are doing that an awful lot in the war as they kind of debate one side of the war or the other and the reasons that they're doing. So what are you doing with that? Ackerman: Well, F. Scott Fitzgerald has this great quote where he says, "The definition of a superior intellect is the ability to hold two opposing thoughts in your mind at once and not go insane." And I think that may of the characters in this book are holding two opposing thoughts in their mind at once and sort of struggling to maintain their sanity. You know, the protagonist of the novel is an Arab American, as you noted, named Haris Abadi who was in some respects a sympathizer in Iraq, a collaborator with the US forces, and he is now going back into Syria to sort of fight for what he believes, at least initially, is this irrefutable cause, but at the same time he's sort of trying to reconcile himself to what he did before by his actions inside of Syria. You know, there's--one of my favorite books is Anna Karenina, and it's actually a book I was thinking about a lot as I was writing this novel, particularly its ending. Without--well, I'm gonna kinda--spoiler alert. This is how the book ends. But it's about Anna, and she has an affair. She's married to Karen, a very sort of senior Russian bureaucratic official, very, very well respected but boring guy. So she has this affair with a guy named Count Vronsky who is a very dashing, young cavalry officer. Their affair forces her and Vronsky to live outside of polite Russian society, because they are refused. They try to enter back into society as a couple; again they are refused. Anna starts to go insane. 800 pages later in Tolstoy's book she throws herself in front of a train and commits suicide. And when the book is often taught, Vronsky doesn't come off very well. He's sort of this, you know, playboy who's careless with Anna, doesn't really care about social mores. I always sort of--I don't know what this says about me, but I always sort of found him to be a sympathetic character inasmuch as I think what happens to him at the end of the book is incredibly sad. In some respects sadder than what happens to Anna. After Anna commits suicide, the last Tolstoy tells us about Vronsky is he doesn't even write the scene, it's just mentioned at like a party. Someone says, "Oh, did you hear about Vronsky?" and someone says, "No." "Well he was seen on a train riding off to go fight in the caucuses trying to hopefully rejoin his regiment that had kicked him out after his affair with Anna." And you never really understand why Vronsky's getting on that train, right? Tolstoy leaves the questions open-ended. Is he going to fight in sort of obscure war for the caucuses? Is he going back to war because war is perhaps a redeeming action? He wants to go rejoin his regiment, distinguish himself on the battlefield, and perhaps he sees that as his way to reenter polite society? Or is he doing something very different? Or is he going back to war to in effect do what Anna did? Is he through war throwing himself in front of the train and committing suicide? And you never get the answer. All you know is that's the last you see of Vronsky. And in some respects when you meet Haris Abadi in this book it kind of is picking up where you last saw Vronsky. Haris is going across to fight, and you don't--when you meet him you don't really know why. Is going to war for him? Is it an act of redemption, or is it an act of destruction? And for all of these characters, they're sort of holding those two ideas in their mind. Are their actions destructive or redemptive? For instance Amir's wife in this book, Daphne, she is not convinced of the fate of her daughter who everyone reports has been killed, and she wants to cross back into the--cross the border. Is she going there-- is she truly going there to find her daughter, or is perhaps she going there to kill herself as well? We don't know, and the book is sort of in many respects about that duality, why often times our motivations for actions are hidden even from ourselves.

Clarke: I gotta tell you, when I was reading that, I was like, this is the worst idea you've ever come up with, Haris, Daphne. Why do you want to go over that border? Why do you

want to go so bad? There's this tension throughout the book where you're like this is--no rational person would think that this is a good idea. And it turns out to be a very bad idea, as many people could predict.

Ackerman: Well, war often isn't very rational.

Clarke: Yeah. Well, that's probably a conversation we could have for about an hour and a half or two or three over dinner. The thing I want to know about your characters, Haris and Daphne, when you were driving them across the border, they're--it doesn't seem like they have a choice, I guess is my point. You didn't give them a choice not to go across the border, and I was kind of wondering what you were doing with that in your writing.

Ackerman: Well, I think in the book when they make this choice to finally cross together, they've kind of been their motivations have been continued and continually and continually reduced until that's just obvious what they feel compelled to do. But when I'm writing a novel I don't know how it's going to end. I'm not one of these writers who makes outlines. It's often, if I'm writing a book I'll have sort of a first scene that will come to me, and as I'm writing that scene it's kind of like I'm describing a piece of a puzzle, and I come to another scene and I'm describing another piece of a puzzle. And I just sort of keep describing a book until hopefully if it goes well I've written all of these puzzles, and I start to see how they are beginning to fit together, and once I'm at the end of a book it's that sort of same sense of inevitability. You know, you've gotten to know these characters. You've gotten to see all these puzzles arrayed, and you realize there's only one way this thing can fit together and feel like a--feel true. And so as much as you know, when they were going across the border it seemed as though they were inevitably drawn that way, I felt I was inevitably drawn that way as a writer. Like this is the only way this book can end.

Clarke: Is there any parallels in your own military career that felt like that that you drew upon?

Ackerman: Specific to crossing the border, or--

Clarke: Or just, like, things that you just, you just got sucked into and you couldn't--

Ackerman: Well, I think you know, for a lot of people that served particularly in these wars, one of the things that's been unique about them is they haven't ended, as we already discussed, so every person who's left as I have left, you sort of had this moment where you needed to declare a separate peace basically you know, it's over for me now, which I think is really--much-- really difficult. I mean, I sat around with--I've sat around with a number of my friends who are still in the service who've left. We've kind of often lamented. I wish there was a signing ceremony on a battleship somewhere or a helicopter taking off the roof of an embassy so we knew it was over and we could just get on with our lives. But because you've had to declare that separate peace it sort of has made it much more wrenching to leave the war. So I'd say that's maybe something--that's a parallel insomuch as, you know, I kept going back because I kept feeling drawn to the war, not 'cause it's the act of war itself, but because that's what your friends are doing. That's the world that you're living in, and it keeps pulling you back.

Clarke: The character Jamil in your book learns a little too late that the practices of the Daesh are not exactly what he thought they would be from before he joined. When somebody joins the American military, I think that many people not only joining but also those of us who are civilians, we expect our military to behave in a way that is moral, that is just, that does the right thing no matter what the circumstance. And yet in wars that you fought and particularly the enemies that we've fought, it seems that those standards aren't something that they hold themselves. It's something the Vietnam veterans talk about an awful lot, that winning hearts and minds was very important, and the enemy really wasn't worried about that. They were worried about winning territory. So I'm kind of interested to hear your thoughts about the ideals of America and the way

it fights its wars, because there are certainly things out there that don't really match that idealism as well.

Ackerman: Sure, I mean I think the US military in all of my experiences does adhere to a sort of code of conduct and long established notions of the law of war. But those are westernized notions. And I think that it is certainly a worthy mental exercise to try to imagine how one's adversary perceives our actions. So if we stand there and pontificate how we are behaving according to the law of war, you know, often times our adversaries don't necessarily see it that way. You know, for instance, is it morally--is it morally more correct for us to take out a senior Al Qaeda leader with a drone strike, you know, an individualized drone strike in Yemen or in the border areas in Pakistan? Is that okay? Is that not really an assassination? But if the Russians prick some guy on the street with a, you know, with a thing of plutonium, that's an abomination. I can understand how the Russians might say, "We're basically just doing what you're doing." This is an assassination, that's an assassination. What's the difference? And I think to not be able to see your adversary's perspective is very dangerous if you're trying to challenge that adversary. You know and writing this book, a piece of journalism that I did was one day I was sitting in sort of the house that I was living at in Antep at that time, and I had a couple of American roommates who were there, sort of NGO types, and my friend Abed who was working for an NGO lived there as well. And I was standing there in the kitchen one night, sort of making a late dinner, and he came in from the field, pulled up in this car, sort of windswept, dust on his clothes. And I was like, "Oh, where you been, Abed?" He's like, "I've been down at the Akcakale refugee camp", which is a refugee camp right on the border. And I said, "Oh, what were you doing there?" He's like, "Oh, you know, just doing my work. He said, "And you know what Elliot," he's like, "I met a guy there that I really think you should meet." I said, "Okay Abed. Like, who's the guy? What's the deal?" He fought for Al Qaeda in Iraq, but I think the two of you would really get along." So--so you know, I'm sort of up for anything. So I said, "Okay, Let's set up a meeting." And it turned into a lunch that the two of us had. So myself, Abed translating, and this guy's name was Abu Hassar, and I could tell you stories about him for quite some time. But this, you know, what was gonna be an hour, hour-and-a-half lunch turned into a six-hour lunch and a number of subsequent meetings, and he and I are still in touch. And but long story short, at one point in our meeting--he was a former Al Qaeda fighter, had been thrown in prison by Assad, and then when he was finally released decided he wasn't gonna go back to Syria and fight; he was gonna move into southern turkey as a refugee. But one of the things he said to me was as we were talking he was kind of started sliding into a lot of this sort of Islamist Salafist dogma talking about the return of the Mahdi and the Great Battle in Dabiq and the End of Days. And we had been going for a while. I sort of like put my pencil down, and so I'm not really paying attention to this anymore, and he got offended. He looked at me, he said, he's like, "What's the matter?" He's like, " You don't believe me?" He's like, "Even Albert Einstein predicted all of this. Albert Einstein said that the third war would be a nuclear war but that the fourth war would be fought with sticks and stones. And that's how we beat you in Iraq, with sticks and stones." So you know, I think it's--and he was--in some respects I'd say that he was right. I think we often give short shrift to really try to understand how our adversaries are looking at these conflicts because maybe it makes us uncomfortable 'cause we think by understanding we are tacitly agreeing, and I think that's unfortunate. When did trying to understand someone become the same thing as agreeing with them? I think that's like you see on everyone's tweets, like, you know, retweet does not mean endorsement. Well, who said it did? But we don't do that due diligence, and we're never gonna figure out our ways out of these conflicts if we don't really try to deeply understand the people on the other side.

Clarke: What was he fighting for?

Ackerman: He--

Clarke: Because you have a character in this book that is basically him, if I'm not--

Ackerman: Yeah, I would say--

Clarke: Or close to it--

Ackerman: --the character--some of the things that the character says is based on conversations that he and I had with one another, and I really wanted to write this character as a member of the Islamic state. And I think with any of my characters, no matter the ideology, I feel the onus is on me to sort of write them as though they are making their case to God. So I really wanted to feel like I understood someone who was fighting on the other side.

Clarke: Well, because our impression of them is they are beheading everybody and killing everybody mercilessly--

Ackerman: And they're psychotic and insane. And--

Clarke: But you're having lunch with one for six hours.

Ackerman: Well, one of the things he and I actually talked about was he said--he was like, "That was--you know, these videos are horrible. They're not doing our cause any good." So there's schisms within radical Jihadis about whether or not those are the right things to be doing, those images. But he is someone who in 2006 kind of became very, very devout. He said that he was taught that the quickest way to reach paradise and become a truly holy man was jihad, and he was living in Deir ez-Zur, which is a town in eastern Syria. And so he started running guns and fighters across the border into Iraq. And he did that until 2009, and then he was in Iraq in 2009. And he worked for a man called the Border Amir. So they call their commanders the Amirs. And some of the Amirs inside Iraq came up to him while he was there and said, "Hey, listen. We found out that the border Amir, your boss, is on the payroll for the Mukhabarat, which is Assad's secret police. So either you take care of your boss or we're gonna take care of you." And so he then went back across the border, was at home for about two days trying to figure out what he was supposed to do, and in the middle of the night the Mukhabarat came and arrested him 'cause they figured out that their assets cover had been blown. He gets thrown into prison, spends about three years or so in jail. And it was part of, at that time, a larger roundup Assad was doing towards the end of the Iraq War of a lot of the jihadists who had helped him during the Iraq War. And so while he's in prison the revolution had started going. It was probably nine months into the revolution, Assad wasn't doing too well, and so he very astutely decided that he was going to release all of the radical Islamists from jail because you look much better in the eyes of the international community if you're fighting radical jihadists than if you're fighting democratic activists. So the--so my friends and Abu Hassar, you know, a lot of his old comrades came and said, "This is great. We're getting out of jail." These are the people that started Jihad al Nusra. And sort of like--we're in Chicago--it's sort of like the Blues Brothers, right? We're gonna get the band back together. So, and he said, you know, "listen. If they're releasing all of us, I guarantee you the Mukhabarat, the secret police, have gone through at least half of you, and you're already on the payroll. I did this once before; it landed me in prison. I'm not doing it again. I'm out." And he went across the border into Turkey. So that was sort of his journey fighting. But interestingly enough, the schism I could see with my friend Abed the activist who on the one hand knew if he--he was chased out of Syria by the police as well, and he knew if he ever went back across he would be a dead man. But you could see how much he wanted to go back even though he knew the consequences. And I could see the same thing with Abu Hassar. Even though he'd sort of forgone that life, he still felt this draw to it. For instance at the end of our first meeting after he sort of said, "No, no, no. I'm done with the war," and explained

all that, one of the last things he asked me was he said, "I hear there's a guy who can get passports in Gaziantep. Do you know how much those cost?" 'Cause he wanted to try to go back across the border, too, or he was flirting with the idea.

Clarke: So what was he fighting for?

Ackerman: I think he in the early days was fighting for that radical Islamic ideology, and then I think by the end of it he was really questioning that. And he has not come back to fight, but he definitely I think still felt that draw.

Clarke: Did you guys talk about that as fellow combat veterans, like why you were fighting?

Ackerman: We did in many respects. You know, one--I remember one moment in particular. One thing he asked me about was we asked each other, when were you the most afraid, and a point he made to me, he said--he told me a story where he was taking--he was smuggling what he had been told were a bunch of commanders across the border into Syria for a meeting that was gonna be taking place in Damascus. So he picks these guys up in a van, and he drives them all the way across the border, gets them into Damascus, and they're in downtown Damascus, and they're kind of waiting to do the next link-up, but the person who's supposed to meet them doesn't come to meet them. And as they do this some of the guys from the back of the van start shifting around, and they're trying to get out of the van, and he realizes they're all wearing suicide vests. And so I said to him, like, "Oh my god, that must have been terrifying. You thought that one--maybe one of them would blow up." and he said, "No, no, no, no. That's not what I was afraid of." I was like, "Then what were you afraid of?" he's like, "Well I was afraid someone was going to arrest us." And he made the point to me, "You fought. All you had to worry about was living or dying. Maybe you'd get killed or wounded. I always had to worry about getting thrown into the bowels of some prison." And he's like, "You know, and eventually that happened." So we talked about that. Another thing we talked about was, at one moment in this meeting--we had been going for a while. As you can imagine, we're--everyone's drinking lots of tea, smoking lots of cigarettes, and my friend Abed goes--he'd been translating for us. He kind of raises his hand and is like, "Guys, I'm sorry, I hate to interrupt, but, like, it's been four hours. I have to go to the men's room." So he gets up and leaves us, and suddenly Abu Hassar and I can't talk. And, you know, it was as awkward as like two thirteen-year-olds on their first date. We're sort of looking at the ground, what do we do? And we had drawn a map beforehand of Iraq that we'd been sort of talking over. And then he takes my pencil from me and he writes a date next to a place on the map. I was like, "Oh I get it." And then I wrote a date, the date of when I had been in that place on the map. And then he wrote a date, and then I wrote a date, and then he wrote a date in another place, and I wrote a date. And sort of kind of like as the two of us had once chased each other around the country, our hands were chasing each other around this map trying to see if we had both been at the same place at the same date fighting against one another. But for me it was this sort of more profound realization that the connection that existed between the two of us was one that transcended language. it was one that was as simple as a list of place names and dates.

Clarke: Where was he from?

Ackerman: Deir ez-Zur.

Clarke: He was from Deir ez-Zur. So why was he in Iraq fighting?

Ackerman: Well you know, I think for him--

Clarke: I mean, I can ask you the same question. Why were you in Iraq fighting?

Ackerman: Actually, and it came up sort of the same way. You know, he viewed himself as a Muslim first and then as an Arab man. He's like, "You invaded," you know, "you invaded both Muslim and Arab lands, and my duty was to go and fight you." So he

viewed it very much as you invaded my country. And that gets into these issues, which are sort of the existential issues in the Middle East right now, which is, you know, what do these borders mean? There's a redrawing of these borders going on right now. I mean for instance when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in June of 2014, when the Islamic state rolled into Mosul and he declared the caliphate from Mosul. You know, he climbed the minbar of the mosque there and standing on that platform, one of the first things he said was, you know, "This marks the final nail in the coffin of Sykes-Picot," you know, which as we know is the agreement made after the First World War by the imperial powers that carved up the middle east into Syrian and Iraq and all the countries we know today. So what's going on right now is potentially the dissolution of those borders and a redrawing of the Middle East. But I think what it also underlies more is that, you know, that those borders are not recognized by many, many people. That's not where they get their sense of identity. That's not where the nations are defined. So for--again we talk about the geography here. Deir ez-Zor is not a particular long drive from Al Qaim or Ramadi or Fallujah. And so there was a lot of back and forth of people from Syria and Iraq when we were fighting in Iraq, and that back and forth continues today.

Clarke: So basically at the end of the day one man's freedom fighter is one man's terrorist.

Ackerman: Yeah. I think that's safe. It's a matter of, you now, perspective, which is what we were talking about before.

Clarke: You talk about the idea of martyrdom being an American conception whereas the Muslim concept is baring witness. And I also find that's a very interesting thing when thinking about--basically thinking about our enemy that we've been facing for so many years. I guess my question-- my final question along this line of questioning is, do you think that we Americans have any idea who we're fighting over there?

Ackerman: I think we do to a certain degree. It's tough to say as a monolith all, what do all Americans know about the people that we're fighting. But I do think that often times, you know, one of the things that the Islamic state has done very well is their western-facing images are videos of beheadings, you know, of really horrific images. And understandably those images disgust us, as they should, but they often permit--they don't allow us and sort of prohibit us from going deeper and asking the questions of, okay, but then why are so many Sunni Arabs supporting the Islamic state? Why did Mosul fall in two days? And we're still fighting. It's March. The battle for Mosul started in October, and the Iraqis with some American help still haven't taken that city back? So why is there that support? And I think when you're in the region it looks very, very different than it does from the United States. And you really get a sense that what's going on there isn't so much an issue of these rogue terrorists whoa re taking over the country. It's a political issue. This is about the redrawing of borders and, you know, perhaps the establishment of new sates.

Clarke: Your book seemed to be explorations in the ideas of maybe why we lost the war, and I think saying lost the war is kind of a--it's kind of an extreme way of saying it because I don't know if anybody's actually won either, and they seem to be ongoing. Is this part of your thinking in these books, or is that just kind of an aftereffect of the stories of the characters?

Ackerman: I think one of the things that I--it kind of goes back to that idea of who won, who lost. I don't think those are questions that the characters are engaged with as much. I think something that's --that's definitely affects people deeply in war. It kind of goes back to what Faulkner said, the human heart in conflict with itself. I think you see that acutely with issues of war and peace because war is a strange phenomena, this human condition that we seem to continually enter into, where on the one hand we say that we need to go and fight a war for our society, for all that is good in our society, for our

respect for human life, for our respect for rights and liberty. And so what do we do in order to uphold those things? We kind of devolve into our basest selves. I mean, you know, the fundamental rule of society is thou shalt not kill. And so we engage in mass killing in order to protect the society where we don't kill. So there's just this inherent conflict within the act of war. It's denouncing your humanity in the name of humanity. And so you see the after effects of that play out in this book in these characters' personal lives and through their stories.

Clarke: So you've been living in Turkey, in Istanbul, and you actually went to Antep, and to live there for a while and doing research for this book. What is it that the Turkish people think about everything that's going on around them? Because we in American can only begin to imagine what it would be like to have Syria on one side, Iraq on the other, you got Daesh kind of everywhere. You've got all sorts of things going on, and then you have the internal political environment that's going on in Turkey as well. What are people talking about, obviously quietly?

Ackerman: Well, I think, I mean, it's been very volatile in Turkey for the last three or four years in particular. However, you know, the Turks are frankly used to it. They're used to living in that neighborhood, so it isn't quite a jarring for them. They have if anything a much higher tolerance for that instability. But I think the current, currently what's the most concerning to many of the more liberal Turks I know have been the political crackdowns in that country, specifically the imprisonment of President Erdogan, his political opposition, much of--many of them are in jail now. Turkey has more journalists in prison than any country in the world at this particular moment. And there is a massive political referendum coming up just next month there, which if it passes--it's already passed the parliament, and now it's going to a popular referendum, and it looks like it will pass--that will basically give President Erdogan unprecedented powers. He will have a ten-year term that he can renew as the president, and for example he'll have the power to dissolve the parliament by decree if he wants to. He'll also have the power to appoint and fire the judiciary, members of the judiciary, if he wants to. So it's really sort of the death knell of Turkish democracy. And if we talk about the region, for so long Turkey had sort of been the one example of a healthy thriving, majority Muslim democratic state. And so to lose Turkey is an enormous loss.

Clarke: So that's what everybody's talking about when they're able to talk about it.

Ackerman: I think most Turks are watching that very, very closely.

Clarke: That's interesting because, you know, everything that's going around them would really freak us Americans out if the Kurds and the--

Ackerman: Well, and it impacts the conversation there, too. I mean, you know, for instance one of the reasons President Erdogan has made for doing this power grab is it's been in the name of security. Since the coup there in July of 2016, the country's been under--he's had emergency powers over the country. So those emergency powers have been because of the coup, because of an uptick in terrorist attacks related to the Kurds and related to the Islamic state. So it's certainly had an impact.

Clarke: From your perspective there, what should this mean to us Americans?

Ackerman: Well I think it's sort of--I mean, in this political moment that we're at there's a lot of people in the United States talking about freedom of the press and their concerns about access. I don't think we're anywhere near where Turkey is. I sort of think our dystopian nightmare of what things could turn into is like Turkey's reality at this moment. That's what's happening. We're watching the dissolution of a democracy. It's really happening there. I mean, here people are sort of saying, "Wow, could you imagine if this ever could happen here?" But in Turkey you do not have institutions that are as strong as they are here. And yeah, it's happening. Whether we're watching it as Americans, I

don't know. We seem to be much more inwardly focused on this moment, but I think it's pretty terrifying.

Clarke: I'd like to know, since we're a museum and library, what book are you reading right now that is something that you'd like to share with us that is something we should also read or at least collect for our lending library?

Ackerman: One book that I read recently that I loved is a book name called *Embers* by a Hungarian writer named Sandor Marai. And it was a book that I had never heard of that was recommended to me by a friend, and it's sort of set at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And it's about two old friends who used to have a standing weekly dinner date, and for forty years they haven't set down to dinner. And one night the one friend shows up to the other, and you get the whole back-story about why they haven't had dinner for forty years. And it sort of--it sort of unfolds against the backdrop of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. So it's a small book, I mean, really a gem.

Clarke: We'll definitely have to check that out. I am taken by this conversation on one--more than one level because, as you know, we're very involved with the World War One Centennial Commission to make sure that the united state properly commemorates WWI, but when you have the leaders in the part of the world that you're living in talking about this is the end of that contract from WWI, that WWI history is very alive and vibrant right now. And then you also then mention another book that's also kind of about that area as well. So people should pay more attention to that period of history as well. Well, I want to thank you very much for having this wonderful conversation with me.

(Applause)

1: What is kind of like the prevailing narrative in the neighborhood that Turkey--in Turkey about why the United States invaded Iraq?

Ackerman: Ah gee, I mean, it really depends who you talk to. I think, I mean, there's a lot of various narratives. I don't--the Iraq War is certainly not popular there. I'm sure that doesn't surprise you. But a whole host of reasons. I think many people will say they invaded for the oil and for our economic gain, but it's right for the conspiracy theories. It's certainly not something--it's not a popular war when you talk to people in the region. But I can't tell you that there's like one prevailing cause that people look to that's maybe different than the causes here. But it's certainly--that wound is still also very raw there.

2: You're based in Turkey reporting in Syria. Have you been able to get some experience or insights from other parts of the Levant--Lebanon, Jordan, Israel?

Ackerman: I haven't spent much time at all in Lebanon, and I haven't been to Jordan for about ten years. I was in Israel in September, and one of the--I was in the Golan Heights. And I was actually with a former Israeli paratrooper who had been shot through both legs in fighting in Jenin, and he now ran a kibbutz. And he was sort of like--he was great--he was sort of like I would say, like, the Donald Trump of kibbutzes, 'cause when you would drive up this kibbutz he would be like, "This kibbutz, my kibbutz, is the best kibbutz." Like, "Try this apple. Is that the best apple you've ever had?" Like when we drive in, he ran his kibbutz, it's right on the Golan Heights right on the border, and one of the points he made amino he sits there, and he basically watches the Syrian civil war everyday from his backyard. And he was just making the point, you know, for the first time in a long time it's sort of, it's good to be a Jew in Israel because, you know, we're not worried about the Arabs coming and coming across the border at us. And it's been, you know, for him, he said, like, "It's been my entire lifetime since that happened." So I think it has in some respects, at least with regards to Syria in particular, it's kind of made the troubles with Israel just a no-thing for them. But yeah, sorry I don't have more specifically in the Levant. Most of my time has been sort of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria.

Clarke: I have one last question for you. It's completely and totally unrelated to our conversation today, but it's from our website, or from Facebook, and it's from our friend Alex Kershaw who is asking you if you've ever met a Marine who fought at Iwo Jima?

Ackerman: No. I would like to though.

Clarke: I'm not sure how he came up with that, but Alex, I'll have to get back to you on that question later. If you haven't read Alex's books, he's written a lot of good ones, and he just helped us write a book about a local military veteran who did a lot at Dachau. So I want to thank you very much for being here.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you Elliot Ackerman for visiting the Pritzker Military Museum and Library for an outstanding discussion. The book is *Dark at the Crossing* published by Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. To learn more about the book, our guest, or the Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore original exhibits on military history, or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other episodes of *Pritzker Military Presents*; find out What's On at PritzkerMilitary.org.

(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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