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## THE TRAGIC COST OF COVERING AFGHANISTAN: COLUMN

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Alicia Shepard

Corrections and clarifications: Due to an identification error by the epa photo agency, an earlier version of this column included an incorrect photo.

To Donald Trump, journalists are dishonest, sleazy, scum, slime, or nasty guys. To me, a lifelong journalist, the majority of my colleagues are anything but.

What would the presumptive Republican presidential nominee say about NPR photojournalist David Gilkey? He and NPR's Afghan translator, Zabihullah Tamanna, were killed Sunday in a surprise, brutal Taliban attack in southern Afghanistan. Gilkey embodied the ethics, commitment and passion for journalism that Trump constantly belittles.

The pair died the day before the Newseums annual rededication to honor 20 journalists killed reporting in 2015. The memorial bears the names of 2,291 reporters, photographers, news executives and broadcasters who died doing their jobs as far back as 1837. The Committee to Protect Journalists says 13 more, including Gilkey and Tamanna, have already been killed in 2016.

None of them are sleazy, dishonest or scum.

Before the latest deaths, CPJ calculated that 24 journalists and one media support worker had been killed in Afghanistan since the 9/11 attacks. There are too many journalists who have given their lives to tell the Afghan story," said Bob Dietz, CPJ's Asia program coordinator.

Four NPR journalists were traveling as embeds with the Afghan Army last Sunday afternoon when a rocket-propelled grenade demolished the armored Humvee carrying Gilkey and Tamanna. Pentagon reporter Tom Bowman and producer Monika Evstatieva were traveling in another

Humvee and this time escaped death.

I say this time because Gilkey and Bowman and other NPR correspondents and producers have gone to Afghanistan repeatedly since 2002 to report on a country in which many Americans have lost interest.

I knew Gilkey when I was the ombudswoman at NPR. I invited him, Bowman, and their producer, after roughing it in the field with Afghan soldiers, for a meal of burgers and chocolate shakes last year when I worked at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. David was an honest, dedicated, funny man, though his scowl could definitely intimidate. He was passionate about capturing the stories of those whose voices too often go unheard.

Gilkey, 50, and Tamanna, 38, gave their lives so the world might better understand what is going on inside a country devastated by an omnipresent enemy determined to keep Afghanistan from becoming a real democracy.

The NPR crew flew to Afghanistan in May to report on the progress of the Afghan Armys struggle against the Taliban. Despite Americas best efforts to provide financial and military support, the Taliban grows more powerful. The only way to get the story was to go to one of the most dangerous parts of Afghanistan and live on the frontlines with Afghan soldiers.

Traveling inside Afghanistan to report any story — even with the military — presents dangers beyond comprehension when threatened by an enemy that shows no regard for human life. Human life and capturing all its complexity is what Gilkey did best whether it was in Afghanistan, Iraq, Gaza, Haiti or Liberia.

Reflecting on his coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Gilkey captured why he put himself in constant danger and took risks so many journalists would avoid. "It's not just reporting. It's not just taking pictures," he said. "It's, 'Do those visuals, do the stories, do they change somebody's mind enough to take action?'"

Powerful as they are, I now wonder if Gilkeys photos are accomplishing what he hoped. I recently spent two years in Kabul — one in the city, the other safely behind the U.S. Embassy walls. I grew inured to the almost daily bombings around the country. Too many stories coming out of Afghanistan show little progress or offer much hope for the future. Many of the best and the brightest Afghans, who once offered the most promise, are choosing to leave.

I applaud NPRs commitment to continue telling the story of a forgotten war, but knowing Gilkey and Bowman takes this tragedy out of the realm of journalism and into the personal. It raises a question I am deeply struggling to answer: Is Afghanistan, with the news year after year barely changing, any longer a story worth risking your life for?

There does come a time in covering a war when you have to ask yourself if it's worth it. At what point do you stop covering it? By the time I left in February, there were only a handful of international press.

The reporting has to continue, don't you think? said Mark McDonald, who reported alongside Gilkey in 2005 and 2006 in Afghanistan. Even if the average American doesn't care. We have to keep showing them why they should care. Getting wounded or killed should be an acceptable risk in the journalism business.

I know in my heart hes right, but its much harder to accept when its personal.

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