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**SARAH BALDWIN:** From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

This week we're going back to one of our favorite interviews from the past year with celebrated journalist and war correspondent Sebastian Junger. He talked with political scientist Rose McDermott about his book *Tribe*, and about what we can learn from the military as we try to rebuild civil society in our own neighborhoods. To Junger, growing up in a comfortable suburb of Boston had some downsides, and it wasn't just typical teenage boredom.

**SEBASTIAN** There was no reason to be my best person. No one needed me.

**JUNGER:**

**SARAH BALDWIN:** And he wasn't alone. The comfort and isolation of modern life have left many of us without a strong sense of responsibility to our community. This isn't just a problem for apathetic teens, it's bad for society.

**SEBASTIAN** The big question is, how do you get that sort of good cohesive altruistic behavior in a large

**JUNGER:** scale society when you're not facing a massive catastrophe? Can we have the best of both worlds? Can we have that small scale communal action in a large scale society that's not facing a crisis? Probably not entirely. But I think we can get halfway there. But we have to do it intentionally.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** So without further ado, here's Rose McDermott talking with Sebastian Junger.

**ROSE** Sebastian, thank you so much for doing this with us today. I was hoping to just ask you to  
**MCDERMOTT:** speak a little bit about what made you become a war reporter, and what drew you to that topic, how you got involved.

**SEBASTIAN** Yeah, thank you. It's a pleasure to be talking with you. I started anthropology in college. I

**JUNGER:** wrote a thesis about Navajo long distance runners. I did fieldwork on the Navajo reservation. I was a pretty good runner when I was young, trained with their best guys. And I got out of college with zero planned, but I thought that writing the thesis was something must be like journalism, so I decided to be a journalist. It was that haphazard.

And I sort of muddle through my 20s trying to write for local magazines and newspapers in the

Boston area. And I eventually got a job as a climber for tree companies. And so I worked on a rope with a chainsaw 50, 80, 100 feet in the air, mostly taking trees down. I got hurt doing it. Hit my leg with the saw, had to take some time off, and I started to think about dangerous jobs as an interesting topic for a book. And it would have been my first book obviously, and so I set out to do that.

And one branch of this idea led me down the path towards the perfect storm. I was living in Gloucester at the time, and a local boat was sunk with six men, so I pursued that. But another branch led me towards war reporting. My father was a refugee from two wars. When he was a young child whose family fled the Spanish Civil War when the fascists overran Madrid. And then he and his family left Paris when the Germans came in. His father was Jewish. And he wound up in this country, and that's how he wound up meeting my mother, and here I am.

So war affected our family a lot. War reporting seemed dramatic and intense and meaningful, everything that my life didn't feel like at the time in quiet little Boston. But also I grew up in a very placid little suburb, and I really had the feeling that I'd never been tested in any meaningful way as a young man in this sort of suburban, quote, "utopia." And I felt like I needed some kind of initiation to achieve manhood. And I know it sounds very regressive to use terms like that, but that was how it felt to me when I was young. So off I went to Bosnia, the Civil War in Bosnia in the early '90s.

**ROSE**

And are you going to continue to report about war related topics?

**MCDERMOTT:**

**SEBASTIAN**

**JUNGER:**

I reported on wars off and on for about 15 years, culminating in a yearlong project at an American outpost in eastern Afghanistan. Most of the wars I covered had nothing to do with America or American soldiers. These were civil wars all over the world where I was with local militias or with the civilian population. I started going to Afghanistan in 1996 when the Taliban were taking over from the Northern Alliance. Finally, finally I wound up with American soldiers in eastern Afghanistan and I made an outpost called *Restrepo*. And I made a film called *Restrepo* with my colleague Tim Hetherington, and I wrote a book called *War*. And a few years later, Tim was killed in combat in Libya on an assignment that I was supposed to be on with him, and I couldn't go at the last moment. And after that I decided to completely stop frontline war reporting.

I went on to other things, but a colleague of mine who had been on my film projects since the

beginning-- Nick Quested-- came to me with the idea of doing something on the Syrian Civil War. And I said basically, as long as I don't have to go over there I'll be a director, I'll be whatever else. I'm not going to be on the ground reporting. Yeah, sure, I'm in. So I've dealt with war, but I haven't reported in a frontline situation on war since Tim was killed.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:** I teach a lot of your work in my American war policy, and war and politics, and war in film and literature classes. All the movies you just mentioned, *War*, but a book I particularly love his *Tribe*. And one of the things that my students really respond to in *Tribe* is the sense of having both mission and community combined. That you have a group of people that you share this sense of purpose with. And I'm just curious if you have thoughts about ways that we could institute that in society now that are unrelated to necessarily going to war. Right to fight. There are some men who are going to want to go fight, and that's a legitimate choice. But for those who may not choose to fight, do you see a lot of opportunities for recreating that sense of tribe in a civilian society?

**SEBASTIAN**  
**JUNGER:** Yeah. The interesting thing about this for me is that clearly in a small scale society, which is how we developed-- survival was a group endeavor, and it was done with a very small number of people you knew quite well. And social norms, social behavior was imposed by the group, and it was hard to be a freeloader and take food where you hadn't put some effort into the food gathering. It was hard to be a bully and to abuse people without the group intervening. It just kept people acting well basically.

What happens in a modern large scale society is that as soon as there's a crisis, people-- not everybody-- but a lot of people intuitively act well. They become very generous with their belongings, they become generous with their time.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:**

**SEBASTIAN**  
**JUNGER:** Exactly, yeah. And 9/11, or just any building fire where the fire department hasn't arrived yet, people are constantly running into the building to try to pull the children out. And these are children they're not related to. There isn't a Darwinian reason to do that. But clearly it's wired in us to do that. Most of the children you might pull out of a fire in our evolutionary past you actually were related to, or you knew the people that were they were related to. It does make a kind of Darwinian sense by extension.

But the big question is, how do you get that sort of good, cohesive, altruistic behavior, that

communal behavior in a large scale society when you're not facing a massive catastrophe? We're wired to do it when it happens, but can we have the best of both worlds? Can we have that small scale communal action and behavior and morality? Can we have it in a large scale society that's not facing a crisis? Probably not entirely. But I think we can get halfway there, but we have to do it intentionally.

Need to proactively come up with strategies and societal and political norms that push people in that direction. They'll rush in that direction if they have to when there is a real crisis. But the modern society, its blessing and its curse is that it has achieved a state of stability and peace and affluence where crises almost never happened. So our best human behaviors are not called forth on a daily basis by the natural world, by our situation. They lie dormant for years, decades, even entire lifetimes. That's what I didn't like about growing up in a suburb. There was no reason to be my best person. No one needed me.

And so what can we do? I think national service with a military option would be an excellent way to instill in people the idea that we're all on this incredible experiment of democracy and everyone's needed. I think there's a very detrimental effect to toxic partisan rhetoric in government, and I think it trickles down. I think when we effectively hear the parents fighting-- the parents being the Democrats and the Republicans fighting in really disgusting ways and calling each other loathsome names, and wishing that they weren't part of the country-- when we hear the parents acting like that, we the children think like, my god, this family might not last much longer. And I think that toxic effect trickles all the way down to towns, communities, neighborhoods, and even families.

So I think as a free speech issue, if you want to-- as then candidate citizen Trump did a couple of years ago-- try to claim that the current President Barack Obama was not a US citizen, if you really want to do that, free speech protects your right to make a fool of yourself. It really does, as it should. But that doesn't mean that the GOP is morally correct in remaining silent and not denouncing that stupidity. They really should have stepped forward and denounced it

And likewise the Democrats right now. I didn't vote for Trump, there's not much that I like about him, but he is my president. And when the Democratic Party allows for this sort of liberal nonsense of, he's not my president, you wouldn't even be saying that if he weren't your president. The fact that you're saying that proves he is your president. So let's stop with the, he's not my president. He is, he was democratically elected. Let's move on from there.

So I feel like if there was a bipartisan congressional commission devoted to the toxic effects of partisanship and contempt, where it would call out really egregious behavior and demand that the political party affiliated with that person denounce it, I think that would be a huge step-- completely democratic-- a huge step in binding the country back together again. But we can't allow it to be the most nonpartisan thing in the country, because that means the democracy is failing if that's the case. So I think we can take real lessons from that.

Veterans. Veterans are civilians. They have absorbed the nonpartisan lessons of military life and gone on to be civilians and politicians if they choose. So therein lies some hope, and I think veterans have the moral authority to demand-- that are the most politically and economically powerful people in this country-- to start acting a little bit better and putting the country's welfare first.

There is a group that I would like to mention called With Honor. And it's a bipartisan group that is devoted to putting veterans into Congress, but veterans of both parties. And they will be supported with financing and messaging and everything else by this group. But these veterans have to take a pledge of bipartisanship, and they have to pledge to socialize with people from the other party once a week, to actively engage in the legislative process with people across the aisle. They make pledges were they actively assert that they will do things in a bipartisan way or they lose the support of this organization.

And to me, it's the immune system of this democracy responding to the virus that we have. And I think we're going to come out of it stronger, frankly. Precisely because of organizations like With Honor.

**ROSE** It's really interesting because you now see so many military or former military people pretty  
**MCDERMOTT:** high up in the government and in the cabinet and so on. And it's the first time I've heard liberals talk about having a military coup as a positive thing. Like gee, OK, I've never wanted that, but now it doesn't seem so bad because I trust Mattis more than say I trust Trump, or whatever. And you hear that from liberals who you wouldn't expect to because obviously they don't like Trump. But also they haven't traditionally had such an affinity for the military.

And the commentary I've heard that I find most interesting in that regard is, is this bad for the military? Is it bad for the military when they actually see the road to advancement within the military as happening through a political channel?

**SEBASTIAN** I think it's a mistake to ask our military to play babysitter. We shouldn't need babysitters. And

**JUNGER:** we've gotten to the point where we do. And that's partly because we have allowed-- this sort of toxic partisan rhetoric is great politics. You consolidate your base when you identify an enemy. Your demographic rallies around you, they turn out in greater numbers to vote, et cetera, et cetera. Fear is a great motivator, and it's a great political strategy for winning an election.

But you do it at the cost of the welfare of the nation that has elected you. There's the irony. And so that's why you need a legislative body that patrols this language and calls people out. And disagreement's fine, argument's fine. But when politicians use the welfare of the nation to promote their own political well-being and advantage, they are acting undemocratically. And so I think ultimately the solution is a political solution. And at that point I think the military will happily resign their job as babysitter of this nation. They don't want to be doing that, and neither do we.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:** The group that you mentioned, With Honors, also seems like not just a great thing for the democracy, but also a great thing for the veterans. You come back and you lose your sense of community-- to go back to the point you make in *Tribe*-- but also your sense of purpose and mission. And it seems like that's one of the really valuable aspects of this organization that you're mentioning. And I'm curious if you have other ideas about things that civilians-- not people who necessarily have jobs that they can offer-- but that civilians can do to help with the reintegration of so many men coming back from fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, who have been so sequestered throughout the last 17 years from the majority of the rest of society.

**SEBASTIAN**  
**JUNGER:** Yeah, if you go to their website, With Honor, they have a chart that shows the decline of the percentage of congressmen who were veterans alongside the increase in partisanship. So they're inversely related. So back in the '70s or something, something like 80% of Congress were veterans. And bipartisanship was at an all time high. Obviously right now it's the exact opposite. So just to make that point. But there were their website is worth checking out.

So the problem with a large scale society-- a large scale modern industrial society-- is that we as the inhabitants, the citizens, we are not in touch with virtually any of the things that keep us safe and alive. I drive a car, I don't know a single oil worker. I live in a house made of wood. Do I know a logger? No. I eat vegetables. Do I know any farmers? No, I know one. I know one farmer. On and on. You can go down the list.

Every democracy, every free nation is protected by an army. I know soldiers, but do my friends know soldiers? No. I don't even know any cops. We're safe because of the police, really. So

we have subcontracted out all of these vital tasks, which in some ways is a great liberation. So then you invent the Tesla, then you go walk on the moon, then you invent a cure for cancer.

**ROSE** Specialization of labor.

**MCDERMOTT:**

**SEBASTIAN JUNGER:** Right. So a society that can do that's an amazing society. And we are an amazing society. But there's a problem. So that when you have people who are doing-- drilling for oil arguably, since we all drive cars and demand oil, even those of us who are against oil still demand it, and demand cheap oil, hence the irony of no blood for oil on an SUV in a liberal town where I live-- that distance allows for that kind of irony. Soldiers arguably are engaging in something that has a real moral burden in a way that logging doesn't or drilling for oil doesn't. A huge moral burden.

And so I think when soldiers come back, one of the reasons they feel alienated in the way that warriors wouldn't have, I think in a small scale society, is they're coming back to a society that imagines, that has deluded themselves into thinking that the moral burden of war does not fall on them. That somehow morally speaking it's the soldiers' war. It's not. We paid for it. We elected the people that started it. Some of the war's necessary and some aren't. But either way, there are wars.

I think what would really help is to have some kind of regular community events, like say on Veteran's Day in town halls, where veterans stand up and speak to their own community. Not community in a metaphorical sense of the whole nation, literally the town or the city where they are from. And they simply tell their friends and neighbors what it was like to go to war for them. And some of them are going to be very angry, and they're going to rage and shout. And some of are going to be very proud, and they're going to make liberals uncomfortable with sentences like, going to war was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I miss it. And some people are going to be so just clobbered with grief and anguish that they won't be able to speak very coherently. Most of the time they'll be crying.

If you go to my website, [SebastianJunger.com](http://SebastianJunger.com), there's a page called veteran town hall. It's an idea that I started based on Native American rituals of homecoming for warriors, where the warrior gets to just say what happens, and the community has to listen. And that shares the moral burden. It's also psychologically extremely therapeutic for the veteran. And I think it's a binding force for the community as well. This movement is taking off in the last few years.

There's probably been hundreds of them this past Veteran's Day. And if you really have a whole nation doing that, then you have a whole nation that's understanding it morally, politically, socially as a whole, even though it contains disagreements.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:** And what you would expect in a democracy. So for people to accept responsibility for their vote and for their choices, and to bridge that distance. And to know a little bit more about what it's about. So like with oil or logging, I have no idea how I would go about doing that task. And I have very little idea about how I would go about going to war. And so learning more about what's actually involved in it, that some of it's boring, and that some of it involves things that you like to do, and some of it involves things you don't like to do is an important part of the lesson, I presume.

**SEBASTIAN**  
**JUNGER:** Yeah, exactly. And it stops the liberal trope that all soldiers are victims of the military industrial complex. A lot of soldiers actually wanted to wanted to fight. They wanted to join the Army, and they were curious about combat. All the guys I knew were like that. And there's also the horrible conservative trope that all soldiers are heroes, and this sort of ignorance. Ignoring the fact that it's mostly civilians who die in war. Both sides have these horrible delusions about what war is, and they don't serve us well.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:** Well thank you so much for talking to us today, Sebastian. I really appreciate it.

**SEBASTIAN**  
**JUNGER:** My pleasure. I really enjoyed it. Thank you.

**ROSE**  
**MCDERMOTT:** Thank you.

**SARAH BALDWIN:** This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards, John Maza, and Alex Laferriere. It was hosted by Rose McDermott. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

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