

When it Mattered

Episode 45: Justin Richmond

Chitra Ragavan:

Justin Richmond's twist in the road surfaced on September 29, 2009 at Camp Bautista, a Filipino military base in the Southern Philippines. Richmond was deployed there as a US army special operations team leader, helping the Filipino army with stabilization, counterinsurgency and information operations. Richmond's inability to convince his superiors to abort the ill-fated mission, forced him to confront the dissonance between America's promises and America's actions.

Chitra Ragavan:

Hello everyone, I'm Chitra Ragavan, and this is When it Mattered. This episode is brought to you by Goodstory and advisory firm, helping technology startups find their narrative. Joining me now is Justin Richmond, founder and executive director of impl. project, a scrappy little nonprofit with a global vision and mission to use data to drive community outcomes. Richmond is an alumni of Duke University, five wars, USAID and Silicon Valley, where he served as a forward deployed engineer at Palantir Technologies. Justin, it's nice to have a former Palantir colleague on the podcast. Welcome.

Justin Richmond:

Good morning, Chitra. Thanks for having me.

Chitra Ragavan:

It's great to have you here. What were the events that led to that twist in the road for you at Camp Bautista on September 29, 2009?

Justin Richmond:

Well, when I first arrived at the task force in April of 2009, we were coming into an already dynamic situation, where three international committee of the Red Cross aid workers had been kidnapped on that island by the Abu Sayyaf group. And while the Filipina had been released very early on, the two Europeans had been held for, I think, around three months and carted through the jungles with the Filipino military chasing them and trying to get after the militants that kidnapped them. And this was a really big embarrassment for the Filipino military because they couldn't track down these bad guys and find the hostages. And so eventually the European governments paid ransoms to the terrorist group and the Europeans were released. But in the process of trying to rescue those hostages, the Filipinos probably lost about a dozen men over

probably the course of those three months. And so when I came into the task force, they were really looking to get some revenge and find the guys that did this.

Chitra Ragavan:

So what happened?

Justin Richmond:

Well, all I know is I walked into the task force targeting meeting one morning and somebody brought this up like, "Hey, the guys that did this ICRC kidnapping are going to be at this place on the feast of Eid and the Filipinos want to go after him." To which, I laughed and said, on the feast of Eid, you can't do that. You don't do major combat operations on holidays." And with the narrative that the Filipinos, that's mostly Christian, already hate the Muslims, which are 99% of the island's population, there's no way this operation works. I thought people were joking. I legitimately thought people were joking when they brought it up, but they weren't. And very quickly, I got concerned that I wouldn't have the clout to influence this decision.

Justin Richmond:

I was just a Sergeant at the time and I was the lowest ranking guy in the room and that's just the way it goes. But it's something that haunts me to this day. And while I don't think any one person is to blame for the tragedy that happened on the 29th of September, 2009, which is when my colleagues were killed. I don't think there's anyone to blame for it, there was no malice there and there wasn't incompetence, it was hubris. And it looks like, man that is a lesson that America is learning over and over again. But that's why we went to data. Data was the solution.

Chitra Ragavan:

So tell me what happened.

Justin Richmond:

They decided to go ahead with the operation and support the Filipinos. And let's remember, in our capacity there, we're advisors and we're trainers, and we're what's called enablers, we're supposed to help our partner nations, but not get involved in direct combat, which is largely true. The morning of the 20th, which was Eid al-Fitr in Sulu. The sun came up, the prayers went out over the loud speakers and you could hear the entire island bringing Ramadan to a close. And then the bombers started coming from Zamboanga city, flying right over our base and right over the population center of the island. The Filipino forces has went forward with the operation, with our support in terms of capacity and advising them and sitting right next to them. And it's something that we should quite honestly have advised them not to do. That was our job, sometimes your job is to sit next to somebody and be like, "That is a horrible idea and you shouldn't do that and this is why."

Justin Richmond:

But I think if you look at the totality of the American wars since 2001, we can always say that there was an over emphasis on killing bad guys and not actually securing communities and helping to stabilize areas. And that's because we're really good at military stuff and not really good at other stuff. So on the 20th of September, the operation kicked off right as the Muslims and Sulu we're bringing Ramadan to a close. And the bombers were coming overhead, they were dropping 500 pound bombs out on the jungle. The Filipino forces were about two to three hours behind those bombers because they had gotten bogged down and it was just an unmitigated disaster. The bad guys weren't caught, the bad guys weren't killed, but what they did manage to do was reinforce the narrative that the Christian Filipino military is out to get the local Muslim population, which is a narrative that has gone on for the past really 50 years of fighting, since the early 70s.

Justin Richmond:

And when I saw that, and when I saw the disbelief and utter disappointment of the population with our action and our support of the Philippine military's actions, that really made me, and then nine days later seeing the two colleagues get killed because of just, I think, incautious action, it really made me start thinking that there must be a better way to do this and I must not be the only person out there struggling to get my superiors to see the right dynamics and to do the right thing. And that's why I started looking for more options in data.

Chitra Ragavan:

So this was on September 20th. And then what happened that led to your two colleagues getting killed on the 29th?

Justin Richmond:

The operation on Eid ignited pretty much all sectors of the population that were anti-Philippine government, like national government, anti-Philippine military, and certainly anti American. And I mean, the island essentially erupted. So we had about 70 to 96 hours where there was a threat of being overrun. And since we were the main base, we were taking care of the casualties coming in from the Filipino bases, all around the island. And the American surgical team was working on so many of these Filipino soldiers as they were getting cut up in ambushes and attacks on their bases. And so, I mean, the Filipino forces lost a lot of men, both in the initial attack and in the days after the Eid al-Fitr operation, because they essentially radicalized the island against them.

Justin Richmond:

And the Tausugs in Sulu, that's the tribe that's down there, they made them pay. It was just a gruesome event. And I think we probably lost around two dozen Filipino soldiers or Filipino Marines, over the course of those two weeks. But the incident that obviously sticks in my mind is when two of my colleagues, Jack Martin and Chris Shaw were both killed in an IED attack on the 29th. Those were the only two combat deaths during the entire lifetime of that task force. It happened because we took for granted our narrative

and we took for granted that everybody wanted us there and thought that we were there to help them and protect them.

Justin Richmond:

Yeah, on the 29th of September, Jack and Chris hopped their Humvee and went to do a water resupply and in the middle of that road was a really big bomb and they drove over it and killed Jack instantly and Chris held on for a little while. He got medivacked over to us, myself, and one of his former teammates were on his Aid and Litter team, got them off the helo and prepared him for the forward surgical team, but the injuries were too significant and he didn't make it after that. That's just what happens because, I look back and I think time gives us the generosity of heart that we probably don't have in the moment and I look back and I think about the people that were involved in this decision and there wasn't maliciousness, there wasn't guile. It really boiled down to a lot of complacency and hubris.

Justin Richmond:

And I think I keep going back to this word, because there seems to be a lot of data out there now, especially the data that's coming in around COVID, that suggests just the breadth of modern hubris and that these modern things like COVID, they're going to hit us where it hurts. And the data shows that we have to be much more responsive and understanding of the situations that we're finding ourselves in. I never understood that until 2009, but I really felt like had I the right information, I could have at least made a more compelling case that may have prevented that operation. It's the could've, should've, would'ves and everybody has these regrets after going to war. But it's something that changed my life and it led me to go to USAID and then led me to go to Palantir, where you and I bumped into each other a few times, because I was part of the problem until I learned how to do data.

Chitra Ragavan:

So what was that moment like when you found out that Jack Martin and Chris Shaw were dead?

Justin Richmond:

Sickening, absolutely sickening. I knew Jack was dead, but he was up on the mountain and he was out of my mind. All that mattered was Brandon and I keeping an eye on Jack in the back of that Humvee until the surgical team got ready. And I'm embarrassed about the relief that I felt once we got Chris in the operating room, because I'm not going to lie to you, in that moment of adrenaline and high emotions, I really felt like we had ... and really the medics who got to him before us, we didn't do much, the medics got there before us and stabilized him that he was going to make it. There's that mythology within the modern American military, that if you can get somebody to good docs within the golden hour, that they're going to live, and that's usually true, but it's just not true in this case.

Justin Richmond:

And yeah, he passed away while he was in there with the docs. And yeah, that was when we had retired to one of our common spaces after Chris was getting worked on, they brought in Jack and it was really somber, obviously, the body bag and the flag over it. And I made the remark, "Well at least Chris made it." And apparently I was one of the only people that didn't know that he died. And I can't remember who it was that looked at me and they just shook their heads and Chris was dead too. He actually didn't live that long in the surgical suite at all. And man, that was tough.

Justin Richmond:

And so that really brought it home and then going and talking to my two younger teammates, a 20 year old and a 21 year old. I think it was both their first times being out of the country, first deployments, first time in combat and they knew these guys, they knew Jack and Chris because we worked with that team all the time. And they had been in our office for the majority of that day and walking in, covered in gore and explaining to them what happened, that was a really tough moment. That was a really tough moment, but war's full of that. And you think about all the conflict that's going on and I think it gives me a lot more empathy for what families are suffering. And I think that eventually led me to wanting to start an NGO and trying to work on the solution side of this.

Chitra Ragavan:

So you left the military. And so then where did you go next and how did you end up setting up your impl. project NGO?

Justin Richmond:

I feel like special operations made me very survivable. I don't know how effective it made me and that's largely because what the special operations forces are asked to do now around the world is way more than we were ever trained in, in the school house we're selected for. Because the state department and the United States Agency for International Development personnel, who are like partners with special operations forces in the field, they can't go out to the dangerous areas, they don't have that insight. And so many times special operations soldiers, especially ones like myself, are tasked to being battlefield diplomats, battlefield aid workers. And yet we don't have the master's degrees that they get, we don't have the training, we don't have the resources.

Justin Richmond:

So it's really quite problematic. And that's why after I got back from the Philippines, I felt like I wanted to go work for USAID and take that survivability skillset over to them and see what they could do with it, if they could teach me more of the methodologies and the approaches that I would need to be effective. And that's exactly what happened, I actually fell into a very good stabilization, first stabilization instruction slot, and then USAID deployed me to Afghanistan for a couple of tours in the East, where the ambassador that was out there took the advantage of me being a special operations veteran, and sent me to partner at the local level with military units that were struggling with their stabilization and counterinsurgency.

Chitra Ragavan:

So after USAID, you ended up at Palantir, I guess, probably because you were still looking for that data driven approach to solving problems.

Justin Richmond:

Yeah, yeah. I mean, since you were at Palantir, you know those pain points and we were spending millions of dollars of money in the East and there just wasn't ... Number one, we didn't know what effects we're having positive or negatively. What I can tell you is that the broader trends were pretty negative, that we were seeing a lot more violence, that we were seeing not only violence against the security forces and us, but more importantly, violence of the Taliban against the community and just community, inter-community violence. And those are all just really bad indicators of vulnerability and instability on a local level, because it shows that there's just no mechanism right now to help people resolve their issues peacefully or legally, and they're resorting to violence. And that creates dynamics within communities, which are just very, very hard to start mitigating.

Justin Richmond:

So data was the problem. And that's why when a good friend of mine who I believe you know, James Boyd. James Boyd came to me and said, after my second Afghan tour, he came back and was like, "Hey man, you should come join Palantir. I want you to take the stuff that you learned over there and build it into our system."

Chitra Ragavan:

That's great. James Boyd has been a guest on this podcast and really has an amazing story as well.

Justin Richmond:

That's actually, how I first found out about your podcast, is through James. And what most people don't know is that James and I were in the same infantry platoon back in 2005 at Fort Benning. So we go way back and he's a good man.

Chitra Ragavan:

So why did you leave Palantir and start impl. project?

Justin Richmond:

Ah, yeah. So this is the great divide between the Silicon Valley narrative and the Silicon Valley reality. I really enjoyed working at Palantir and quite frankly, I enjoyed the people the most. It was just such a fantastic team. I love working in the field, I love working directly on problems and sometimes when it comes to technology, there's the narrative that you were solving the world's problems, but you're really writing the code that helps the frontliners solve the world's problems. And I think that therein lay the disconnect for me, is just that at the end of the day, I'm a field guy. And I gave two years of my time to help Palantir understand how to deploy this very strong technology in the field in really

nasty environments. And particularly we did that large disaster response after typhoon Haiyan in the central Philippines in 2013. And I was the lead engineer in the field on that.

Justin Richmond:

And that was great because I felt like I got to bring real value to the company and at the same time, really learn and test the things that I needed to know to make the impact that I wanted to make. I was a 34, 35, 36 year old combat veteran at a tech company, where the average age was, especially in my office, were probably around 23, 24. And so that fit only lasts for so long. And so I feel like I brought a lot of value to Palantir and I will be forever grateful for what I learned there. But in taking those lessons, we immediately founded impl. project with other stability practitioners from State Department and USAID, and have been going strong ever since.

Chitra Ragavan:

And what are the types of global projects that you've been working on? You've been all over the world.

Justin Richmond:

Yeah. When you're a startup, you don't have the luxury of saying no too much, so that's actually given me the chance to work on some amazing problems. Our specialty is collecting data in very non-permissive, very dangerous, highly inaccessible areas, including police states. It's a niche that no one really fills and obviously coming out of Palantir, that is near and dear to my heart, we can't solve problems that we don't understand. So right now, we have better data out of some of the toughest conflict areas in the world. That's including Mindanao, Philippines, Benghazi, Libya, Tillaber, Niger. These are really rough neighborhoods. But I'm actually proudest of our work in Azerbaijan because that is a police state, where no data collection has really occurred at large scale, since 2013 and the crackdown on civil society. And yet 2018 and 2019, we were both able to secure permissions to get sample sizes over 3000 for face to face surveys, which is unheard of.

Justin Richmond:

And so getting that data is really critical and that's how a lot of people know us, but we're not the data project, we're the implementation project. We're impl. project. And so we do the data simply so that we can get the programs right, and the projects right. So we really focus on building community resiliency by addressing the fundamental issues that are creating conflict and creating vulnerability and creating dysfunctionality. What that really looks like, is most places we're doing livelihoods projects that brings the community together to decide how do we build infrastructure that will benefit everyone? How do we build community toilets, irrigation canals? How do we teach the community to govern the irrigation canals and the water supply now that they have it?

Justin Richmond:

Because as people all over the world, practicing development stabilization of past 19 years, it's just giving an asset like irrigation canals to a community isn't enough. You have to give communities the capacity to govern this. If you just give them something more to fight over, there's a chance that that'll happen and you've done harm. So we're really trying to approach this in a holistic but also very locally sensitive manner, gathering all that data when we conduct focus groups, because we do it all with disconnected technology and remote monitoring technology. And we can gather this clean data and then show it to the communities and you wouldn't believe what it's like to hear women on the border of Niger in Mali, unpack their own issues when it comes to subsistence farming, livelihoods, abuse, maternal health. I mean, all those issues are connected in their heads and in their lives, but very rarely does the programming help them and address their needs comprehensively. So that's what we're trying to do and it is an uphill battle, but most of the right ones are, and things have been going pretty well.

Chitra Ragavan:

Well, things were going really well and then COVID-19 happened and you were, to put in mildly, grounded in your little neighborhood in Maryland, and you've decided that you're going to go from global to local and use the impl. project to figure out what's happening at the community level with COVID-19 in Maryland and then beyond perhaps. So what are you doing and how's it going?

Justin Richmond:

It's going really well. I never thought I'd have to apply my trade in the United States, but on some level, I'm humbled to be able to do so. My kids live in Frederick, Maryland, and I don't feel like there's any stronger motivation to help Frederick get it right than my own kids growing up in this community. So my team and I have been gathering community contextual indicators, here for the past six weeks and have seen the dynamics in some of the local economic issues, supply chain health, and the dynamics are fascinating. And what's interesting is that if you compare the actual cases and death rates across all 50 states, you'll see 50 different COVID infections and infection curves and the severity of these infections. And this reinforces the concept that data people have known all along, all programming is local.

Justin Richmond:

If you want to have a genuine impact, you have to get it right at the local level, or it cannot aggregate up into a broader impact. And this is really inconvenient for people because everybody wants a silver bullet to COVID, just like they want a silver bullet to poverty and to malaria and to the biggest ills that our world is facing, and it doesn't exist. It doesn't exist. Data teaches us that it is, it requires just hard work, consistency, and quite frankly, a lot of humility and just learning what we're doing right, and what we're doing wrong and adjusting that. And I think you can only do that when it comes to data.

Justin Richmond:

So we look at our community contextual indicators as the same type of bio data that a nurse or a physician's assistant would take on a person going into the ER today,

because they're worried about COVID, we're trying to diagnose the communities' COVID ills, just like a medical professional would be diagnosing this in a patient because we're going to have to treat this patient here in Frederick and down in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and in Marawi City, Philippines, where we're going to be operating within weeks and months, we're going to have to treat this patient according to the ills that we find here, not overall general trends that we see nationwide, got to address a problem locally. So that's why we're collecting the data.

Chitra Ragavan:

And what are some of your early insights as to the short term, mid term and long term problems, societal problems, that are going to erupt or slowly percolate in the wake of COVID-19?

Justin Richmond:

There is an appropriate emphasis now on the need for more protective equipment for health providers and ventilators. The problem is it took so much effort to convince the American public of what is obvious, that we now lack the capital to tell everybody, "Hey, we need to start thinking about the economy. We need to start thinking about domestic violence. We need to start thinking about mental health resources." Nobody wants to hear it. People only want to talk about COVID. And the problem is a lot of states, like Maryland that I'm in right now, a lot of states have come up with good solutions to COVID, or at least the best solutions that they can, reflecting an environment where everybody was largely unprepared. But the problems, the social problems that will exist after the COVID infections and after the COVID deaths are going to be significant.

Justin Richmond:

The level of unemployment, before COVID the single biggest response worldwide to our first question in every survey we ask, what is the biggest problem facing your community, was the lack of livelihoods. Worldwide 35 to 40,000 people in war zones and in police states over the past four years, 40,000 people, nearly 50% of them said, lack of livelihoods or some permutation of that. That was before COVID. That was before the American economy saw 30 million people unemployed. It's about to get really, really bad and there's going to be a reshaping of the economy, and people are grossly unprepared for that. However, like you said, we are a scrappy little NGO, and obviously we're not the fed, we're not going to be able to overhaul the US economy. What we are going to be able to do is work on an issue that I think demands a lot more attention and time and that is the effect that the quarantines have had on domestic violence.

Justin Richmond:

The quarantines have forced families into situations that they wouldn't have gone into otherwise, if there wasn't COVID and there wasn't quarantines. And I'm a huge believer in the quarantines, I think they should have happened faster and I think they should stay longer because it's the only way we're going to save lives. Having said that, this puts people that are already in vulnerable relationships, really in the cross-hairs of their

abusers and requires them to essentially shelter in place with people that don't have their best interests in mind. So domestic violence hotlines across the country are just exploding. I know in Virginia, we're seeing 75% more calls than we did at this time last year. And the problem is we actually have some of our Impl family that is affected by this, and we've had to resort to emergency funding. And we realized that this is something, a need that a lot of women have.

Justin Richmond:

So we have been piloting efforts to provide emergency shelter to women and their children, to get out of domestic violence situations, to give them five days in a suite or a stable living situation, to give them the mental space, the physical space, to assess their kids, to assess their situation, to not face an additional financial burden, by making some space that's safe and letting them figure out their plans. And where we're piloting it early right now is among the veteran population and we really hope that we're going to be able to expand that more broadly, we're hoping to serve 10 to 15 beneficiaries in North Carolina and Frederick, at each location, hopefully by the end of summer.

Chitra Ragavan:

Has COVID-19 given you what I call, viral insights, about your own life and work and reason for being?

Justin Richmond:

Yeah, I wasn't quite expecting that question, but yeah, it really has. I'm not going to believe anybody that tells me they didn't completely reassess themselves and their careers and their lives during this time. I, for one, am spending way too much time on the road and not enough time with my children. And that is a sober reality that I am slowly, slowly trying to come to grips with. And I think telecommuting is absolutely going to become a much more fundamental part of impl. projects future trajectory. I just don't see the need in taking people away from their families to sit in an office all day. I think there's just a lot better ways to it. Now, one opportunity that impl. project has, that most other organizations don't, is that our scrappiness means that we're terribly resilient. We have had to endure tough shocks already. 2019 was a tough year in terms of foreign policy decisions being up and down and right wrong.

Justin Richmond:

And there were a lot of disappointments, but all those disappointments refine your understanding. It is hard to have hubris when you were getting thrown curve balls. And quite frankly, we've been hitting curve balls for the past couple of years, and we're structured in such a way that is highly resilient to these types of shocks. Civil society is getting hit so hard by COVID and the lack of donations, and quite frankly, a lot of US local governments and state governments, aren't used to working with civil society because they'd never had to. American government has always worked enough, but we're going to see COVID break that and break those processes locally. And then each jurisdiction is going to have to figure out how they're going to solve that problem. So, for me, I think we've always had the motto within impl. project to be humble and be curious,

because I think that it's in that humility and curiosity that you learn your own weaknesses, you learn your strengths and you become more self aware of where you can plug in.

Justin Richmond:

And I think that's where we all come together. We all have to look at what we have to offer in this post-COVID environment and offer what we can and not do so with the idea that we got to get something out of it. I get a lot of questions for why I started a consulting business and run it like an NGO and don't have shares, don't have stocks and just really do it because I love this stuff. But that reason is because I think a lot of people are starting to get back to being neighborly and friendly and kind and generous because we have to, we don't have the luxury of being unkind anymore because we're all going through significant traumas in our own lives. And I hope this does lead to a little bit more, just generosity between all of us and some unity.

Justin Richmond:

But man, I'm not exactly seeing that right now. I think people are really too scared for that. And the data shows that, data shows significant, just doubt and uncertainty. And that's never existed in our lifetimes in America and it does put a lot of the pressure on local jurisdictions to get this right, because there is a high chance, in some areas, that this will result in violence. So these are tough times.

Chitra Ragavan:

Looking back on your life, what would you say to that young soldier sitting in Camp Bautista that morning of September 29, 2009, watching the helicopters whipping up dust as they went off to go kill those militants?

Justin Richmond:

Yeah. You know what, I would probably treat him like one of my own young soldiers and just look at him and just tell him like, "The storm that's coming, it's going to last a long damn time. And take your breaths when you get them, take a knee when you got to and prepare yourself for the long haul, because what's coming is tough." And I think my experience, in many ways, matches the national experience, the idealism of the post 9/11 world in which we have the mandate to go into other countries and to eliminate threats and then rebuild them in our own image, but then end up getting distracted by other foreign policy priorities. The idealism, and then being met with just the inability or a lack of desire to follow through.

Justin Richmond:

And it's interesting because I'm starting to read the narratives that are coming out about the main powers that are going to emerge from this crisis. And one of the main narratives that's really hitting home to me, that I've seen particularly coming out of the subcontinent, is that China won World War III without firing a bullet. They won it with their pandemic response and they're providing aid, while we are demanding aid and stealing aid from different states. And that these points are not lost on our allies and

adversaries throughout the world. The look in that America was more paper than tiger. That was a great line that came out of an article in Politico this week, on how the world is viewing the US's horrible response to COVID. And I don't know if it's quite to the magnitude of losing World War III without firing a shot, but it's bad. It's bad and it's way worse than Americans are really taking it. I mean, they're going to emerge from this and the American empire is in decline and there won't be any saving it this time, I don't think.

Chitra Ragavan:

Justin, thank you so much for taking the time to join me for this very amazing and insightful conversation.

Justin Richmond:

Yeah. I don't mean to be a Debbie downer, I think the Brits still doing really well despite having loss of their empire. So there is hope after hegemony. But yeah, I think that's where we're at right now. And I think it's good for us to take this time to take a nice deep breath. I really appreciate talking to you and highlighting so many good people. I love the podcast you had with James, so that's great.

Chitra Ragavan:

Thanks so much. Justin Richmond is founder and executive director of impl. project, a scrappy little nonprofit with a global vision and mission to use data to drive community outcomes. Richmond is an alumnus of Duke University, five wars, USAID and Silicon Valley, where he served as a forward deployed engineer and was my colleague at Palantir technologies. This is, When it Mattered, I'm Chitra Ragavan

Chitra Ragavan:

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