Modern Challenges to Intelligence: How Can the CIA Keep Up?

Michael Morell served both as Deputy Director and twice Acting Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He joined the CIA as an economic analyst and climbed to senior leadership positions, including the Director of the CIA's Office of Asian Pacific and Latin American Analysis, the Director of Intelligence who functions as the Agency's chief analyst, and the Associate Deputy Director, CIA's lead administrator. He also served as the daily intelligence briefer to President George W. Bush, as DCI George Tenet's Executive Assistant, and as the head of analysis at the Intelligence Community's National Counterterrorism Center. Morell obtained his Bachelor's degree from the University of Akron and his Master's degree from Georgetown University. He retired from CIA in 2013.

Though your two stints as acting director of the CIA were only about a year apart, they were at times of very different challenges to the American intelligence community. How did your first tenure differ from your second, and did active challenges make your second tenure more difficult than the first one?

They were different in a couple of ways. One was that the first time I knew exactly how long it was going to last because the president quickly made the decision that Dave Petraeus would be the next director, and it was clear he was going to sail through confirmation, so I knew when my starting day was and my ending day would be. The second time around, the timing was much more open; there wasn't a clear successor and the president went through a process of identifying one, so it was much more open-ended. In fact, the second stint lasted much longer than the first one—four months compared to two.

Another way they were different was that the first time around there wasn't anything that popped up in the world that required a new approach or a change in direction for the organization. But the second time around, we were in the midst of the beginning of the Syrian civil war, so the president was in the midst of putting together a policy with regard to that war, so I found myself leading the agency at a time when we were trying to provide as much intelligence and support to the president as possible on a critically important emerging issue.

Having served at senior levels for both the Obama and Bush administrations, could you compare both of their leadership styles and perhaps how they grew throughout the presidency?

A comparison is very hard to do, but I do think what struck me about both of them was their reliance on intelligence. One of the things I talk about a lot is the growing importance of intelligence. I don't think that the number of national security issues facing the United States has ever been greater, and many of those issues are first and foremost intelligence issues. Whether you're talking about terrorism, proliferation, drug trafficking, organized crime, human trafficking, or a host of other issues, a senior policymaker really needs first-rate intelligence to understand the issue, to make

Conducted by Freya Jamison and Kevin Zhang
Transcribed by Jessica Sun and Stephanie Her

policy on it, and often times to carry out that policy. And because of the growing importance of intelligence, both administrations and both presidents were heavily reliant on intelligence and they really wanted to know what the intelligence community knew about and thought about an issue before they made a decision on what to do about it. That really characterized both of them.

You played a very central role in the search for Bin Laden, and you said in the past that the search was a decade-long effort. How did you manage to make decisions throughout the process with only piecemeal or sometimes incorrect information, and how did you make the statistical calculations of when you had enough information to make a move?

The hunt for Osama Bin Laden was a priority from the day he slipped away from U.S. forces at the end of 2001, and the CIA followed every lead as far as we could follow them. There were literally hundreds of leads over that ten- or eleven-year period and we followed each lead as far as we could, until it hit a dead end. We had a very systematic approach for identifying leads. One of the approaches was to focus on the couriers, those individuals who carried handwritten communications between al Qaeda's leaders, and that's the approach that hit pay dirt at the end of the day. We identified the courier who would end up taking us to Bin Laden in 2002 when a handful of detainees told us about him. It took us a number of years to identify his true name, and a number of additional years to identify his general location, and even longer to follow him to where he actually lived. So you follow all these leads, and this one—this particular lead—just never ended. It just kept going and going, all the way to a residential compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Now I will say, as an answer to the second part of your question, that CIA's judgment that Bin Laden was hiding in the Abbottabad compound was a circumstantial one. There was no direct evidence that he was there. It was just circumstantial, and we made that very clear to the president. We told him it was a powerful circumstantial case, but still circumstantial. The president ultimately had to make a tough decision to put US soldiers at risk based on a circumstantial case.

You talked about how we've spent many years trying to find the courier by looking at the communications of the terrorist network, as well as the proliferation of cellular phones in a lot of third-world countries. Would you say that technology has made terrorists easier or harder to find?

Technology is an advantage for the adversary and for us. It's a constant game of them using new technologies to their advantage and us using new technologies to collect intelligence. I think of it as just a reality that you have to deal with. Technology creates both challenges and opportunities for the Intelligence Community. We hire really smart people to be able to figure out what the bad guys are doing with technology and how we can use it to our advantage.

We've also seen this recently with ISIS being so active on social media. Do you think that is a hindrance or a help to them?

I think it's a huge help to them. It's the way they get their message and their narrative out and they're very effective at doing that. I think it's been one of the reasons why so many foreign fighters have gone to Syria to fight with them. They're very good at social media and they're the best I've ever seen at getting a tailored message out in a very sophisticated way to audiences they want to reach.

How do you combat that as someone who doesn't want this message to get out there, other than simply shutting down these networks?

Does the United States have the ability to shut down these websites? I'm not getting into that, but I'm going to say that doing so might only keep their message off the net for a day or two. So, it is off of one website, but it'll pop back up someplace else. So, there's not a lot of benefit in following that route because it would become a game of whack-a-mole. To win at this part of the fight against extremists you really have to challenge their narrative at the end of the day. You have to have a narrative that is just as persuasive as theirs, and that's something we can't just do on our own; we need other countries and Muslim clerics to take ownership of part of that narrative. That's how you have to combat it: you need to take on their narrative and show why their narrative doesn't make any sense at the end of the day.

On a different note, in the wake of the Snowden and WikiLeaks scandals, and considering that over a million Americans have top-secret clearance, what are your thoughts on the fact that some have said that America is currently over-classifying and then giving too many people security clearances to that over-classified information?

In my time at CIA I didn't see a lot of information that was over-classified. I think most things are appropriately classified. Could someone find a document here, a document there, that is not classified properly? Absolutely; it's a bureaucracy. But, in general, no, things are not overly classified. With regard to how many people have security clearances, the United States has a need to protect its national security and you need people to do that, so you give security clearances to the number of people that you need to do the job. At the CIA, I felt I didn't have enough people, so I would have actually given more security clearances to people if I could have.

I think there is an issue with regard to security clearances: just because you have them doesn't mean you get to know everything. Inside the CIA, we have a concept called "need to know." That means just because you have a security clearance, you still have no business knowing what I'm doing unless you need the information to do your job. Because the lack of sharing within the government was an issue related to 9/11, after that event there was a significant pendulum swing towards sharing everything with anybody who has a security clearance, and the pendulum swung too far; at some agencies, if you were an analyst, you had access not only to what you were working on, but to almost everything else as well. In my view, the pendulum swung to far and now needs to swing back. There are issues, like terrorism, where you really need to share everything, because it's all about connecting the dots. But there are oth-

er specific issues where you don't really need to share, because they're so narrow and so compartmented. We really need to move back to a case-by-case situation, in which you look at an issue and say, "How much sharing does we need to here and who's going to get to see this? On this issue, there's going to be a lot of sharing and on that issue, there's not." That's what needs to happen. It's not about the number of people who have clearances or about over-classification, it's about who has access to what.

Has the change in political climate, from perhaps the early 2000s to now, changed the way Congress deals with the CIA or the way CIA deals with Congress?

Yes. I'd say in two related ways. First, historically, in the United States, politics ended at the nation's shores. There was an understanding in both parties that making national security decisions was hard, and that the last thing you needed was politics to make it even harder. There was also an understanding that for U.S. foreign policy and national security policy to be effective, we needed to be united at home. So, there was a tacit agreement that politics didn't belong in foreign policy and national security policy. All that has just gone out the window. Politics now invades everything, including national security and foreign policy, including CIA's operations, and I don't think that's healthy for CIA or for the nation.

The second way is that people in a political use what CIA says on issues as weapons against each other, and the CIA often finds itself in the middle. "Well you said this," but "the CIA said that." We call it becoming the "meat in the sandwich," and it's not a fun place to be. I don't think that's healthy for the organization or for the country either.

Considering the incredible pace of world events—just this summer, we've seen conflict in Ukraine, the rise of ISIS, the conflict in Gaza, even the Ebola outbreak—how does the CIA stay ahead of the curve in predicting these, or how much of your role is reactive in trying to gather as much information as quickly as possible once something has arisen?

One of the ways to think about what the agency does is that it has two responsibilities: one is to be able to anticipate important discontinuities and developments before they happen so that the United States can be prepared for those. The second is to be able to answer all the questions that a policymaker might have about an event once it happens, so that we can fully inform decision-makers as they're trying to make policy regarding it.

We do the latter better than the former because anticipating discontinuities is hard. I don't think I had to anticipate events until I went to work with the agency. One of the ways to try to anticipate a discontinuity is by identifying trends and the key factors behind them. That's something that's really important to help policymakers think about, because maybe they can influence the factors and then influence the outcome. The Arab spring is an example of a discontinuity, and we did a pretty good job over the years of doing analyses that showed there were real pressures in these countries—economic and social pressures—building for political change. We didn't tell policy-

makers that the top was definitely going to blow off or when it might blow, but we did tell them that pressures were building.

What's one of the more underrated stories going on right now or developing in the world that the media is not quite focused on but will have a huge impact?

I think there are two. One is the fight going on in Libya between Islamic extremists and moderates over who is going to rule that country. That outcome is of significant importance to the United States, but we are all focused on ISIS. I don't remember the last time I saw a news report about what's going on in Libya.
The other one is what's happening in Hong Kong at the moment. It's of great significance and the media is not covering it to the degree, I think, that's reflective of its importance. This is a real challenge to the Communist government and it's going to be very interesting to see how this plays out.

Something that characterized the Arab Springs was the idea of "hashtag protests," or the ability to leverage the media to gain popular support. Do you think that might become a tool for future uprisings in places like Asia?

Yes, and it also becomes a tool for anticipating events and for seeing them before they happen. To the extent that we're watching social media in the intelligence community, we can anticipate those events. But absolutely, people use technology and they try to get the most out of the technology for what they want to achieve. If you're organizing a protest, you're going to do what you can to get as many people to attend as possible.

Back in 2003, in Iraq, we saw a gap between the depth and breadth required of human intelligence. Major General Martin Dempsey said that the army was "either fighting for intelligence or fighting based on intelligence." Have we resolved that gap and are we better at collecting the human intelligence and having the area knowledge and language skills that we need now, or is that still a deficiency?

Our success in collecting intelligence, by whatever means, depends on what part of the globe you're talking about. The places we have access to, like where we have an embassy, will be better than those places where we don't have that access. Iraq, prior to the Iraq War, was a place we didn't have access. We did not have an embassy in Baghdad, and so we were almost starting from scratch in terms of rebuilding our understanding of the country from an intelligence perspective at the beginning of the war. I think that's what he was referring to, but it's just a reality of the world, and the way that the world is, and how you have to operate.

Speaking of Iraq, I think it was David Petraeus who asked, "How does this end?" at the beginning of the Iraq war. As we begin airstrikes against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, we want to ask that question again, to you. How does this end?

The answer is, "I don't know." I'm not sitting at the policy table in Washington. I don't know to what extent they've talked about the end game. But it is a very im-

portant question whenever you go into any sort of operation, whether it be a military or an intelligence operation. My own view of the ISIS strategy is that the Iraqi side of it is pretty solid; the Syrian side of it is pretty weak. I can see significant success over the next year against ISIS in Iraq, but I don't see that same success in Syria for many reasons. So, I don't know how it ends. The goal is to degrade ISIS to the point where we don't have to worry about it as a threat to either us or to the region. Not just as a terrorist threat, but as a threat to the stability of the Middle East. Someone is going to have to make a decision about whether we've met that objective and sometimes it's hard to do that. Sometimes, inertia kicks in and people just want to keep going and it's hard to see that you've met your objective. So, I think, as a policymaker, it's important to asking consistently ask yourself "how am I doing against my objective?" and "have I met my objective?" It's really important to keep your eye on that.

Have you ever felt frustrated, as an advisor, when your policy suggestions haven't been able to be seen through by the policy makers in Washington?

A really important point to make is that intelligence agencies and officers don't recommend policy. There's a very sharp red line in the US government between intelligence and policy. My job, as an intelligence officer, was to put the facts on the table and share how we think about those facts. Then it is up to the policymakers to decide what to do. Intelligence officers don't make policy recommendations. We don't say, "based on all of this, we think you should do X, Y, or Z." We're part of the intelligence discussion—every policy meeting at the White House starts with an intelligence briefing. Then people ask questions to the intelligence guys, and then the focus turns to the policy discussion. Your role at that point, as an intelligence officer, is to make sure that the policy discussion doesn't get away from reality. Your job is to insert reality back into the policy discussion, "Remember A, B, and C, right? It's not X, Y, and Z—it's A, B, and C." I've never recommended policy as part of my job. I've had presidents ask me, "What do you think I should do?" Then you take yourself out of the role of being an intelligence officer and say, "I'm not in the policy business, but here's my personal opinion." The CIA doesn't have an official policy view on any issue and analysts don't have policy recommendations that they're pushing. We stay away from policy because we want intelligence to not only be objective, but to be perceived as objective. If we came to the table and said, "Here's what we think you should do, Mr. President," everyone around the table would have less confidence in our intelligence judgment because they would think that we're presenting it in a way to support our policy view.

Considering the high level of politicization of issues today and the amount of media coverage, is it ever the case that the President's views about certain issues actually ends up coloring the way that analysts will create reports in the future?

No, I don't think so. In fact, analysts pride themselves on telling policy makers when they're wrong, sometimes in a bad way, metaphorically poking their finger in

the eye of a policy maker. That's not the way to do it; you have to tell the policy maker when they're thinking about the intelligence in the incorrect way, but you need to do it in a way that is effective.

Analysts are not easily influenced: the director of the CIA can't tell analysts the way to think about a situation because analysts come to their own conclusions. I could ask them lots of questions; "Have you thought about this? And about that?" but at the end of the day, it's their judgment and I'm going to carry that judgment to the White House. There are times when I would say I have a different view, based on my own experience, but I would always start with, "here is what my analysts think" and they deserve that. We tell analysts in their training that no one is going to tell them how to think about an issue, we tell them nobody should be trying to force them to think about something in a certain way. We tell them to raise their hand and scream if they think anyone is trying to do that.