

# Transcript

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So we've been talking a lot about a lot with reporters today and how they approach the work of covering the Pentagon.

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and how they build and establish relationships.

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Uh we've talked about a little bit of that with uh Louie this morning and with Helene um this afternoon.

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Um and now we're gonna talk about the other side.

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Um because as journalists the best um that we can expect are relationships that are based on respect and mutual trust.

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And uh for years uh George Little uh was the face of the two most demanding assignments in in Washington I think.

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Even though I come from a Justice Department perspective, I was always uh dumbfounded by the folks who who covered the Pentagon and the CIA.

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But George was the face of both of those institutions. Um ultimately serving three defense secretaries.

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Um his terms coincided with the deadly raid on Osama bin Laden's Pakistani hideout and the wind down of the long war in Iraq.

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Um George's respect for for the mission has always resonated with me. Um he was here uh for the 2024 class and

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and I I thought that uh his his message was uh particularly relevant now and and he was kind enough to accept an invitation to return.

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And and one of the things I I wanted to repeat from his last appearance here um was quoting from his uh departure um from government um several years ago. I won't say how many years ago.

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In a few minutes. But he but he quoted uh Thomas Jefferson uh with this. Um the only security of all is in a free press.

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The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to.

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It is necessary to keep the waters pure. And I think you know we can't be reminded enough of of that message and it was good to come from from somebody who deals with with reporters every day as George did.

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So please welcome George Little. Thank you all. Thank you very much Kevin. I should say at the outset that you are uh led here by one of the most respected journalists uh in a very long time.

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Kevin uh has had a storied career and uh is a terrific mentor and leader in the profession and uh it's very hard to say no to an invitation from him. So I'm really honored to be here with with you Kevin and with all of you.

02:02

All right, sounds good. Uh I'm happy to uh I have a son in college so I need the help. Uh it's great to be here uh and uh we can really take this uh in any direction you all would like to go.

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I'm happy to kind of open up with a little bit about my background. I won't dwell on that too much. Talk a little bit about my perspective on how government spokespeople like I was uh engage with uh interact with the press.

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Give you my perspective on what right looks like uh in those relationships and answer any questions you have uh about uh life in Washington and engaging with the government.

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There's obviously a lot to talk about these days. I know you were at my former professional home the Pentagon earlier today.

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I hope that was an interesting uh visit. Lots of change going on there uh at the moment and uh happy to give you my perspective on what's happening in that building or or elsewhere.

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Does that sound like a good uh Sounds like a way to go. Okay, fantastic, good. By the way, I only have uh two hours of remarks, so uh and then we'll open it up to questions and then you can get to the bar uh where I hope you will be enjoying one another's company very soon.

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Now. In all seriousness, let me just briefly kind of describe my background. I grew up in this area in Loudoun County.

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Uh I'm really a creature of Washington. I went to the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. Thus my affinity for Thomas Jefferson.

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Uh then uh ended up going to UVA, Thomas Jefferson again, and then went to Georgetown for my PhD. I really thought I was gonna live the good life as a leafy uh college professor on a leafy college campus uh somewhere.

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And uh ended up not doing that. Thought it was a little bit too solitary an existence for me and I went to work for IBM and then Booz Allen doing corporate strategy and national security consulting for several years.

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in place. Uh, and whether it goes right or wrong, we need to be prepared for uh success or failure.

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And we need to do this in a way that's going to protect the equities of the CIA, the administration, the president uh at the time.

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We're going to have to justify this. And we're going to have to tell this story whether it goes right or goes wrong.

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And so we need a communications plan.

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Uh, this will make headlines. And he said, you got it. Okay, go for it, George.

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The CIA lawyers uh said, well you can't really plan a public affairs uh communications, you know, thing, strategy for a covert operation technically, but I said, come on, you know. So anyway, got clearance from them and

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I along with a very small group of people, one to start with one other person and then one or two other people at the end built uh a communications plan for the bin Laden operation.

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33 pages for failure. Success meaning we capture or kill bin Laden.

21:04

It is bin Laden number one. You know, remember it was a circumstantial case up until the very end.

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And failure meaning the operation went wrong. We didn't reach the compound, helicopters or airplanes or however we were going to execute the mission wasn't going to where they were to crash and one kind of did uh on the compound that night.

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Uh, or it wasn't him. It was another tall guy walking around the compound that

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and we misidentified him, you know. So they were saying, well what about this, this, this? I said I can't plan for every possible failure scenario, but

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you know, failure is failure at the end of the day. Uh, it's not him. Luckily we never got to that point.

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But for both scenarios, success and failure, we uh prepared what would become the un- uh classified intelligence case, you know, what led us to believe that this was bin Laden uh in an al-Qaeda compound.

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A draft uh statement uh by the president uh that would be issued uh Q&As and so forth uh that could be used as background material and briefings for

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the press and uh internal messages to the workforce and so forth and so on. Kind of your classic uh communications package.

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We were closely with the operators, attended meetings so that we knew what the latest and greatest intelligence was,

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uh so that we were staying up to speed on it uh because this was a fast-moving train. And uh, you know, we worked closely with elements of the US military as well who were deployed in a very secret room at CIA headquarters to make sure that we had that aspect of things right too because this was truly a joint operation.

22:32

It was a Title 50 operation, so it was technically by law commanded if you will by my boss, the director. But this is really executed by brave men and women uh on the ground who led an incredibly

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uh precise mission uh in Pakistan launched from what within our bases in Afghanistan. So it took us several weeks, you know, it was really never done because we were still dusting it off uh up until the very last moment.

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But uh, you know, that consumed a number of weeks. Um, had to explain to my wife why I was

23:06

not at home as much as I should have. So we won't talk about the state of my marriage at that time, but we were still married and having a good relationship. But uh, it was uh, you know, a pretty pretty tense period.

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And then of course as we got closer, uh there were some interesting things that happened. We had we were pretty sure this was going to happen.

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Uh, we get closer and closer, three days before the planned day of the raid, my boss Leon Panetta is nominated to become Secretary of Defense.

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And my first reaction was, they're nominating you three days before this raid which could go right or it could go really wrong.

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And you know that you what we all might be resigning in a few days. Luckily that never happened. He got confirmed, the raid went well,

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but that added uh some complexity and stress to an already challenging time. And then

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the weekend before the raid, uh there were very few people read in outside the CIA and a very small group of people in the military uh and in the White House.

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I think seven or eight people until the very last weekend were were read in at the White House and that includes the president and vice president, national security advisor and a few others.

24:24

So I went down uh to uh on Saturday morning uh before the raid which happened on a Sunday night to uh brief the uh Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes and we met um on Saturday morning.

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I drove myself with a a locked bag with classified information. Basically everything that bin Laden raid was in that bag. And I parked on G Street near the White House, walked over to the Secret Service booth uh in Lafayette Square.

24:45

Went up to say I'm George Little from CIA and here's my numbers and whatever. Sorry sir, you're not in the system.

24:50

Said, are you freaking kidding me? I really have important information here. I need to go. It took him 45 minutes to clear me.

25:02

I'm pretty unflappable generally in situations like that, but I'm standing there in Lafayette Park with everything to do with the bin Laden raid clutched here concerned that someone would mug me, you know, and that I would be the reason and the sole reason why bin Laden would take another 10 years to find.

25:13

But uh, I ended up getting cleared through and uh now you'll know why I have a lot of gray hair and a lot less of it. Um, it was really because of that Saturday. Anyway, uh, you know, went through that day.

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Uh, maybe you'll recall that that night was the White House Correspondents' Dinner. And my boss and I were being um hosted by the Wall Street Journal.

25:44

You know, and I told various national security leaders that they had to go, you know, that even they couldn't stay away. They had to, you know, pretend like this was all business as usual and so forth.

25:59

I did have one very national senior official uh come to me and say, George, I'm just too tired. I don't want to go.

26:05

Then I said, you are going to get your posterior, I used a different word to uh the uh to the Hilton tonight where it's typically held.

26:15

And you're going to make it through at least, you know, the main course and then and then you can leave at at dessert, but you you've got to go. You don't want people suspecting something.

26:22

Uh, and my boss was there and of course I was really concerned that someone would spill the beans that night because we were all pretty tired and stressed out and things were about to happen.

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Anyway, we got through that and President Obama at the time, you know, was speaking as many presidents do at these at this dinner, not always the current one.

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And uh Seth Meyers who was the uh comedian that night made a lot of jokes about bin Laden. And so we were all politely laughing there trying to get through that and uh luckily we did.

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Uh, the next morning, you know, went back to the agency where I stayed throughout the day. And

27:01

around 1:15 I walked into the director's office with or conference room and he was there and it was turning into a makeshift kind of operation center with video conferences to Afghanistan and communications to the White House and so forth and so on.

27:18

And he's kind of bantering with Bill McRaven who was uh this commander Special Operations Command and had led the led the raid, military side of the raid. They were talking rather casually actually uh back and forth to one another.

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Remember Bill was drinking a huge Diet Coke. Um, and suddenly Panetta, my boss, uh just turns really formal.

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I'm standing there going, well I don't know what the hell's happening. And he just takes out some words uh on a piece of, you know, and he says on uh upon the orders of the President United States, Bill, I direct you to begin this operation.

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So I said to my staff member who was with me, this is getting real. Let's take down the time here.

28:00

I think it's important. And then a number of us uh walked into that uh room a little later, you know, we monitored the operation that was unfolding.

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Um, it was fairly tense as you would imagine but quiet. And uh that was the first time really I learned the power of Twitter to be honest with you because people were live tweeting from rooftops during the raid.

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And uh that was uh something new for me uh at the time and kind of surprised us. I think we expected it to be a less densely populated area than it really really was. So you heard that kind of input from people around the room.

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We were tracking what was happening on screens. Uh, we were communicating a little bit with the White House uh along the way. And uh at one point we heard uh Geronimo EKIA.

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And we all turned to each other. We said, I don't know what Geronimo EKIA is. And we heard a little bit later Geronimo KIA. And Geronimo I guess was the military term for or codename for bin Laden and KIA means killed in action.

28:57

So we knew at that point that um that that he had been he had been uh he'd been killed in the raid. And then

29:09

we really didn't um feel um like this was over until uh our aircraft uh returned to Afghanistan. So it wasn't really until about 90 minutes later that we felt like, okay, we can breathe a sigh of relief.

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And we tracked that uh very closely, you know, hoping that everyone would get out safely and and they did. I can't tell you how the milit how how superior the military operators were.

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They just did an incredible job including uh even though they took out the al-Qaeda members uh of the group on the at the compound, the women and children were all whisked away uh safely and unharmed uh and that's great credit to them.

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In any case, there was no high-fiving. It was really more in quiet hugs around, you know, a sense of accomplishment, maybe a little bit of relief that the mission had, you know, actually happened.

29:51

It was uh successful. Then I went down to the White House that night uh and everyone was trying to figure out how to it's not just about the press, right? I mean it's important to get me wrong you all are important people,

30:02

but it's also about your allies and partners and how to inform them and the stakes were high here especially with Pakistan because we had undertaken a unilateral operation on their soil without their knowledge.

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And so that was the first call that the then uh chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff made uh to his counterpart and that series of communications began.

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People started communicating with Congress. Once that started happening, I knew that this thing was about to blow open. There was a lot of speculation that night on television.

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Is this Gaddafi? Is it something else? Why is the president, you know, coming out to speak? In fact the president didn't want to speak that night. He wanted to wait until Monday morning because it was Sunday night.

30:51

And I said, this thing ain't going to hold. We need to go tonight. This is big news uh and you know, people know that uh we've taken bin Laden out. So that's why

31:01

he went out so late, but that was just how the timing uh worked out. And then uh after he did his speech, we did some background briefings for reporters at the White House and then we um went back to the agency.

31:11

And as we were leaving and this was not for us because there was a wall construction wall at the White House at the time, but the crowd had started to gather uh out front.

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And they were chanting CIA, CIA, CIA. And I turned to my boss and I said, sir, I don't know whether to be happy or to run.

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Because when large crowds are chanting CIA, that's not usually a good thing. The pitchforks are coming anyway. But uh, you know, there were a lot of lessons learned actually from from that.

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I think that uh, you know, while the the operation obviously was was a mission success, uh I think that we could have done a

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um amount of information that went out, confirmed information that went out. Um, I mean it was a feeding frenzy as you would expect and there were lots of people speaking around the Beltway who probably didn't have

32:01

uh the information at hand to be speaking as authoritatively authoritatively as they should have. But uh, you know, so that was a little bit hard to to navigate. Um, but you know, one of our main concerns was to

32:14

establish the um legitimacy of the operation for the American people. I mean that wasn't necessarily hard to do, but we had to to convince them that this was right and done legally and so forth.

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Number two, we had to kind of convince the enemy that it was bin Laden. You know, and not allow them to spend some story that we had not actually gotten them. So we had to think about that aspect of things.

32:39

And we also had to think about um, you know, not wrecking our relationships with reporters by sharing information that was going to turn out to be bogus. Uh, and there were some bits and pieces out there that not from me, but from others that turned out to be bogus and that you know, shouldn't have gotten out there.

32:57

I think that in retrospect we probably should have spent more time as a government confirming certain details with the team on the ground in Abbottabad just to make sure that we had the sequence of operations correct.

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And I mean there were, you know, crazy stories about night vision goggles and body cameras and you know, seeing bin Laden up close and that never happened and so there was a lot of bogus out there that I think could have been handled a little bit differently.

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One of the big debates post-raid was uh whether or not to share the uh photos of bin Laden. Um, those the death photos.

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And frankly, uh I was part of a group of people said I think we probably should, you know, this will serve as clear evidence that it was bin Laden. There will be no doubt in most people's minds.

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And this will disabuse anybody of the notion that he's still walking around. Um, admittedly fairly gory photos. But still, you know, identifiable as bin Laden. And uh

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President and other senior advisors I think ultimately made the right call uh at the end of the day. They said no, we don't want that to get out there. We don't want to look like we're, you know, really touting this uh even though there is some benefit maybe in

34:07

confirming his identity through this uh visual proof. Uh, and so I said, well are there other ways that we can do this, you know, without releasing the photo. And it turns out that we actually were able to locate a lot of really helpful

34:20

information at the compound itself. Collected a lot of material there that demonstrated that this was really bin Laden in an al-Qaeda compound. So a week after the raid or so, um brief reporters of the Pentagon briefing room on background and showed the visuals that maybe you remember, maybe you don't, but they were

34:37

really outtakes of bin Laden watching videos of bin Laden or practicing for video messages and so forth. So once people saw

the those images and and those videos then it was pretty clear to most people. So we didn't have to end up releasing the photos, death photos anyway uh at the end of the day.

34:57

Let me let me pause there. How close um was it uh in terms of reporters' knowledge or whatever knowledge they had Yeah. uh to uh undermine the the uh uh the operation. I mean was it was it ever a close call uh and how did you deal with that?

35:12

So, um I was convinced that as the circle grew in Washington, the people who knew about this raid that uh, you know, there might be a call from one of you saying uh, you know, I've heard something big is going to happen in Pakistan.

35:44

And I heard that it's a big guy. Uh, and this is going to be a important news story. Um, I really did worry about that up until the very end. Um, I remember talking actually the day up with people on my staff about how we would handle this uh if something like that happened.

35:51

I was also pretty confident that if it were, you know, a New York Times reporter or, you know, someone I was engaged with on a regular basis that we could probably make a deal frankly. I mean I think that any outlet that had uh printed information at that time that would have um timed out the raid before it happened.

36:07

I think that would not have been favorably viewed by the American people and I'm I was pretty sure that we could reach an agreement. Now I would have had to make a deal and promise exclusives and so forth and so on and probably sit the reporter down with the operators or with the intelligence uh officers who I worked with in in CIA to to give them some background and context uh on the raid.

36:35

But I was pretty sure that responsible journalists would not um and we actually never got close. Um, in fact, I work now with a former Wall Street Journal reporter named Shavon Gorman.

36:53

She was my host uh with Panetta that night and uh she to this day is still really angry with me for not having given her a little bit of a tip that something was going to happen the next day.

37:14

Hi there. So I'm Shreya with PBS NewsHour. I wanted to ask a little bit about Say hi to Lisa. I will do. She and I went to high school together. Don't tell anyone.

37:20

No. That's great. Uh definitely will. Um, I wanted to talk a little bit about um obviously this new administration and particularly throughout the confirmation hearings, um particularly with Pentagon execs, we had a lot of questions about the recruitment efforts

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of the military and uh how that something that he is both concerned and focused on um as are a number of members of Congress. And I kind of want to ask you about how the executive orders and attitudes now within the Department of Defense could hamper or help that recruitment effort and if you think that this current Secretary of Defense and what's happening from the White House is actually going to impede that moving forward.

37:46

Yeah. That's a great that's a great question. I am um look, I think we all my my perspective is is the following. Uh, we all as Americans in this country want a fighting force in a military that represents us.

37:59

Yes, they can absolutely fight and win, but that also uh creates opportunity for all Americans. And I actually believe that both sides of the aisle, including the Trump administration are

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not opposed to diversity and inclusion. I think it's the E where a lot of the disagreement is. Now, DEI programs and how structurally the program the government is set up to implement some of these ideals and so forth.

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We can have a discussion about that, but I actually think intellectually uh even though it hasn't necessarily played out politically because there have been divides, I think we're closer than we may think in some ways.

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I'm not necessarily justifying what's happened at at DOD. We were the administration that um open combat roles to to women. Uh, and I think that's remains an important uh objective and I think we should continue to do that.

38:40

Um, on recruitment uh which is already a little bit tough. You know, it was uh not going the right way for DOD prior to this administration. I think that there will be some Americans, some groups that think maybe this is not for me.

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And I'm not sure that's healthy. We want to have people involved in various aspects of the military or around the military mission. It's not all about fighting and spider crawling, you know, and training exercises.

39:00

So I'm concerned that there will be a um suppressive effect on recruitment efforts. I think we can have diversity. I think we can have equity. I think we can have inclusion and I think we can have war fighting uh American and locality to use the current term of choice.

39:10

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40:00

uh, all at once. It's not in either war.

40:06

Hi, thanks for doing this. Audrey Decker with Defense One. Um, Oh, yes.

40:12

I remember when Defense One was uh was founded. Yes, right, Kevin. Kevin? I know Kevin very well, do you? Yes. 2013 as I recall? Yeah.

40:24

Um, I'm curious as a spokesperson whether, you know, at DoD or CIA, how um if the DoD or CIA did something that you personally just didn't agree with. Yeah. Um, how you kind of put that aside, I guess, to, you know, outwardly at least defend or justify that and kind of like how you wrestle with that personally.

40:53

Yeah, no, that's a great question, Audrey. I think the uh the short answer is I was never uh forced uh to say something that I didn't really want to. You know, I I was never challenged morally with one one set of exceptions I will say.

41:05

Uh, I wasn't necessarily a big fan of uh a lot of enhance enhanced interrog the enhanced interrogation program. Uh, do I think waterboarding is the right way to go? Uh, probably not. But what I was what I cared about at CIA was CIA officers who were instructed that this program was safe, lawful, and effective

41:28

by policymakers. And by others uh and had been briefed to Congress. So this wasn't the CIA doing some kind of rogue thing

out there. Uh, and a lot of these officers came under a real microscope uh and you know, suffered um a great deal doing what they thought they had approval and legal authority to do. So for me,

41:51

in those instances where I might have had a slight disagreement with with policy and when you're in intelligence community you don't really you're not a policymaking agency, you're an intelligence agency.

42:02

Uh, I think uh I really thought about my colleagues uh and how they were grappling with us uh and how they were facing scrutiny for something that uh both the Article One and Two branches of government uh knew about.

42:27

Hi, thank you for being here. My name's Hannah Deniso, I work at ABC News and I cover the White House.

42:33

Um, my question for you Nothing going on there. Yeah. This week has been a long year. Yeah.

42:38

Um, my question for you is um as a former spokesperson, I'm curious just your take and your thoughts on, you know, kind of kind of seizing the White House, curious if this falls through at the State Department or the Pentagon, you know, this talk about new media leading and podcasters and you know, social social media influencers into the briefing rooms, you know, I'm just curious your take on it and just how you view it, like this shift in the media landscape and just expanding.

43:03

Yeah, I mean, look, I think um my my my take is that uh you know, we have to shift with the times uh and frankly, I think it's okay for media to have access, whether that's the state or the Pentagon or the White House.

43:35

A lot's happened at the Pentagon recently, a lot in the headlines over the Pentagon briefing room and certain media outlets being switched out. I wouldn't have done that, but it is what it is and it is a government building and you know, there's not much the media can do frankly. I mean, tell me if I'm wrong, Audrey. But uh I know this is something the Pentagon Press Association is all over right now.

43:43

But uh where I think we are at fault in government is that there's a lot more space for media. We could open more space at the Pentagon, you know. I probably should have done that when I was there. Uh, but we didn't. And so I'm okay with new media coming in, responsible new media and so forth. There's always a bit of a chop line,

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but I think we need to also not exclude others because of physical space uh these days. So look, I don't necessarily disagree in principle with what the White House has done. Um, I do disagree uh you know, with how the Pentagon is handling it because in a building with 25,000 people, you can make room for a few more people.

44:22

Hi, thank you for being here. My name's Preena, I'm a reporter at the Washington Post. I've heard of it. Um, yeah, just a little news out there. Um, you talked about adversarial moments. So I was wondering as someone who's on the other side, like engaging with reporters, what you've seen as best practices from reporters that helps retain trust through those adversarial moments that you're talking about.

44:44

Yeah, so um look, I think uh look, we all make mistakes, you know, I wasn't always 100% right, you know, my heart was in the right place, but I didn't always get the information I was sharing, right? So I think A, um,

44:57

you know, it it's like in anything, right? Acknowledging uh when there's an issue, right? And not ignoring it, uh addressing it in a timely manner, just like you would address an issue with your family member or friends or roommates or what have you. Uh, these things unlike fine wine don't get better with age. You know, they tend to age like milk. So trying to nip it in the bud early, I think is really important. Uh, number one.

Number two, I actually found myself uh most angry. This wasn't very often, but when embargos were broken. That drives me absolutely bonkers. Uh, and I remember having a very heated discussion uh at the uh Intrepid Museum in New York at a dinner because we were traveling there and the press was there and one outlet, I won't name the outlet, uh broke an embargo and of course all the other reporters were lighting me up and they had every right to do so and I was upset. And so

45:58  
that really stings uh as a public affairs officer when the ground rules are broken, when embargos are broken because that tends to break trust. And then in response, it makes it worse if you say, well, it was my editors. You know, you own the story. It may have been an issue in New York or wherever, but it's your story. So I would just acknowledge that and and be and be human about it.

46:28  
Thanks for speaking with us. Of course. Um, my name's Sophie with the Christian Science Monitor. Um,

46:34  
so I I mean, I think this is probably increasingly true as news organizations are kind of like less staffed and news stories feel like they're growing in number. But uh in at the Monitor like we're smaller staff, but we try to cover a lot of ground. So often I'll find myself writing on a topic where I've I like don't have a regular byline. Right.

46:54  
Um, and I'm just wondering like as a spokesperson, what it what what what a reporter could show you when there's not someone who's like face you would see daily in the halls or whose byline you would necessarily see every day covering like arms deals or whatever. If they then come to you and it's like, hey, I'm a religion reporter, but I'm actually writing today about this like arms deal. Yeah. And like what can what could reporters show you to demonstrate like credibility if it's not like a beat-based credibility.

47:25  
Right. It's a great uh it's a great question. And increasingly um you know, one that a lot of reporters are do I mean a lot of reporters don't tend to cover just one building anymore, right? I mean, the Pentagon is different, the White House is is different, but uh and that's changed. You know, reporters used to cover a building, you were the DHS beat or you were, you know, I mean, DOJ has has a beat still, but um a lot of agencies and departments don't.

47:47  
So uh there are a couple of approaches there. Uh one is um to get others to vouch for you in media, right? Um, you know, your colleagues at CSM if they have um you know, where frankly others in the in the in the beat who's, you know, hey, you should get to know so and so. Uh, or former spokespeople who can vouch for you. I mean, that's not a requirement, but it can help.

48:12  
So I think it's um and it doesn't take long, right? Um, you know, if you get a little bit of validation, you know, from a third party, that could be helpful. I I would um and especially uh what I think what's been lost in last you know, 10 even more years is the is the handoff um that used to occur traditionally. If you were moving on from a beat, there used to be a time when you were mentored by the person on that beat and were kind of plugged into at least, you know, their their contacts, their their network. And so you were given a running start. Um, as you all know that doesn't happen so much anymore and often you're thrown into the water uh completely cold and uh but I I I think George is absolutely right. You have to find creative ways around that and even if and and mostly reaching out personally in person to to the people that you're trying to make contact with. Um, I just find the texting, email route just uh they I'm I'm so over that. Um, and and I think the pandemic created an atmosphere enabled that and that that atmosphere to sort of spread and become acceptable and uh and I think that has to be uh you know, unwound in in a lot of ways. But yeah.

49:51  
Hi, uh I'm Sibel. I cover the Pentagon for USA Today. Okay, alright, great. I'm in trouble today. Yeah. It's my lucky day.

49:57  
Um, so I wanted to ask you about kind of the legacy of like the war on terror. Um, and I feel like in the last few years we have seen this sort of like fragile situation in uh many of the countries where the US was involved just sort of unravel in very

disastrous ways. Um, and I would say, you know, tell me if I'm wrong, but I also feel like as well sort of the trust, public trust in the intel-

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ligence community is like at an all-time low. Um, and so I'm just wondering, you know, as somebody who kind of saw that from the inside and um was privy to some of the decisions that were made, it's like what do you think went wrong with that? What mistakes were were made?

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Yeah, it's a great uh it's a great question. Um,

50:51

so to your first point on uh on on the counterterrorism legacy of of the last 25 years or so. I think that uh

51:07

we learned about our own government and our own shortcomings uh at the time, right? Information sharing, how the government was constructed, firewalls inside the government and so forth and so on.

51:18

I think that uh we were shooting a little bit from the hip literally uh at the outset. We didn't know how to necessarily deal with this new threat that took us by surprise uh in New York and the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania on 9/11. So there was a lot of improvising, I think, uh at the outset. And that worked out pretty well frankly in Afghanistan. Uh, you know, we were able to get in there fairly quickly and so I mean at at the outset. Um,

51:47

you know, I think we did put Al-Qaeda on its back feet uh for a very long time. I will say there hasn't been a major foreign attack on US soil really in a long time. I mean, a terrorist attack. Yes, there have been moments in you know, uh there have been attacks, but uh massive 9/11 style attacks really haven't happened. Uh, so there has been some success

52:17

in going after counterterrorism targets, but you're absolutely right. Uh, you know, we have seen not just Al-Qaeda but ISIS and um I try to get people to talk about what what was then called the Nigerian Taliban, but turned out to be uh Boko Haram in Nigeria and in Mali and elsewhere. Uh, so there has been, you know, clearly a radicalized um terrorist movement that has cropped up over the last couple of decades. How much of that is is the United States responsible for? I think we probably did make some mistakes uh frankly.

52:49

Uh, in the way we uh articulated policy and executed it. Um, you know, could we have been a little bit more surgical in Afghanistan? Maybe. Let's have the conversation about Iraq as well, you know, was that the right war to fight and did that have a natural uh flow and consequence, you know, uh on radicalization and ISIS and so forth. We talked and then there's the Arab Spring uh and all of the fallout from that. So

53:21

I'm willing to concede that there were mistakes made. I think there were successes uh on the part of the US government too and protecting the homeland was number one and I think we get a fairly decent grade there, okay? I think there were also other forces that were in play uh the rise of social media, uh social movements uh that were well beyond the scope of US policy uh as well. Uh there were um issues within particular countries including in North Africa that I think contributed to the Arab Spring and some of its aftermath. So yes, I think US policy probably did, you know, have some role to play. Could we have made some decisions a little bit differently? Yes.

54:02

Uh, in the main, are we safer because of what the US government did post 9/11? I think the answer is also yes. And I think that's um a tribute to millions of people, you know, who have served in uniform and uh in civilian clothing in my former agency and and others in the intelligence community to uh to make happen. I do think that there is a crisis of institutional legitimacy over large, right? It's not just about

54:30

DoD and uh and CIA and others. Uh, I think that for whatever reason the American people have lost a lot of trust in

government. In fact, in 2015, I gave a talk at Georgetown that uh said I think people really don't want to go into public service anymore. It's just not the cool place to be. Uh, and that was deeply concerning to me, you know, whether it's Department of Labor or CIA or wherever. Um, we should want good people, smart people to go into government and we can talk about all the reasons why, you know, the pay gap between private sector and public sector and so forth and so on, but there is something that's an undercurrent across all institutions.

55:06

DoD and CIA are natural lightning rods, I think, just given what they do and what they're called upon. The easy problems don't come to the CIA. So I think there's going to be controversy that attaches and you're never going to bat a thousand. Um, it doesn't mean excuse the strikes, you know, uh and uh you know, do you think you have to put it in that context?

55:33

That was a wandering answer, but hopefully. Sorry.

55:36

Right back here. Hi, um my name is Katie Stanton, I'm a Capitol Hill reporter for Tax Notes, um which you may guess is a pretty small outlet. Um, so you a lot going on busy beat these days. Yes, yes, this year. Um, but I wanted to ask you were talking a lot about kind of the best practices and what makes like a good, you know, press person PIO, but as a small outlet, I definitely run into people who aren't like that, you know, uh they kind of see it as very transactional, you know, what is publishing or giving you a comment for your outlet going to serve, you know, for me on Capitol like my member or what have you. Um, and that can be, you know, pretty challenging. Sometimes I'm sending 10 emails across weeks and maybe getting one back. Um, so I guess from like a reporter standpoint knowing that, you know, I'm at a small outlet and I may not be able to offer the same amplification, like Right. how should I go about those relationships. Obviously, you talked about the interpersonal aspect, which, you know, I attempt to do, but there is a level of like transaction there and and I've definitely felt challenges.

56:41

Yeah, yeah. And volume is high on the hill and so forth. Yeah, yeah.

56:42

Look, my my personal mindset uh although not not everyone, you know, follows this, but um, you know, I always thought, well, you might be at this outlet today, but you might be somewhere else tomorrow, right? And you have to think about that uh and not just about the relationship in the moment. So I would try to be responsible whether it was a big outlet with lots of circulation or frankly with a blog, which was fairly new at the time I was in government. So that was my personal perspective, but I realize others have a more transactional view on it. I think you just have to keep chipping away at it. Uh, and frankly, play opposites off each other. You know, use those interpersonal skills to frankly gain a little bit of leverage. Uh, do it in the right way, professional way, friendly way, but uh you know, uh you have more leverage I think than you than you think. Uh, even if it takes a little bit of time to get a quote back or a response.

57:36

Right back here. Hi, um my name is Lea, I'm with CQ Roll Call. Um, I'm kind of curious, you know, you talked a little bit about um being worried that things would leak and like people breaking embargos. Kind of wondering like what your process was when you felt like you weren't treated fairly by a news outlet. Um, you know, I'm guessing the person who broke the embargo like wasn't getting an exclusive the next day. So just kind of curious like what your

58:05

uh response was typically to that to those instances. Yeah, it was it was mainly a tough conversation to be honest with you. It wasn't me like pulling badges and you know, uh you know, because I knew it was for a long season, right? And then I would still need that relationship uh over time. But what I think twice about including that person in the next Pentagon press trip to uh wherever with the secretary, maybe, you know. So I would say that uh in this didn't happen that often. I mean, the Pentagon press corps has always been exceptionally professional, but there are mistakes that happen. So I would it would be frosty for a while sometimes. Uh, but we would usually get through it. Uh, and uh I knew that I had to make sure that I wasn't seen as uh engaging in retribution, you know, because that wasn't going to serve me, the Pentagon, the CIA, or my bosses very well uh at the end of the day. But it is problematic, but again, you have to treat this as a long game.

59:00

Hi, um Mea McCarthy, I'm a Capitol Hill reporter at Politico. Um, I wanted to ask so all of us are pretty our younger reporters.

I'm sure you've dealt with a lot of reporters both seasoned and I feel like I've been in my peer group here. And and and you've probably dealt with a lot of younger reporters. So from from you you being on the other side, I guess what's something that

59:29

younger reporters you find either get wrong or are um still or let's something that they should know earlier on, I guess. Um, either generally or about the Pentagon. About the Pentagon generally. Yeah, so are you also at the Pentagon? No, but I'm just curious. Yeah.

59:46

So um look, I I do think I mean to be honest with you, younger reporters, you know, um I think need to be a little bit more prepared when they engage. Uh, you know, you need to come with a point of view or to be informed.

01:00:00

And if you're informed and educated uh and you come with you know a perspective or or a tip that you feel is pretty strong, then that will get you um a uh a long way uh I think. I mean any any reporter but especially if you're younger. Like if you come prepared it's like being you know prepared for your job interview, right? Uh or meeting with your your boss. If you're prepared that goes a long way and will I think yield over time a much better relationship. Um if you play the young card it doesn't always work, you know, I'm new and you know, can you help me out. I think be confident. Own it. Uh you're smart people. You know how to do research, you know how to be informed. I mean that doesn't mean that you shouldn't seek information or be educated by the government spokesperson on the other side of the the phone or the desk. But um you know just uh if you're informed, prepared and confident that'll take you a long way.

01:00:58

So I in the interim I wanted to ask um knowing you're not in government anymore but I don't think we any of us saw a proposal to um for buyouts at the CIA or or anywhere else and what's happening uh at at FBI and Justice in terms of um forced resignations and the like. Um sitting where you are now and with the experience of having been in government in national security, how how vulnerable does that make us at the moment?

01:01:21

Um I think it's a huge problem. Uh I think that um people in my former buildings are feeling shocked. Um morale is I think probably low. There's a lot of uncertainty, right? There's a lot a bit of worry about respect for their mission overall. Uh I I do worry about the long-term effects of um taking a wrecking ball to the federal workforce uh in this kind of manner. Look I would agree that there's probably efficiency in the federal government who wouldn't you know that that we can achieve through greater efficiency. We probably should have some reductions elsewhere but is this a planful way to go about it? Is this very strategic? No.