

EPISODE 493

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] AH: We're going to talk about 9/11. Then we're going to look at the backstory of 9/11, then walk up to where we are today. I think just to start off, can you tell us where you were in the morning of September the 11th, 2001, Diana?

[00:00:16] DB: Oh, my. That is a story. To begin with, I actually left the Counterterrorism Center, where I had been following Sunni extremists, including Al Qaeda for several years, just a few months before 9/11. At this point, I am in a master's of education program, student teaching. I walked to the school on 9/11. It is a absolute cliché, but it is true. It was a beautiful, blue, gorgeous September day. I was helping the main teacher in the classroom and ducked out for a – I don't even remember what the errand was. In the teacher's lounge, they had the TV on, and somebody had just flown into the World Trade Center; the first airplane.

I knew, it was Al Qaeda. If you ask anybody who had worked the account, we all knew right away. It was a terrible, terrible feeling. Because, first of all, I felt very, very guilty that I wasn't on the job, back in CTC. One of the first things I did was call the office and say, "I'll come back. I'll come back. Just let me back." Then walked back into the classroom with a big smile, took over a algebra lesson, while my supervisor teacher went to the teacher's lounge to follow the news. We spent the rest of the day balancing, trying to keep the classroom absolutely normal for the students. Running back to the teacher's lounge, first of all, we had so many of our students had parents who worked at the Pentagon. We actually did lose a parent. A couple of my students, very young girls did lose their father on American Airlines 77.

We had to go through all the card student emergency information to see whose parents were at risk, who might actually have lost a parent. The second thing was, thank God, my father had just retired from the Pentagon, but I knew he went back fairly often for lunches with friends and visiting. My husband was at CIA headquarters, and the TV was speculating about additional airplanes, what their targets might be. I also was waiting for the phone call back from CTC calling me back, which actually didn't come.

It was a totally surreal day, on so many different levels. I was not called back to CTC. I only found out a decade later, it was because they knew how much money my husband and I had shelled out for my masters, that was out of pocket. They didn't want to shortchange me. They also knew, since I could talk with him, that I had had a couple of students who lost their father and I was engaged with their family, and did get involved in various programs.

Things like, supporting our Muslim students, helping our students and teachers who didn't really understand, why do they hate us? Teaching kids to write their names in Arabic, learning a little bit about Muslim religion and the Arab culture. That was my 9/11. It was very different from my former colleagues, I do know.

[00:05:02] AH: When you said, you knew right away, do you mean when the first plane, or do you mean the second?

[00:05:08] DB: Oh, the first.

[00:05:10] AH: The first?

[00:05:12] DB: Now, I'll admit there was a possibility at that point, I could have been wrong. My mind immediately jumped to that conclusion. Remember, I hadn't worked these guys. I have been following them one way or another, since 1990. When I resigned in May 2001, it was largely for personal reasons. My husband and I had not been able to find jobs in the same place. I'd get a job in one country, and he wouldn't. He'd get a job in another country and I didn't. After a couple years of that, he absolutely needed to get out of the area, and I had always been interested in teaching. That was a compromise.

An additional factor was sheer frustration, because everybody in CTC knew there was a big one coming. We were not getting attention from the new administration. That was extremely frustrating for all of us.

[00:06:33] AH: Tell us a little bit more about the CTC that you left. One of the things that I love about our podcast, as the – ranges from people like you who used to work on the desk, to the

average person on the street. Just interested in those topics. Just tell us a little bit more about what the CTC as what it was, and how long you were there and what things you were up to.

[00:07:00] DB: CIA's Counterterrorism Center began the winter of 1985-1986, focusing on Hezbollah, which if you recall, a couple years ago, had bombed the Marine barracks and our embassy annex in Beirut. At that point, still had multiple US citizens hostage, and also had killed, murdered and tortured. They were chief of station, William Buckley. My first encounter with the Counterterrorism Center was as a trainee. I joined in February of 1986. At that point, it was a very, very small group, a handful of people. I would say, you'd be talking in dozens, rather than scores or hundreds.

That three-month period, the one thing I'll take out of it, my job as a trainee was creating a cheat sheet book, listing every terrorist, international terrorist group on the planet. I staged a mock contest for CTC members, because there was nothing for the letter Q. The irony of ironies that there was no terrorist group for the letter Q. At the end of my internship, I went on back to the Afghan branch. This was during the Afghan program and the Reagan Administration's focus on driving the Soviets out of Afghanistan. CTC continued to grow throughout that time.

I worked with him again, in 1993, when, unfortunately, we had a shooting outside of the CIA headquarters that killed a couple of our colleagues, including, unfortunately, the brand-new bride-groom of three months of my former roommate. They continue to build up. It's a well-documented history, how they created the Alec Center under Michael Scheuer, focusing exclusively on Osama bin Laden.

Now, the thing that's worth remembering is almost everybody when they think of CTC in the 1990s, especially, they think of Alec Station, Alec Station, Alec Station. They don't realize this, we're still focused on the planet. Alec Station was focused on Osama bin Laden. There was another group that I worked with when I joined CTC in 1996, that was focused on Sunni terrorism. That, ironically, a lot of what looking back, we think of now is Al Qaeda, at that point, was under that branch. There is still quite a bit of work ongoing on in Hezbollah, which a few remember, was still active. Did a major bombing in [inaudible 00:10:58], etc., etc.

It continued to grow. It continued to develop professionally. It continued to build its ties with the rest of the CIA and the IC as a whole. Remember, again, before 9/11, we were always short of people. There were some incredibly talented people, some incredibly motivated people. Yes, there were some experienced people. I can think of a few towards the end of their careers. If you look at oh, The Looming Tower mini-series, so any of these, you would think that there were three people in CTC. That was not the case.

[00:12:03] AH: There were, just to clarify, Alec station was an outpost within the CTC?

[00:12:12] DB: It was a group among many. For more details, I would encourage your listeners to look at either the 9/11 report, or there have been a couple of declassified CIA inspector general reports that talk in more specifics than I really feel safe getting into right here.

[00:12:41] AH: Okay, no problem. I want to go to the backstory in the not too distant future. Just for now, I just want to get back to that day. Did the call from the CTC come, or –

[00:12:53] DB: It did not come. I called them. I talked to the Deputy Chief of Alec Station, and I just said, "I'm at your service." I was truly surprised not to be called back. Like I say, it was only a decade later that I discovered, they didn't call me back out of generosity to me, which I appreciate that I wish I had known.

[00:13:28] AH: That whole time, you were feeling sore?

[00:13:32] DB: A little mystified, since I had lived in Pakistan, I spoke the language. I had worked the account at that point for much longer than most of the people who were working it that day. To also put things in context, A, I knew I had worked the aftermath of earlier smaller attacks, such as the African embassy bombings. I knew darn well, they were working 24/7. Not a cliché, but the truth, overwhelmed with incredible demands. The last thing anybody had time to do was make touchy-feely phone calls to former employees. It was not like that.

[00:14:31] AH: Is there a particular vignette, or conversation, or experience of 9/11, of that specific day that sticks in your mind?

[00:14:42] DB: I would say, there are two. One was, of course, the student who lost a father and the mother. I was not in the principal's office for that discussion. Just knowing when the student was called to the office, the other students didn't, at that point, know what was going on, etc. I knew she was going to hear that she had just lost her father.

Then the second thing was, of course, when I finally was able to get a hold of my husband, and the first thing he told me, was that he had volunteered for worldwide availability for anywhere, anything, anytime, that he was wanted. Of course, the first thing I said is, "Good for you. Go for it." My stomach just dropped, because, of course, I knew there was going to be fighting. I knew there was going to be danger. He was an army veteran. I had no idea where he'd be sent, or what he would be doing. Long story short, in hindsight, all I can say is he is happy and well, and none of my fears came true for him, at least. Thank God.

[00:16:34] AH: I'm assuming that because you had been tracking this issue, your mind immediately went to Afghanistan. Is that correct?

[00:16:43] DB: That's where bin Laden and his training camps were.

[00:16:49] AH: This is the part of the story – another part of the story that I find really fascinating, because this wasn't your first rodeo, as far as Afghanistan was concerned, Diana. Was it?

[00:17:01] DB: No, it was amusing. I had written a senior thesis back in undergrad on Islamic radical movements in Pakistan, next door to Afghanistan. When I was hired, the analytical office in what was then the directorate of intelligence that followed that region, South Asia, chose me to work on their Afghan Task Force. Because I had somewhat of a background in that region. To this day, when I speak with students now as a professor, I tell them, every single one of them is more qualified to work at the agency than I was at the day I was hired. Because I was hired right out of undergrad, on the basis of that senior thesis.

I had never been to South Asia, or the Middle East. I had never studied Urdu Pashto. Any of the other languages, I was lucky enough to be taught down the road. They brought me in. At that point, there were two analysts working Afghanistan. The Soviets were in Afghanistan to just

place this in time. This was the fall of 1986. The Stinger missile had been introduced a few months earlier. The senior analyst did what was considered to be the important job.

He did Soviet influence over Afghanistan. He did the Kabul machine, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. He did the Geneva Accords, the negotiations with the Soviet Union and Pakistan to arrange the details to allow the Soviet withdrawal. I did the Mujahideen. Who would have ever thought, that would turn out to be the more historically memorable account?

Starting the fall of '86, I studied not just the Peshawar 7, the seven main groups of resistance fighters based in Pakistan that received the bulk of the CIA, and US support. Pretty much, Afghan culture, Afghan tribal resistance, what was happening in the refugee camps, all things related to Afghanistan that wasn't communist.

I did that from the fall of '86, through middle of '88, when the Soviet withdrawal got going. The GS15, who was doing the important stuff, realized, he pretty much no longer had a job, or an account there. He got a job elsewhere managing a branch in another office. Suddenly, I was the only intelligence analyst in the director of intelligence, working Afghanistan.

Just to put things straight, I had been in the IC three years at that point. Three years out of undergrad. That would have made me 23-years-old. The vacancy for the GS15 position that I was filling never got filled. Because again, everybody thought Afghanistan was a finished story. Done deal.

I hereby apologize to the universe for everything I missed, or every mistake I made. I will only plead youth, stupidity, ignorance, and absolute overwork. That said, it was fun. It also was fascinating. The IC these days is longer in terms of knowledge, area knowledge, the fact that it's much more diverse. People of South Asian heritage, who were born understanding the languages, knowing the cultures, knowing the understandings. It's so much stronger than it was in my day. I don't think they'll ever have the fun I had that year, at 23-years-old, going to the White House in the NSC, briefing cabinet members. Doing everything that fell under the job. Testifying before [inaudible 00:23:07] I mean, you name it. It was just incredible.

[00:23:12] AH: Yeah. Were you approached because you have done work on Pakistan, or did you apply, then they picked you up, because you had the best experience?

[00:23:22] DB: Oh, I applied. In fact, the irony is, I had had no interest in government work for the CIA. I wanted to be a foreign service officer. I took the foreign service exams. Did shockingly well on the written part. At that point, their tests were straight out of the classes that I was taking at the time, majoring in international studies. When it got to the oral exams, again, being 20-years-old, I passed by such a thin skin of my teeth, because I just plain couldn't compete with some of these MBAs and lawyers, etc., that I was very, very low on the list, priority list to be hired into the Foreign Service.

This was the same time that Reagan really was starting to throw major money, 1985, major money at the Afghan program, and at the CIA as a whole. I did see an advertisement figure. Well, okay, that's a good place to work, until either my foreign service appointment comes through, or I'll save up some money to go to graduate school. I had never intended to actually take the job. Then I had never intended to actually stay more than a year or so. Once I got onboard, I loved it. Truly, truly good people, committed people.

The thing to know is, these days with Afghanistan, and the world at large, there's so much cynicism. A lot of that is justified. I can't second guess it. There's a long history of mistakes between 1985 and now, or unanticipated consequences. In 1985, Afghanistan was the good fight. Afghanistan was an occupied country, where there truly were millions of refugees. There truly were – There was genocide going on. If you look at the number of villages that were bombed out of existence, the number of political killings by the regime, political prisoners, etc. It truly was something that I believed in, and we all believed we were doing something good. We knew there would be lasting consequences for the Afghan people themselves. When the Soviets announced their withdrawal, we truly, truly believed this was a victory.

[00:26:53] AH: Just for our listeners that are familiar with the region, just briefly sketch out the region for us. You do this undergraduate, work in Pakistan. Then you find yourself working in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan, there's an interesting relationship between them, right? It's a 1,500-mile border. The border was imposed by the British. It's not a strict border in the way

that many people in the United States might understand the border. It's more porous, and fluid, right?

[00:27:26] DB: Very much so. The thing to know, at that time, and it's not just part of my own story of my work at that point, but also very much sets us up for all of the issues that we've had post 9/11 with the Taliban, etc., is that border was very porous. In addition to that, the Pashtun ethnic group, the Durand Line that formed the border, ran right through the middle of the tribal areas, that members of the same tribe belonged to both sides. There has always been not just massive smuggling going on between the two countries, but also just massive intermarriage, massive travel, you have villages even that some of the fields that they work are one side of the borders. Some of the fields they work are the other side.

You have nomads, that there's summer camps and there are winter camps across the border. In addition to all of that, with the Soviet invasion, and the massively bombing villages that supported resistance fighters, conquering cities, of course, looking to arrest members of previous governments, you have roughly 3 million Afghans going into Pakistan as refugees. Another 2 million Afghans going into Iran. Those 3 million Afghans in Pakistan, the bulk of them may have settled in refugee camps, but they didn't really stay there. If you had family in Pakistan, you went to live with your family. You had Afghan refugees moving into Karachi, starting to take over some businesses. For example, the trucker business always had been heavily Pashtun, along with another ethnic group, the Muhajirs.

Suddenly, you have a lot more Pashtuns looking to be drivers. You had a lot of Afghans working as traders, starting to not just work with Pakistani traders, but compete with them. You had, frankly, a lot more people, towns like Peshawar that suddenly doubled and tripled and quadrupled in size. All of the new people were Afghans, who had some tribal relations. At the same time, were also viewed as interlopers, were also poor. Some of them ended up as beggars. Then what also happened, you move into the later part of the 1980s. The Kabul regime supported by the Soviets started bombing campaigns in the marketplaces.

Suddenly, you've also got massive ethnic tensions, because nobody knew this Afghan who is working the stall next to me, is he going to bomb me out? Now, obviously, a lot of that was prejudice. That is a real contributor to instability in Pakistan.

The crying shame is from visiting Peshawar 1987 to 1988, to when I arrived in 1990, it already that town had really transformed and not for the better. Then for my embassy toward 1992, the country as a whole grew more and more unstable, with the arms that at that point, were starting to – well, not just starting to. Had been flowing in from Afghanistan and had been siphoned off from the flow to the Afghan resistance throughout the 1980s. The aftermath of the bombings, the bombings didn't stop when the Kabul regime actually fell. It just kept going with other groups. It just was a very, very bad scene all around.

[00:32:52] AH: It's interesting to hear you talk about that, because I think one of the interesting things about that period, does the role that the Soviet Afghan war had on transforming Islam and that region of the world? Can you talk a little bit more about that? Because that touches on a lot of things that you're interested in, or that you have direct experience of. Could you talk a little bit more about the way that Afghanistan, or Pakistan were, and then the effect of the Soviet-Afghan war and its unintended consequences had on that borderland region?

[00:33:31] DB: Okay. I'm not going to go into long lecture with the names of different camps, Barelvi, etc. What I will simply say is, traditional Islam, as practiced in Pakistan and Afghanistan was very different from what people imagine is Saudi Wahhabi, or what you tend to picture as the Taliban. It was a folk religion, people were deeply devout, deeply pious, but they also have lived side by side with Hindus for centuries. They had picked up a lot of practices. They also had – it was colorful.

If you went to a graveyard, you would see the graves decorated with banners. You would see holy trees, where a saint had sat and taught centuries before, with lots and lots of banners flying from it, because a woman who wanted a son would go and pray to the saint at that tree and leave a banner or an offering. You had malas, which were festivals, with music and dancing, and the music would be hymns. If you look at some of the traditional hymns, oh, my goodness, some of the old [inaudible 00:35:24] are pretty darn raunchy, or talking lots and lots and lots about being drunk. It's all symbolic for love of the beloved, who is truly all of above.

In the 1970s, Saudi Arabia started funding, education, not just madresses, but offering money to lots of mosques, offering money to help bring in new textbooks for the public education system.

What had always been a minority in the region started becoming more and more powerful, which was what people today would picture as the Islamic religion, where it's pure, no images, no alcohol, which did used to be legal in Pakistan and Afghanistan, by the way. More women, more covering, etc., etc.

There really was attention between the two of them, when [inaudible 00:36:45] who was the Chief of Army Staff, seized power. He actually followed that brand of Wahhabi influenced Islam, and he started enforcing it. Long story short, that's how you also get a lot of not just the violence increasing inside in Pakistan, because several of these groups that were founded by the Saudi money and with the Saudi influence, started going after Pakistani shares, who before then, roughly 20% of the population, and had included, I mean, Prime Minister Bhutto senior, probably was Ashia. His wife certainly was.

All of a sudden, you had sectarian violence and fighting in Pakistan, but you also had Saudi and other Arabs, not just funding the Afghan resistance, and funding the people who agreed with them. You got these Arab volunteers. This is before any of us had ever heard the name Osama bin Laden. People like him, who would go into Afghanistan, and then get into massive fights with Afghan villagers, or Afghan fighters, because what are you doing decorating this grave? How dare you? That's totally unIslamic. For the Afghans, this is our martyr. Of course, we're going to honor our martyr. It was the beginning of what we saw in spades with the Taliban and today.

[00:38:50] AH: You mentioned the Peshawar 7. Can you just tell the listeners a little bit more about who they were? You also referenced that there were many groups beyond the Peshawar 7. As I understand, the Peshawar 7 were a creation of Pakistan. One is a way to try to just make sense of all the various groups, but also, secondly, to play their own game and save Pakistan. Could you tell us a little bit more about the City of Peshawar, how you found that, and the various Mujahideen grips, which were your daily bread and butter during this period?

[00:39:29] DB: Well, let's flashback to 1973, which was when the king of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah was ousted. The follow-on government was run by his cousin, was socialist influenced. That socialist government actually inspired several Islamist leaders, who again, as I mentioned Saudi Arabia starting to make contacts in Pakistan at that time, it was also doing the same in

Afghanistan. Several of these Afghan students really, fled to Pakistan, rather than go to jail under Daud, and the follow-on regimes.

Daud's regime also started contesting the border much more aggressively with Pakistan. As far as Pakistan was concerned, there was a real incentive to support these Afghan dissidents that had fled to Peshawar, including people like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, for example, who, when he had been a student at the University of Kabul, the rumor is, I've never seen absolute proof. The rumor among people who were there is he was going around, throwing acid in the faces of women who weren't fairly fully veiled.

Sayaf, who was another one who actually studied in Saudi Arabia. Yunus Khalis, Burhanuddin Rabbani, these people were the four that we called Islamist. They truly wanted to reform Islam and reform Afghan society in an Islamic way. They also set up a relationship with Pakistan's intelligence service in the early 70s.

When the Soviets invaded, of course, it made great sense for ISI, the Inter-Service Intelligence Directorate of Pakistan, to keep on supporting it. In the meantime, there were other more traditional Pakistani leaders, such as Gillani, [inaudible 00:42:18] who were basically, hereditary saints in the old religion. Very rich. Very westernized. I sometimes saw them in the press, referred to as the Gucci gorillas, because they pretty much had either Italian, or British London tailors. Those were the seven that, to my knowledge, and I was never a CIA DO operative. To my knowledge, and from everything I've read, received the overwhelming bulk of the CIA support, which was funneled through Pakistan.

There actually were hundreds, if not thousands, of local village leaders, tribal leaders, clan leaders, who rose up all over Afghanistan, even before the Soviet invasion, and the year before the Soviet invasion. This is in fact why the Soviet invaded to oppose the Kabul regime, because the Kabul regime basically, came on full-on Stalinist immediately. It's crazy, because you can find documents now from Moscow of the Politburo, and their representatives, begging these people, slow down, you can't change the society so quickly.

Going in, forcing people to send their girls to school, forcing land reform, etc., etc. Most of those fighters ended up joining one of the seven, because that's the only way they could get arms.

The Pakistanis allocated the arms to gain control over that huge movement. There were still people like Ismail Khan in Herat, who drew heavy support from Iran, who didn't join one of the seven, more than tangentially. He signed up with Rabbani's group, but never really. Then Ahmad Shah Massoud up in the north, who was from a different ethnic group, and he drew very heavily from the French.

[00:44:55] AH: Peshawar just briefly, that's a border city in Pakistan, right?

[00:45:00] DB: It's also surrounded by Pakistan's tribal areas, where tribal law still holds sway. It always has been very different from, for example, cities like Lahore in Pakistan South, that oh, my goodness, what a center of culture. Peshawar, well, I'd say, picture Star Wars. The Star Wars bar, where everybody meets. Whether you're a trader, whether you're a smuggler, whether you're a spy, whether you're an aid worker. I remember one evening, for example, going to the American Club, to see a German employee of a French aid organization, doing Spanish flamenco dance. That was pretty much normal.

[00:46:12] AH: It was a bit of a slightly wild west, the border type setting, lots of interesting characters around?

[00:46:21] DB: Very much so. That would, of course, include the Europeans, as well as the Pakistanis, Afghans and Arabs. I will say, what's probably most interesting to your listeners, is the growing Arab community. Because the thing is, going into Afghanistan to fight is scary. There are people shooting and bombing, you could get killed. Worse, you could get very bad dysentery. You could get blisters on your feet. Everything is uphill both ways.

The Afghans themselves usually didn't really welcome foreign volunteers, because they decided really, foreign volunteers were wusses. If you think of the conditions they lived in, and pretty much a lot of the time living on rice and chapatis three meals a day while they're in the field, they were right. Hundreds, and hundreds of Arabs set up headquarters in Peshawar, rather than Afghanistan. That's where they ran.

Whether it was Maktab al-Khidmat, which was Abdullah Azzam's aid agency, which he was a Palestinian. Yes, he very definitely was preaching continued jihad. Let's not stop with

Afghanistan. That's where Osama bin Laden first setup. That's where a whole lot of Muslim and Arab aid organizations set up, that funneled millions of dollars, preferably to the people willing to carry on not just Afghan jihad, but do it in the Wahhabi sense. That really fueled a lot of cultural change. What also was going on at the same time in the Afghan refugee camps.

The thing to remember, Afghan rural culture, you did not have women sitting all day in their houses, fully covering their faces, never going out, never doing anything, other than maybe the richest, most important family or two in the village. Because you needed those women out in the field working, if the family's going to survive. It was in the Peshawar refugee camps and the camps around the tribal areas that were run by organizations, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Heavily influenced by these Arabic organizations, where all of a sudden, women who had spent their whole lives, yes, with her hair covered, yes, they maybe cover their face if a stranger showed up, but otherwise, moving relatively freely. All of a sudden, going into full production, living under the conditions we later associate with the Taliban. That's where a lot of that really started being imposed on Afghan culture, especially a generation that grew up. A lot of them joined the Taliban, who grew up only seeing this.

[00:50:25] AH: This is really fascinating. When you were working the Afghan usher, who were your interlocutors across the government? I know that you mentioned that you went to testify and went to the White House and so forth. Give us a sense of any other people that you worked with, or more of a horizontal connection. Was there someone at the State Department that you were working with? Was there people at the DOD, people in the DO? Yeah, help us understand your day-to-day. What was coming in and what was going out, and who were you speaking to?

[00:51:05] DB: On the State Department, I worked both with the desk, and most closely involved, almost on a daily basis with a wonderful, wonderful woman named Eliza Van Hollen, who had so much more of a background on South Asia that I did. She had the most radical generosity of spirit to help and support my learning and education. Her husband was named Christopher Van Hollen, and her son is now a member of Senate, the Senate. Very, very impressive family.

Then, I did work with the State Department desk. I obviously met comparatively frequently with analysts in the DOD, analysts – other parts of the IC, especially when we got together to work

on national intelligence estimates. Those are community-wide products, rather than anything individual.

[00:52:32] AH: Okay. I mean, when you came to that, can you tell us a little bit more about your experience of finding yourself as the point person for this issue as a 23-year-old? Tell us about some of the people that you met, or some of the things that you were involved in.

[00:52:50] DB: All I can say is the bulk of the work came after **[inaudible 00:53:03]**. January, February 1989. Benazir Bhutto, at that point, was the Prime Minister of Pakistan, and she decided, she wanted a really big Mujahideen victory. I think, she was going on a trip to Saudi Arabia, or something like that. The Muj were ordered to take the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad, and it didn't work. Instead, they fell to pieces fighting each other.

That really was the start of my briefing circuit and my greatest exposure to senior individuals is they wanted to know A, what went wrong. Basically, what went wrong was pure and simple. Every one of those groups saw the end game coming. They wanted to make sure that their rivals didn't end up on top. They all wanted to know what would happen next. Ironically, we're getting into the point where A, nobody knew what was happening next. We did believe that the Kabul regime was going to fall comparatively quickly. I can tell you exactly the three reasons why we were wrong. That was an intelligence failure I was deeply a part of. One, we did not expect, and nobody expected that the Soviets would launch the biggest airlift, since the Berlin airlift to keep the Kabul regime fully supplied.

We underestimated how quickly the Muj would break down. I should say, we. I will say, I underestimated how very quickly the Muj would break down. I assumed, they would wait until they won. That was a mistake. Third was, we had a whole lot of reporting from every source you can think of, and especially, especially press saying that everybody in Kabul was making secret deals, to basically open the door to the Mujahideen, that the second that the Soviets left, they were going to switch sides.

What we didn't get was A, a lot of those people were saying it because they were playing both sides, rather than simply believing what they were saying. There was no reporting on the same people telling the PDPA, "Yes, I'm with you. I will support you to the death." Second, Jalalabad

changed everything with the fighting. There were some real human rights abuses associated with the Muj activity at Jalalabad. Lots of innocent civilians they killed.

That changed a whole lot of minds in Kabul. It's one thing to surrender to somebody who you don't agree with, but if you surrender, you're more likely to stay alive. It's another thing to surrender to somebody you're afraid is going to gouge your eyes out. Totally different universe. That prediction was very wrong. I did end up testifying, why we got it wrong. I will say, it was vastly amusing.

Also, another monthly set of briefings I did for – well, he's gone now. Stephen Solarz, who had the sub-committee on Asia and the Pacific. One month I went in, and, man, that man made me feel good. He told me that, yes, the DO gets all the praise. He wants me to know, he also thinks, analysts also counts as American heroes. I left there feeling great. The exact next month, he told me that I was so blankety blank incompetent. I lacked the awareness to recognize I didn't have a blankety blank clue what I was talking about. Put me in my place, kept me humble.

[00:58:20] AH: When did you pick up the Urdu, Diana? Because you don't have it when you joined up, but you later acquire it. Tell us a little more about the Urdu, and tell us about your team working alongside Peter Thompson, the special envoy to the Afghan resistance.

[00:58:40] DB: Well, they're connected. I got a chance to spend a couple years at the State Department, actually not at the State Department. In the State Department as a foreign service officer. I was a political officer in the US Embassy in Islamabad, with the portfolio of Religious Affairs, which made a lot of sense, if you think going back what I just spent the past few years doing. Before the tour, I did do six months of intensive full-time Urdu training. Then I continued the Urdu training the whole two years that I was living in Pakistan.

When the Gulf War came up, all of the embassies in the Muslim world were forced to draw down to very, very skeleton crews. Once I got to Washington, DC, I had no job for the duration of the Gulf War. Peter Thompson's deputy had just moved on to another position. He interviewed me and he hired me for the duration of the Gulf War. Once the Gulf War evacuations were over, I would go back to my job in Islamabad.

Of course, what was my first job with Peter Thompson? Going to Islamabad. You don't ever want to do the paperwork involved of an emergency wartime evacuation from a post, doing your per diem while you're at that post. Our number one mission while we were in Islamabad during the Gulf War was President Bush, and this was, of course, Bush Senior, wanted as many countries as possible in the Gulf War coalition.

Unfortunately, one of the things that had been happening through the fall of 1991 is remember, earlier how I mentioned that there were some Islamist groups that received US weapons, US funding etc., through Pakistan, but were Islamist, also closely tied to Saudi Arabia. Well, three of them, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Hekmatyar and Sayaf came out supporting, very publicly supporting Saddam Hussein. This was tremendously embarrassing, not just for the United States, but for Saudi Arabia.

Our job was to try to get the other Mujahideen leaders and Pakistan to agree to join the Gulf War coalition. We had 308 Mujahideen, who did travel to Saudi Arabia. I don't believe they actually fought. My guess is that they did support work. They did the lesser pilgrimage. They did a lot of fundraising. Officially, the Afghan Mujahideen were part of President Bush's coalition.

[01:02:44] AH: I just wondered, now that we started with 9/11, and then we walked by words, I just wondered how you would connect the events of the 80s and early 90s, back forward to 9/11. Because lots of different people have done it in lots of different ways. You have the advantage of being someone who has studied at the macro level, but also, was a participant in various ways. Help us understand how you go from those events of the 80s and 90s, through to where we are now, or through to 9/11.

[01:03:24] DB: It's heartbreaking, actually. Because, of course, there's a direct line. I totally dispute those who point to oh, the CIA supported bin Laden, or this, or that. No. There was no connection. The CIA did not support any Arab fighters, period. End of subject. Here's the thing. Afghanistan became a great jihad. Afghanistan in the Muslim world, was an example of a great Muslim victory. They drove out the Soviets. That right there was inspiring, especially if you look at it alongside the Iranian Revolution in 1979, where the "Iranians drove out the Americans." You've got Muslims driving out Americans from Iran, driving out the other superpower from Afghanistan. We can do it. Inspiring.

Secondly, remember how we talked about Peshawar being this great meeting ground. It was a melting pot. There is plenty of Sunni Islamist terrorism before Arab started showing up in Peshawar. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad in Egypt. This group, often Indonesia, what have you. Afghanistan was what brought them together in Peshawar, to compare notes, to get training, to get inspired, to learn from each other, to organize. Yes, eventually, to create a central organization, Al Qaeda.

The thing is, one way to look at it is a fraternity. Even if you didn't formally join Al Qaeda, you met with guys who joined Al Qaeda. You met with guys who were from the UK, from Argentina, I'm not kidding, from Saudi Arabia, etc. You had a fraternity of Afghan veterans, whether they fought or not, they supported it. They were there. The thing is, these veterans, a lot of them, then went home to their home countries. Some of them may not have intended terrorism immediately. If they couldn't find a job, because their government didn't trust them, and threw them in jail, because they had contact allegedly with other terrorists, that's one way to radicalize them, if they hadn't already been radicalized.

A lot of them though, went back to their home countries with the intention of setting up their own jihad. We won one jihad, let's do another. They not only have the status of having been there in Afghanistan, whether they really went into Afghanistan or not, but they have the motivation, they have the contacts, they have the funding. I don't believe we would have had 9/11 had we not had not even the Afghan war, so much as the Peshawar thing.

[01:07:27] AH: One of the things that I find fascinating is thinking about the Soviet-Afghan war, so it's not just about the CIA. The ISI are part of the story. Saudi intelligence are part of the story. Obviously, the Afghans themselves, the refugees, all the countries surrounding Afghanistan, they're trying to put their thumb on the scale as well, during all of this. If you look at it objectively, although it's terrible, it seems like a very, almost logical thing to happen. Afghanistan, I believe, during the 80s has more refugees than anywhere else in the world, during the Soviet-Afghan war, between the Soviets and obviously, they're very culpable for actually invading the country, but also the West and the ISI and Saudi intelligence for funding the Mujahideen, and then Afghanistan. I believe, it becomes the most heavily armed country in

the world. You can see why any structure, or scaffolding disintegrates and why there's this long period of instability that continues up until today. Do you have any thoughts on that?

[01:08:44] DB: Unfortunately, that's true, every step of it. I would say, what the one incredibly important thing missing from the list is what happens to a country when you totally undermined the culture and the way of life? If you're talking millions and millions of refugees, and of course, there were more refugees who stayed inside the country than outside. People who totally lost their way of life, lost their source of living, lost their local leadership. Remember something, villages had their own hands of leadership.

What happens when suddenly, somebody who's possibly the traditional village leader, quite often not, is the one who's getting the arms affiliated with a resistance group, and suddenly, he's the one not just with the arms to enforce his authority, but he's the one that if you want to join the jihad, you obey. What happens when you have, okay, 7 million refugees, well, those refugees and the resistance camps in Pakistan and Iran are having children, those children are growing up in a refugee camp, where, again, they have no exposure to traditional leadership. It's the resistance party that is running it. The resistance party is preaching jihad, jihad, jihad, jihad.

They're not learning, how do you plow a field? How do you do a craft? Yes, UNICEF and a lot of charities did go in and try to do some education, some teaching. I remember visiting rooms of little boys hammering away on heels, learning how to make boots. In general, these kids grew up playing in alleys. How do you then rebuild the country out of them? Especially when the richer layer, the people who had the money, the education, the pre-Soviet government experience, by that point, definitely, there were a fair number of patriots who did go back and try to rebuild. A whole lot of them, at that point, had teenagers who had become Americans, had become Brits, or Germans, etc. We're going to go back and start all over.

[01:12:00] AH: Just to bring up to the present day, a lot of these issues are, you really still on the scene, Afghan's ability, what happens when power that has been there withdraws? What are your thoughts, looking at the scene now 20 years after 9/11 and 20 years after the beginning of the war in Afghanistan?

[01:12:29] DB: It breaks my heart. Because, again, the thing to know is the Afghan people, historically, I mean, yes, there's always been some infighting, etc. In general, warm, hospitable, a rich culture. I mean, there's so much good that's been lost. I don't see the way back. Remember how the Kabul regime survived some three years after the Soviet withdrew? I would say, there were two things that allowed the Kabul regime to do that. Three years is not a very long time. One was, of course, the Soviet airlift. That was so huge.

Even if the United States wanted to do that kind of an airlift to support the Ashraf Ghani government, I don't think it's possible. We were on the other side of the planet. We would have to, of course, go through somebody's airspace. Secondly, the other main thing that allowed the communist regime to hang on for three years was of course, that the Mujahideen started a civil war against each other. I don't think we can expect the Taliban to be that helpful. Yes, I am pessimistic for the current government. I'm pessimistic for a lot of the current gains. Where I have hope is never underestimate Afghan courage. That includes the Afghan women. Some of the strongest, bravest people I've ever met, were Afghan women. They are willing to speak for themselves. The fact that they have had 20 years of access, however imperfect to education, access, however imperfect to employment, to women's organizations, etc. I don't think you can erase it in a day. I do expect, unfortunately, a lot of fighting to get to whatever the new normal.

[01:15:19] AH: I guess, that's relationship, which has sometimes been on and off. How is this relationship with that part of the world changed your as a person and say, the CIA?

[01:15:31] DB: First part, there is a lost innocence for me, for the agency, for the country, probably the world. In the 1980s, we genuinely believed that we were doing something good. I will say, of course, there were some individuals who looked at it as, "Yay, we're killing Soviets." I would say, the biggest motivation, and I do know for me, too, was we are helping unoccupied people. Of course, it's going to end up –

One thing, in fact, that's worth mentioning is, at the beginning of the I have read the documents from the discussions with Carter, President Carter, and the DCI and the CIA, initially, actually, from the DCI down, was a little bit hesitant to get involved in Afghanistan, because they were afraid, all they would be doing would be helping Afghans to die. It was only when they realized, the Afghans were going to fight no matter what. Then realized that, wait a minute, maybe there's

a chance that they actually can drive the Soviets out, that everything got very gung ho. The program exploded so big.

Now, obviously, since then, we've had much bigger programs, if you look in the wake of 9/11, and the Iraq War, etc. I still believe most people think they're doing a good thing, that they're standing up for US interests, protecting whatever it is they believe they're protecting, whether it's freedom, or whatever. It's harder to believe that with that clear, unquestioned naivete. We wanted to do the right thing. We believed we were doing the right thing. I can't begin to tell you the unbelievable joy that so many of us felt the day the last Soviet soldier crossed over that bridge, back into the Soviet Union. It's not that we expected everything would magically be perfect in Afghanistan after that. We believed we had given the Afghan people a chance at a good future.

[01:18:38] AH: Can you remember where you were when that happened? To all of you working that says you have a party or something?

[01:18:44] DB: Oh, yes. It was an incredible party. I will say, it was down in the hallway where the earliest version of what became the CIA museum was set up. They say, alcoholic beverages, actually, alcoholic beverages are illegal inside federal office buildings, but nobody told the guy with the champagne.

[01:19:18] AH: Wow. Well, that's probably a good place to close off. Well, thanks ever so much for your time, Diana.

[01:19:27] DB: An absolute pleasure. Frankly, given how many people you've interviewed, who I really, really respect, I consider this a tremendous honor, too.

[01:19:39] AH: Anytime. I love having you on.

[END]