

**EPISODE 494****[INTRODUCTION]**

**[00:00:00] AH:** Welcome to the latest installment of SpyCast. To coincide with the 20th anniversary of 911, we'd like to present to you a trilogy of interviews with intelligence officers who have found themselves on point as Presidential Daily briefers on the day of. Now the President's Daily Brief has been called the most tightly controlled daily document in the world. As a daily summary of high-level all sorts of information and analysis on national security issues produced for the president and key cabinet members and advisors. We've got three presidential daily briefers for you. First up, Mike Morell. Mike at various points in time was Acting Director and Deputy Director of CIA. But on the morning of September the 11th 2001, he was with George W. Bush in Sarasota, Florida. Then, uniquely 10 years later, he was with President Barack Obama for the Abbottabad raid. I'm just going to read out a brief part of my conversation with Mike.

"I believe that when we get to the end of the trail, we're going to find our Al Qaeda and we're going to find our Osama bin Laden. I told him that I was so confident in that judgment, that I would bet my children's future on it." If you want to hear more about what Mike had to say, please listen to the interview.

Next up is Dave Terry. Now, Dave started the job on the same day as Mike Morrell, but he was the Presidential Daily briefer for Vice President Dick Cheney. After that, he went on to be the chief of the Presidential Daily Brief. Now on the morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Dave recollects, "I think that for any intelligence officer, what you're doing is often overwhelming, whether you're in front of the President, or the Vice President, or an asset, or your colleagues, and the stakes are often life or death."

Next up, we have Kristin Wood. Now, Kristin was the presidential daily briefer for the Vice President's National Security Adviser, Scooter Libby. And she often briefed the vice president himself. She went on to hold a number of leadership roles at the CIA, but she recollects, "Knowing that every day you had to deliver relevant information to the nation's leaders is a feeling of enormous responsibility. All of the 1000s and 1000s of intelligence officers who have

done amazing work, you want to represent that faithfully, ask questions so that you can go a little bit deeper, but also remain a neutral balanced party.”

Joining Kristin was a special guest, Phil Mudd. He was part of a small diplomatic team that helped to piece together a new government for Afghanistan, a holy winter of 2001. He was second in command for counter terrorist analysis in the Counterterrorism Center. And his most recent book is *Takedown: Inside the Hunt for Al Qaeda*. I'm sure you'll enjoy listening to Kristin and Phil bouncing off of each other, two former colleagues and friends, as much as I did. Please consider the trilogy as a whole. Listen to them, think about them, mow them over. This is history. These are three people that were actors in it. And we are proud to present them to you. Thanks. Take care. Bye.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:03:24] AH:** Thanks for taking the time to speak to me.

**[00:03:25] MM:** You're welcome. Andrew. It is great to be with you.

**[00:03:28] AH:** And I'm glad that you're wearing an Indian's T-shirt, because my first question, as someone who spent their career trying to anticipate what was coming over the horizon, I was rooting for the Indians in 2016. So I was just wondering, when is the next World Series coming? When is number three?

**[00:03:50] MM:** Well, that is a very good question. I've been an Indians fan my entire life. I grew up 30 miles south of Cleveland. So it has been a long time for us since we won the World Series 1954. So I hope it's in my lifetime fingers crossed.

**[00:04:11] AH:** No intelligence and analysis of it?

**[00:04:14] MM:** No. No. I'll stick to the world on that.

**[00:04:19] AH:** Okay. Sometimes that's probably easier to predict in baseball. Well, coincidentally, the 10th inning of game seven of the 2016 World Series, that was a 17-minute rain delay. But of course –

**[00:04:33] MM:** Yes, I remember.

**[00:04:34] AH:** Yeah, but of course, we are here to speak about a more grave 17 minutes, and that's the 17 minutes between the North Tower being struck and the South Tower. Just to kind of like root us in that day. Tell us how your day began. I know as a PDB briefer, you probably woke up on September the 10<sup>th</sup> and started work. But tell us how you got through to that morning.

**[00:04:58] MM:** I was President Bush's daily intelligence briefer from January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001 to January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002. I was with him every morning, six days a week, no matter where he was, Oval Office, Camp David, his ranch in Texas, any travel he was doing domestically or internationally. So when Air Force One went wheels up on the afternoon of September 10<sup>th</sup> for a quick trip to Florida for the President to tout his new education policy, I was on the plane, because I was expected to brief him the next morning in Sarasota. At that point, we were using the communications of the White House to send the materials, my briefing materials to me.

So I got up about 3:30 or so. And I called the White House communications people in Sarasota. And they said, "We haven't seen any of your materials yet, but we'll bring them over as soon as we get them," to my hotel room." And I waited, and I waited. And it turns out that White House material gets first preference and CI material got second preference. So it wasn't until quite late, I think 5:30 or so, 6:00, that somebody actually knocked on my door with my materials. So in that materials were the actual documents that I was going to show the president that morning, the PDB items. Some background material for me on each one of them so I could sound smart when I talked to the president about them. And then some other items, raw intelligence. Either reports from human spies from CIA or signals intelligence reports from the National Security Agency. Intercepts of conversations, or what have you.

That was the package. I went through it pretty quickly, got up to speed pretty quickly. And about 15 minutes to eight o'clock, I made my way up the stairs to get to the top floor of the Colony

Hotel where we were all staying. And I remember as I went up the stairs that I ran into a secret service agent on every level. Luckily, I had the right pin that got me past them.

When I got up to the President's floor, I was joined by the head of the White House Situation Room. Usually on any trip, the President's National Security Adviser, at that time, Condi Rice, or the Deputy National Security Adviser at that time, Steve Hadley would travel with the president. But neither one of them were with him on this trip, because they thought it was going to be so quick. Down on Monday afternoon, back on Monday morning. So they sent the head of the White House Situation Room to fill in for them.

So I met with her. Went over the materials with her because I wanted no surprises for her. And then we waited outside the President's suite until Andy Card, the President's White House Chief of Staff, opened the door at eight o'clock for the briefing.

**[00:08:25] AH:** And is there anything about that morning? I mean, I know that you've written on this and spoke about this and in the past 20 years, but I just wondered for our listeners, is there anything about that morning that is not out there that you would be willing to share, or is everything that you can't remember, or there's significant already out there?

**[00:08:46] MM:** No, sure. I think actually, what's out there in the public domain is wrong actually. And if you go to the Internet and you do some searches, I think what you'll find are reports or ideas, or thoughts, or people saying that there was something in the PDB that morning about Al Qaeda and about terrorism in that Intifada to dampen it down. So most of the materials in the book that morning were about the Second Intifada. There was nothing in the book about terrorism.

**[00:09:22] AH:** Yes. So what's out there on the public record is wrong. There was no mention in the PDB that morning of Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden?

**[00:09:30] MM:** Correct.

**[00:09:30] AH:** Yeah. Is there anything out there that is also a canard that you would like to lance or anything out there that you have seen that you think is important to correct the record?

**[00:09:42] MM:** Not about the PDB or not about that day. There are lots of things about the CIA that are out there that I'd like to correct the record on, but not about that day.

**[00:09:53] AH:** Okay. Out of interest, it seems that seems strange that it's almost 20 years ago. How often do you think about that day, Michael?

**[00:10:00] MM:** Oh, it's a good question. I'd say once a week or so. I talked to a lot of different organizations. I talked to a lot of college students, and it almost always comes up. Either I raise it or somebody will raise it in a question. So I actually find myself talking about it fairly frequently. It's not that it comes up in my mind. It's that somebody raises it in a conversation with me or at a kind of an event sort of thing.

**[00:10:34] AH:** One of the questions that I wanted to ask as well was, have you ever been back to the Emma Booker Elementary School in Sarasota, or been back to Sarasota in general?

**[00:10:44] MM:** No, I've never been back to Sarasota except probably drive by it a couple times on the highway. My in-laws were in Naples. And so occasionally, we would drive down to see them and we'd go down the West Coast of Florida. So we would drive by Sarasota. But I've never been back downtown. And I've never been back to the hotel, and certainly never back to the school.

**[00:11:10] AH:** A few years ago, I drove out to the school and I couldn't get inside the classroom. President Bush was in, but I saw it from the outside. They let me view it from the outside.

**[00:11:20] MM:** Yeah, I remember driving up to the school in the motorcade. So after my briefing, we were told by the Secret Service, the head of the White House Situation Room and I were told by the Secret Service to go down and take our places in the motorcade because we would be leaving very shortly for the school. So I went down and got into my designated vehicle, which was it was called the senior staff van. So I was in there with Karl Rove, President's Chief Political Advisor; with Dan Bartlett, his Communications Director; with Ari Fleischer, his Press Secretary. So I was in there with a number of senior White House officials. And it was during the

drive from the hotel to the school that we learned that one plane had crashed into one of the towers. And so by the time we got to the school, that's all we knew at that point. As we drove up to the school, we had just heard about that that first plane.

**[00:12:28] AH:** And what was your first thoughts when you heard about the second plane striking? How did you experience that as a professional, as an American, as a loved one?

**[00:12:37] MM:** When we heard about the first plane, my initial thought was this must have been an accident, probably a small plane probably flying in bad weather. That's what I thought. When I got to the school, I called the CIA's operation center to see what they knew. They didn't know much. But the one thing they told me was that this was a large commercial jet.

So that wasn't consistent with my initial thinking. And I found it quite odd, because I said to myself, "How does a large commercial jet crashed into a building at that low of altitude?" But it wasn't long. I mean, it was literally just a few minutes after I walked into a classroom that had been set up as a staging area for the president to go into the classroom that he was in with the kids. And the rest of the White House staff was in this classroom. So when I walked into the classroom, there was a TV. And I'd say two or three minutes after I walked in is when the second plane hit the second tower. And I knew instantly that this was a terrorist attack. It's just pure logic. There's no way that that could have been an accident. My mind went immediately to terrorist attack. My mind went immediately to al Qaeda and to bin Laden.

**[00:14:06] AH:** That was going to be a by next question. At what point in that day did you think to yourself Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda. It seems like pretty instantly.

**[00:14:16] MM:** Yeah, at that moment, right? And the reason is because we at the CIA were focused on him and his organization. It was the National Security threat that we worried the most about. By that time, there had already been Al Qaeda attacks on our two embassies in East Africa, on a US naval vessel, the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen, and a number of attempted attacks around the time of the millennium. We were deeply concerned about Al Qaeda. We were trying to collect as much intelligence as we could. We were trying to work as well as we could with the authorities that we had against the organization.

I think the other thing I should say that took me immediately to al Qaeda was, in kind of mid April 2001 to early July 2001, there was a significant amount of threat reporting about a possible Al Qaeda attack. And their start reporting was quite concerning, because it talked about catastrophic attacks. It talked about simultaneous attacks. It talked about history changing attacks. And then that intelligence flow just stopped.

The one thing that was never clear in the intelligence was where, when or how, right? So there was no specificity to that intelligence. But if you take the general concern we had about Al Qaeda, going back to 1996, and then amplified by those actual attacks that they committed, and then again, amplified by that threat reporting in the spring in early summer of 2001. You put all that together, and that's what took me instantaneously to Al Qaeda and Bin Laden.

**[00:16:23] AH:** And did you have any friends or family in New York, or in the Pentagon?

**[00:16:28] MM:** I didn't. And so I wasn't worried about that from my perspective. I was worried about my family. And what I was worried about in that regard is I thought they would be worried about me. I thought that we were a target possibly certainly at the school, because it had been public information that the president was going to be there. So I, quite frankly, worried when we were at the school that somebody might fly a plane into the school. So I was worried that my family was going to be worried about me. We were not allowed to make any phone calls. And so I couldn't call my wife and tell her that I was okay. I couldn't call her and tell her that there was no need to worry, in my view. So that was the personal concern on my behalf.

**[00:17:15] AH:** So you give President Bush the briefing that morning. When is the next time that you see him? So you give the briefing. He goes to the school. He gets the news from his chief of staff. When do you next see President Bush?

**[00:17:27] MM:** Yeah. So I see him in that classroom where I saw the second plane hit the second tower, because when Andy Card gave him the news, he came back into that classroom, and he made some phone calls to the Vice President, to the Director of the FBI, to his National Security Adviser. And it was there that Ari Fleischer wrote out the President's statement to the nation. And so I was standing right there when all this was happening. The President sat down

at a table, went over the remarks, made a few changes, and then walked back into the classroom with the kids and gave the statement to the nation about what just happened.

Then the next time I saw him was when we were back on Air Force One. A Palestinian terrorist group called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the PFLP, took public credit for what had just happened in New York. It's probably about an hour after the attacks. And President immediately asked to see me. So I walked into his office on Air Force One. And he said, "What do you know about this group?" I told him that it was a Palestinian terrorist group. That it had a long history of attacks against Israel. But I told him that they did not have the capability to do what had just happened in New York. So I was confident it was not them.

The PFLP leadership got smart about a half hour later and decided to come out and say, "No, it wasn't us." And so they withdrew the claim of responsibility. It was the second time I saw him after the attacks. The third time was probably the most interesting. We had landed at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. The President was going to tape another address to the nation. And he did that. I stayed on the plane. Plane also took on food and water because we had no idea how long we'd be flying around. No idea when we could go back to Washington. We also left behind at Barksdale all of those White House officials who were on the plane for the education policy events. First one was in Jacksonville on Monday night and then the one at the school in Sarasota on Tuesday morning. So we left all of those people behind. And it was really only the media that remained and those people that had anything at all to do with national security, including me.

So then we took off from Barksdale. And we were on our way off at Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska. And it was during that flight, that segment of the flight that the President asked to see me again. And this time it was Andy Card, the President's White House Chief of Staff, and me, and the president in his office by ourselves. And the President said to me, looked me in the eye and said, "Michael, who did this?" And I told the president that I had not seen any intelligence that would take us to a perpetrator. So he was going to get my best assessment. He said, "I understand the caveat you're making. So now, move on. Get to your assessment." Very much of a George Bush kind of direct order.

And so I told him, "Mr. President, there are two nation states with links to terrorism, Iran and Iraq. Both of them have the capability to do what just happened. But neither one of them would have anything to gain from doing this. In fact, both of them would have everything to lose. So I don't think it was either Iran or Iraq." I said, "I believe that when we get to the end of the trail, we're going to find Al Qaeda, and we're going to find Osama bin Laden." I told him that I was so confident in that judgment that I would bet my children's future on it.

That kind of sunk in a little bit. And then the president said to me, "When will we know?" Which again is kind of direct question you get from any president, but particularly from President Bush. And there's not an answer to that question. I couldn't tell him exactly when would we know. So what I did is I fell back on something that analysts are taught to do and that I had done dozens and dozens of times during my career, which is provide context. So I walked through for him the previous terrorist attacks against the United States. And in each case, how long did it take us to know? So I told him the East Africa embassy bombings, it took us two or three days to figure out that it was Al Qaeda. The attack on the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen, I told him it took us several months to link that back to Al Qaeda. The attack on Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed a number of US soldiers. I told him it took us almost a year to link that back to Saudi Hezbollah and to the Iranians. And so when I put all that together, I said, "Mr. President, we may know soon who did this with a degree of certainty. And then again, it may take us some time."

And I remember at that point, Andrew, that the President just sat there. He was thinking. I have no idea what he was thinking about, but he didn't ask me any other questions. And we sat there for probably five minutes with none of the three of us saying anything. And it was actually starting to feel a little bit uncomfortable to me. So I said, "Mr. President, is there anything else?" And he said, "No, Michael, thank you." And so I walked out of his office and went back to my seat.

The other interaction I had with him, which I think was fairly significant was on the flight from Offutt Air Force Base back to Andrews Air Force Base. So when the President was at Offutt, he did a secure video teleconference with his National Security Team. There were two interesting things in that secure video teleconference. One was that George Tenet, my boss, the Director of the CIA, told the president that the CIA had run the names on the flight manifests from the four

flights against their terrorist database, and they had three hits. They knew that three people on those four flights were Al Qaeda operatives.

So George Tenet had a little bit of evidence to back up his judgment, which was consistent with mine that this was Al Qaeda. The second thing of significance that happened at this secure video teleconference was that the Director of the Secret Service, who was back in Washington was trying to convince the president to not come back to Washington. To stay away from the Nation's Capital, because he couldn't guarantee the president safety. And the President was having none of it. President said, "No, I'm coming home." And so that's when we decided to fly back to Washington.

And during that flight, the CIA sent me all of the information that George Tenet had briefed to the President. I had George Tenet's talking points for that secure video teleconference. And I had a couple of other pieces of intelligence that had come in to the agency. President didn't know about them yet. And they wanted me to share them with the President.

So I told Andy Card I had this material. And he said, "Great. The President will want to see it. I'll come get you when he's ready." So probably about a half hour after that conversation, Andy Card came and got me and said he's ready. So Andy walked me into the conference room on Air Force One, conference table, conference room kind of chairs, and President was seated at the head of the table. I sat on one side of him. Andy Card sat on the other. I gave him a little bit more information than George Tenet gave him from George's talking points. And then I showed him one of the pieces of intelligence that the CIA had sent to me. And it was quite alarming. This was from a European Intelligence Service. It was a piece of intelligence that was shared with us by a European Intelligence Service. And this piece of intelligence said that what happened that morning was the first of two waves of attacks that were going to be carried out against the United States.

So imagine the president sitting there having just gone through what he went through that morning, which is not protecting his citizens from outside attack, which is president's number one job. President Bush had told me a number of times that that was his number one job. So imagine him sitting there with his intelligence briefer showing him a piece of intelligence that said what happened this morning is going to happen again.

I did make clear to him that we didn't know where this piece of intelligence had come from. We didn't know the sourcing. We knew what country gave it to us. But we didn't know where they got it from. So I cautioned a caution to him a little bit on the intelligence, but it was still striking in what it said. That was the last time I saw him before we landed in before I then saw him again in the Oval Office two days later.

**[00:27:21] AH:** Is the European country, is that still classified which country it was?

**[00:27:25] MM:** Yeah, I'm not sure it is. But I'm not sure it's not.

**[00:27:29] AH:** Let's air on the side of caution.

**[00:27:33] MM:** Correct. Correct.

**[00:27:36] AH:** And hearing your talk there, it struck me, the President, my number one job is to protect American citizens. And then you have this catastrophic set of terrorist attacks. And the president is feeling like he hasn't done his number one task. But it strikes me that it would be – I guess, I would feel a little bit exposed or a lot about vulnerable. You've got the most powerful man in the world. He's probably pretty annoyed that he's not performed his number one job. And I'm there as the analytic person on point for the Central Intelligence Agency. Is he going to turn around and lay some of this on me or on my institution? Were there ever any moments where your stomach felt a little bit fluttering? You were like, "Yeah, this is going to be something that's I'm going to have to negotiate on behalf of the agency and on behalf of myself."

**[00:28:30] MM:** There was nothing that day. And there was nothing ever from him on that. He never raised it either on that day or on subsequent days. Now, we do know, that later, the country came together in a very significant way after 9/11. But that ultimately eroded. And ultimately members of Congress came after, both the CIA and the FBI, wanting to blame somebody. But I never felt that. I never felt that from the president. There was one day that he got mad, very mad, and it was related to Al Qaeda. And it was my last day. So it was January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002. We were at the ranch in Texas. I had taken my successor with me to introduce my

successor to the President. And it was the day that we had found out that bin Laden had escaped from Tora Bora.

And so when my successor and I walked into the room with the president, the folks who are going to join us via secure video teleconference we're not on the screen yet. So that would have been Condi Rice; the Vice President, Dick Cheney; and George Tennant, the CIA director, my boss. So they weren't on the screen yet. So the President said to me when we walked into the room, he said, "Is there anything new this morning?" So I was obliged to tell him that we had learned overnight that bin Laden had escaped. And the President got very angry. It was the only time in my entire year of briefing him that he got angry.

And in this case, he shot the messenger. He said to me, "How did you let this happen? What are you going to do about this now?" He kind of made it personal at me. And I didn't take it personally. And I certainly understood his deep frustration. But my successor is sitting over in the corner, wondering, "Is this what it's like every day? What did I just sign up for?"

I know the president felt a little bad about showing his temper and taking aim at me, because I got a card from him a couple days later, very nice card from him a couple days later. So it was very unusual for him. And I don't blame him. But I must tell you, when we were joined in the meeting by George Tenet, and the Vice President, and the National Security Adviser, the first thing the president said to them was, "What is this Michael telling me about Bin Laden escaping? What the hell happened?" He switched his frustration from me to them as soon as they were on the screen.

I think the other thing to say in response to your question is I saw the President on 9/11. I saw the president become the Commander-in-Chief before my eyes. Prior to 9/11, his administration didn't seem to have a lot of direction. His popularity was starting to dip. Wasn't clear what his administration was all about. And on 9/11, I could just see in his eyes that he knew what his job was going forward. And later, he told me that 9/11 for him was – And he's a very religious man. 9/11 for him was God making very clear to him what his role in life was. Why he was put here on this planet at this time. And why he was president at this moment and at this time. And it was to deal with this issue.

He also told me a little bit later that because of 9/11, he now understood how Israel felt. And he now understood why Israel did the things it did to protect itself because of what happened to us. So it was really transformational for him, and of course, for his presidency.

**[00:32:41] AH:** When you were talking there, it reminded me a little bit of – I remember reading about another Son of Ohio, U.S. Grant. And just before the outbreak of the Civil War, he was in Galena, and people said that he was kind of disheveled and seemed to lack purpose. But when the war broke out, they saw him setting higher on his horse, and he got the sense of purpose that never left him all the way through until the Appomattox Courthouse.

**[00:33:09] MM:** Yes. And I think there're real similarities there between President Grant and President Bush.

**[00:33:16] AH:** Another thing that I was thinking of was how does the rest of that period play out? So you're there on 9/11. You're the presidential daily briefer. But before you leave in January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, the war and Afghanistan begins, which no one knew at the time, but that went on to become the longest war in American history. So tell us what it was like to be briefing a president that was just about to go to war.

**[00:33:44] MM:** Yeah. So he was at war, right? So just a couple of weeks after 9/11, CIA officers were on the ground in Afghanistan. In the north, they had hooked up with the Northern Alliance, and they were trying to organize the Northern Alliance to move south. And in the southern part of the country, we were working with Pashtun tribes to try to get them to rise up against the Taliban. After a few days, the Northern Alliance started moving south, and we were at war.

Special Forces joined the CIA officers a few weeks after the CIA was there, and they were calling in airstrikes on Taliban and Al Qaeda position. So there was, in October and November, a war playing out. U.S. personnel on the ground and U.S. aircraft, cruise missiles, all being used against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. And the President was deeply, deeply interested in what was happening every day. So the briefings essentially became briefings about two things. Briefings about any threat reporting with regard to Al Qaeda, planning more attacks. And there was significant amount of threat reporting. Some of it not real, but some of it very much real. And then the second was the fighting in Afghanistan.

So I actually used one of those large military maps that I would lay on the table in the Situation Room. And I would show him where the Al Qaeda and Taliban forces were and where the Northern Alliance forces were. And I would show him the change overnight. So he was deeply, deeply interested in that. He and George Tenet would talk about operational issues. The President would make decisions on the spot. It was a very, very different experience for me post 9/11 than it was pre 9/11.

**[00:35:42] AH:** There's so much interesting things that we could dig into, and your career is so multifaceted. But I think it's better if we just focus on this for at least for this go around. I just wondered, because there's a direct connection to 9/11. So let's do a jump cut forward to May of 2011, because you're with President Bush in 9/11. And you've got this really unique experience. And then you're with President Obama for the raid in Abbottabad. I guess the question is was that a sense of release? Or was that a sense of closure or completeness? Or is that something that you had been hoping was going to happen, and now it had finally happened? Or was it just another day in the life of a CIA intelligence officer?

**[00:36:29] MM:** No. It had the successful operation against Bin Laden, and Abbottabad had significant meaning for the CIA. It had significant meaning for me. And as you'll hear in a minute, it had significant meaning for President Bush. So after 9/11, I mentioned earlier that there was a bit of a blame game. And ironically, the only two organizations in the US government that really paid significant attention to Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, the CIA and the FBI were the ones that were blamed. There's a little bit of responsibility to take here in terms of the fact that the intelligence community, CIA, and the National Security Agency did not penetrate the senior leadership of Al Qaeda to the point that they knew what Bin Laden was planning. Had we done that, we would have prevented the attacks. We didn't.

I often talk about 911 being a national failure, and not just an intelligence failure. So it's an intelligence failure. It's a policy failure, and it's actually a failure of our own citizens. People don't remember that Al Gore, when he was vice president, led a commission on aviation safety. And in that report was a chapter on aviation security. And in that chapter, there were a number of recommendations that had they been implemented, they would have prevented 9/11. The hijackers would not have been able to get on the plane with the knives that they got on the

plane with. And why weren't those recommendations put into effect? Because the airline industry fought them. And the reason the airline industry thought them is they thought that the flying public would not accept them. This is more than an intelligence failure and a policy failure. This was a national failure.

Because of the blame game and because the CIA did feel as if it was responsible for not having fully penetrated al Qaeda, the ultimate operation against Bin Laden had deep, deep meaning for the organization and for any of us who were involved in 9/11 itself, or the run up to 9/11, or the aftermath. So it did have deep meaning.

I mentioned President Bush earlier. President Obama, knowing that I was with President Bush on 9/11, asked me to go to Dallas after May 1<sup>st</sup> and brief President Bush on what happened. So about two weeks after May 1st, I went to Dallas. And I took with me the lead analyst, the most senior analyst on Al Qaeda, to tell the president the intelligence story. How it was that we found Bin Laden there. And then I also took with me the senior planner for the Joint Special Operations Command, JSOC, which did the raid, to tell the story of the raid itself. And we spent two and a half hours with the president walking through all of that. And President Bush was interested in every single detail in the intelligence story he had remembered. Some of the things that happened in the intelligence story happened while he was president, and he had remembered Mike Hayden, who was then the Director of CIA briefing him on these pieces of the story.

When we got to the end, he said, "Laura and I were going to go to the movies tonight. But this is better than any movie you could ever possibly see. So we're staying home." He got up and he went over to his desk, and he opened a drawer. And he pulled out three of his Commander-in-Chief challenge coins. For people who don't know, military units have these coins, and they're called Challenge Coins. And they have the insignia of the unit on them. They might have the motto of the unit on them. And they exchange these coins. And the President of United States, as Commander-in-Chief, has a Challenge Coin of his own. And it is within my reach right now to reach out and grab it, because he gave each of us a coin that day. And when he slapped the coin into my hands, and I looked into his eyes, I could see closure in his eyes for the first time.

**[00:40:53] AH:** That's fascinating, Michael. And we've got a great exhibit here at the International Spy Museum on the Abbottabad raid. And, yeah, a certain person whose first and last name begins with an M may or may not be part of that.

**[00:41:09] MM:** Yeah, it's a great exhibit. It's a great exhibit. And what people should know, this is an exhibit about the analysis that was done with regard to the Abbottabad compound. And what people should know is that the exercise that this exhibit goes through, the analysts really did. This is real stuff.

**[00:41:26] AH:** As one of the exhibits that our guests like the most. So I was very busy. On that question as well, and this is one of these ones where there's intelligence failures and policy successes. And you mentioned systemic failure and national failure and so forth. But just the question that often comes up here is, if after 9/11, Osama bin Laden was public enemy number one, then why did it take 10 years to find him? I'm just thinking about another museum that I used to work at, the 9/11 Museum. And they've got a large sign that a lady in Brooklyn used to have out on her front garden, and every day she would go out and flip the numbers over from day one all the way through. And you can see on it it's got nine years, and I can't remember the amount of days. But yeah, I just wondered if you had any thoughts on that.

**[00:42:18] MM:** Yeah, I absolutely do. So we were asked frequently by the media, by members of Congress, "Why haven't you found bin Laden?" And it was not for a lack of trying. The fact of the matter is, if someone wants to hide, it's possible, particularly if they disconnect themselves electronically from the world, which Bin Laden did, you can hide. People don't remember, but it took the FBI 17 years to find the Unabomber. It took them six or seven years, I forget exactly what the number is, to find the bomber at the Atlanta Olympics. And both the Unabomber and the Olympic bomber were hiding in America, right. They were hiding on the FBI's turf. Here, Bin Laden is hiding, and he's not hiding on turf that we control. So it's not easy to find somebody who wants to hide is the answer.

**[00:43:18] AH:** I think like some of the frustration that I've heard some people express is, I guess, it gets directed towards the Iraq War. There's this argument that Iraq was a huge diversion of forecasts of money of materiel. So Osama bin Laden, the whole energy of the US government wasn't towards getting him and getting towards the people that perpetrated 9/11. A

lot of that energy got diverted to this other very complex, very intractable situation in Iraq. Do you have any views on that? Iraq is a complicating factor in finding Osama bin Laden?

**[00:43:57] MM:** Yeah. I'd say it was a complicating factor in three things. One was the war in Afghanistan. So the war in Afghanistan took a backseat to the war in Iraq. It didn't get the resources that it deserved during the war in Iraq, particularly during the 2006 period when the insurgency was full blown. Two, it got in the way of the fight against Al Qaeda in general around the world, because CIA was asked to pour a lot of resources into our own Iraq work, both analytically and from a collection perspective. And third, I think it got in the way of the hunt for Bin Laden. Absolutely, again, because of the focus and the resource requirement of the Iraq War. No doubt in my mind.

**[00:44:48] AH:** That's interesting to know. And I guess just walking up to the present day. So we're coming up on the 20th anniversary of 9/11. But what are your thoughts looking back now, Michael, on the agency that you served for 30 years, or on the intelligence community, or on the United States and its position in the world more generally? Sorry. That's a huge question, but I just wondered if you had any thoughts.

**[00:45:15] MM:** Yeah. There're some thoughts that come to mind. The first is CIA was the first organization to focus on Bin Laden, and Al Qaeda. It was the first organization to raise an alarm, that the work of CIA saved lives, even prior to 9/11. I talked about the Millennium plots earlier, and our ability to prevent those plots from actually happening.

And then after 9/11, the ability to take off the battlefield a number of senior al Qaeda operatives to prevent a number of plots from happening. There wasn't another foreign terrorist attack in the homeland until just recently in Pensacola, Florida, by a Saudi Air student. The first foreign terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11. So the work that CIA did both before 9/11 and after 9/11 has saved hundreds, if not thousands, of American lives, and CIA should be extraordinarily proud of that.

We do need to take responsibility where we need to take responsibility. And I'd say although we were focused on it, we hadn't penetrated the organization to the extent we needed to to prevent 9/11. And that's ours to own.

I'd also say that that's thought one. Thought two is, in many ways, the United States played right into Bin Laden's hands, not by going to Afghanistan to take on Al Qaeda and take on the Taliban in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, but the decision to stay in Afghanistan. The decision to broaden the objectives of the war, to remake Afghan society was a huge mistake, and played right into the extremist narrative about what the United States is all about. And the same can be said about the war in Iraq. And all of that led to the spread of extremism around the world.

And I'd go so far as to say, Andrew, if Bin Laden were alive today, and he were thinking about the 20th anniversary, and if he were doing an interview like this, I think he'd feel pretty good about where his movement was, right? I mean, Islamic extremists are in larger number today than they were on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001. And they're spread from West Africa, all the way to East Africa, into the Middle East, into South Asia, and into Southeast Asia. So I think he'd feel pretty good about where things stood for his movement, even though he didn't make it and even though Al Qaeda, then, in many ways replaced by ISIS. The movement of extremism is not unhealthy. It's not what it was three or four years ago, but it's not unhealthy. And there's always a risk that it's going to bounce back.

And then the third thought is kind of a contrary thought. We did after 9/11 what we needed to do in terms of focus and resources. But while we were doing that, Russia and China were preparing for the future. And so the last 20 years, in a sense, was a last 20 years in the nation state struggle between the United States and Russia on the one hand, and the competition between the United States in China on the other. It was a last two decades from that perspective.

And I think the last thing I'll say is, prior to the pandemic, it was easy to think that 3,000 people dying on one day was a monumental thing. And it certainly was, right? And certainly was when it was caused by a terrorist organization. But the pandemic saw many, many days in the United States where more than 3,000 people died. 600,000 people have now died from the pandemic. And so it puts a little bit in perspective, right? It puts 9/11 in perspective a little bit that the Coronavirus has killed so many people.

**[00:49:41] AH:** Do you have plans for where you're going to be on the 20th anniversary? Is it going to be a quiet one at home? Or have you been asked to speak somewhere or appear somewhere?

**[00:49:52] MM:** Yeah. So I've been asked to do a number of things. So I think I'll be in New York. I think I'll do some television interview. And then I have a couple of events to go to in New York, but I'll be in New York.

**[00:50:06] AH:** And if you could choose an artifact – This is a difficult one, because I guess you could choose so many. But if you could choose one artifact to go into a museum that would help tell the story of Michael Morrell 9/11 and the post 9/11 era, what would it be?

**[00:50:22] MM:** So I gave to the CIA Museum. So for every presidential trip, the White House puts together a little yellow book. It's the story of every minute of the trip. It's what happens every minute of the trip. And it's a little yellow book. It's about three inches by five inches. And I kept my book from that trip. So it said President's trip to Florida, September 10th, September 11th. And I gave that book to the CIA Museum.

And then if I was going to give another artifact, I have a brick from the Abbottabad compound. So a brick from the main house when the Pakistanis tore it down. That's pretty special momento for me. So that's the second piece.

**[00:51:12] AH:** Okay. I should say that I wasn't fishing on behalf of the Spy Museum. But of course, if you have anything, I would be more than glad to take it.

**[00:51:22] MM:** I'm sure. I'm sure.

**[00:51:24] AH:** And final question. It just struck me. This is a more personal question. It just struck me reading a little bit about your background, a first generation student, and then you find yourself briefing one president on 9/11 with another president for the Abbottabad raid. You become Acting Director of the CIA, Deputy Director of the CIA. Help our listeners who have never had your experience, what is that like to go from this incredible journey that you've been on?

**[00:51:57] MM:** I don't think about it necessarily that way. I joined the CIA right out of college. So I left Ohio and came to Washington, DC. And I worked really hard. I was raised to work really hard. My parents instilled that in me. And I just continued to do well at the work I did at the agency and to get promoted and promoted, and found myself in these very interesting jobs. Whether it was being George Tennant's executive assistant, or George Bush's intelligence briefer, or the Head of Analysis at CIA, or the Deputy Director, or the Acting Director. It didn't seem like a journey for me.

But when I look back on it now, it does seem like an awful long way to come for a middle-class kid, whose dad was an auto worker, and his mom was a homemaker. And I think it speaks. It's going to sound corny, but it speaks to the American dream being, at least back in 1980, possible. One of the concerns today is that the American Dreams eroded and those kind of stories are less likely. And I hope that's not true, because that American Dream is so important to who we are as Americans, and to the belief of Americans in what America stands for. So I think about it more now than I ever did when I was actually on the journey.

**[00:53:28] AH:** And this one as a blatant attempt at fishing. Do you have any plans to write another book that we can get your back on SpyCast for?

**[00:53:37] MM:** That's a great question. So probably not. I really enjoyed writing my book. But it's a lot of work to write a book. I'm a bit of a perfectionist. People at CIA would tell you a little bit too much if you're a perfectionist. But I wanted everything to be perfect. I wanted everything to be right. And so there're a lot of hours that went into that book. And I probably made well less than the minimum wage writing that book. So I don't think I have another book in me. But you never know what the future holds.

**[00:54:12] AH:** Well, thanks ever so much for your time. It's been a pleasure to speak to you, Michael.

**[00:54:19] MM:** Great to speak with you, Andrew. Anytime.

**[00:54:20] AH:** Thank you.

**[00:54:20] MM:** You're welcome.

**[END]**