

EPISODE 497

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:00] AH: Welcome to this week's episode of SpyCast. One of CIA's most decorated field officers, a conversation with Mark Polymeropoulous. What do you get if you cross a Greek Orthodox guy from Athens, and a Jewish girl from Long Island, and then mix in two Ivy League degrees, and a 26-year career in the CIA? If you haven't worked out that this refers to Mark, given that he's mentioned in the episode title, you can probably forget about having a career in intelligence.

Mark is brimming with vitality, chock-full of stories, and can talk baseball and wings as well as any man the side of the Rio Grande. He can also discuss Algerian politics or US grand strategy in the Middle East. If you ever pull a barstool up next to mark, you've knocked the ball out of the park. Mark's new book, *Clarity in Crisis: Leadership Lessons From the CIA* **[inaudible 00:00:56]** the insights he derived from right from his career, and as available in the Spy Museum's bookstore.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:02] AH: I'm so glad that we finally managed to get a chance to speak, Mark, and I really enjoyed reading your book over the weekend.

[00:01:09] MP: Thanks, Andrew. It's an honor to be here. I'm glad you enjoyed it. What an amazing journey I've had from kind of 26 years in the shadows to writing a book.

[00:01:16] AH: I would like to get into your book in a little bit. But could you just tell our listeners how you ended up in the Central Intelligence Agency?

[00:01:23] MP: Ah, what a story? Well, I think it all started back, obviously, with my last name, Polymeropoulous, I'm of Greek background. And so my dad was Greek. He was born in Greece. Came over to the United States to go to university, and he met my mom, who was a nice Jewish

girl from Long Island. So here's a Greek Orthodox guy from Athens. So the marriage didn't last very long. But that's neither here nor there.

And so in the summers, because my dad had received his PhD and then became a university professor, in the summers, I was really lucky, I went back to the Greek islands to Greece for two or three months every summer as I was growing up, which is pretty remarkable, because not only did I have this kind of worldly view, but we also traveled a lot. So I had this kind of wanderlust.

And then a couple other things happened when I was growing up. When I was 10 years old, my dad went on a sabbatical to Algeria. And I don't think we do this today, certainly not with my kids. But my mom put me on an airplane when I was 10. And off I went by myself through Paris to Algeria. And my dad and I, for an entire month, drove 2000 miles through the Sahara Desert, just sleeping in desert oasis. And so I really fell in love with the Middle East end.

So you kind of get a sense, I guess, that I had this kind of wanderlust and this idea that I wanted more. And so I don't think anybody in my family was particularly surprised when I ended up at CIA. It was going to be do something with, first of all, public service, but more importantly, kind of overseas or kind of externally outward-facing towards the world.

[00:02:41] AH: And you mentioned Algeria there. I know that you've done some graduate. Was it graduate work in Algeria, or that was your undergraduate thesis?

[00:02:49] MP: It was my master's thesis on Algeria.

[00:02:52] AH: And that was informed by visiting there as a child?

[00:02:55] MP: Yeah, for sure. No doubt. And so really interesting. And it was the rise then of the Islamic Salvation Movement, which is the Algerian Islamic Fundamentalist Movement, which, ironically enough, later on, when you look what happened in Afghanistan and kind of the rise of the Afghan Arabs, there were a lot of Algerians involved there. So way back in 1992, I was writing about this in university and ended up later on professionally having to deal with that as well.

[00:03:20] AH: And just a brief aside, have you seen the Battle of Algiers?

[00:03:23] MP: Oh, yeah. Look, so the French involvement in Algeria is extraordinary story. It's fascinating. If you talk about a colonial power, which committed atrocities and with all sorts of domestic political considerations, it's truly fascinating.

But ultimately, my studies on Algeria, and my trip to Algeria as well, really kind of that was that was kind of the basis for me wanting to become a Middle East expert, and I don't think I ever became an expert. Nobody really does, but ultimately, really an interest in a fascinating part of the world and culture and, and history. And there's nothing more exciting than a 10 year old kid riding a camel around and sleeping in the desert oasis. And I really I think I thought I was Lawrence of Arabia was incredible. And, and I look back then even years later, when I'm in Afghanistan, and I look back at those early days and my trips to the Middle East, and maybe there was something there that kind of spurred on that interest. But boy, amazing time.

[00:04:10] AH: You retired not too long ago as a Senior Operator in the CIA who got to the Senior Intelligence Service, but you didn't start off as an operator. Did you?

[00:04:21] MP: No. It's a great story. I started off as an analyst. So I went to Cornell University, undergrad and grad school. Again, I wrote my master's thesis on Algeria. Get recruited into the analytical core, the Directorate of Intelligence. And for the first couple of years, I was doing Afghanistan. Ironically, it was an Algeria expert, and they put me on Afghanistan, but I think they just – It's where the needs of the service were. But I took a trip to the Middle East in 1996 for three months. And I fell in love with the idea of living overseas and becoming an operations officer, a case officer. So I went back.

And this is a funny story. I went back to my boss, who at the time was John Brennan, and obviously later of fame as the CIA Director. And I said to John, I said, "Look, sir, I think I want to stay in the agency, but I want to become a case officer." And he said, "Yeah, that's fine. No problem." And I laugh about that because it was like it really wasn't much objections. I must have been a really lousy analyst.

And him and I have joked about that over the years as well. But ultimately, he did the right thing, because I stayed at CIA in the organization. And I ended up doing a job that I loved, which was a case officer.

[00:05:18] AH: Yeah. So when you originally joined up, you wanted to be an analyst? Or was it just a stop gap before you got to operations?

[00:05:24] MP: Oh, great question, Andrew. So I think, ultimately, I wanted to get in the door. It's good you say that, because so many people asked me now about careers in the CIA. And I said, "Just get inside." Get past the security processing and the clearances. It took me – God. So look, remember I was born in Greece. All my trips all over the world. It took me 18 months to get my security clearances. And I think my parents were ready to kick me out of the house. But really, it was a weigh in the door. And one of the great things about CIA, there are different careers there. Whether you're an analyst, or an operations officer, or scientist, support officer, logistician, we employ so many different types of folks. And so it really was, as you said, it was a step in the door. And I think everyone's got to find their calling. And sometimes things change in your life and your career. But certainly, I really enjoyed the three years where I was in the analytic core. It taught me how to be a really good writer, which, as we're sitting around today, talking about my book. That's a skill that the director of intelligence really does. There is analytic tradecraft training. So they taught me how to write, and it helped me frankly as a case officer later on, because we always joke around on the operational side, if you don't put it down on a table, it didn't happen. So you can be the world's best recruiter, but you've got to be able to write it up. So I was able to write. And I think that really helped me later on.

[00:06:27] AH: Do you think that you took a lot away from the experience, someone who was trained in analysis, trained how to write and then becomes a case officer? Or do you think there could be some model in the future where you could have someone join the CIA like a cop? You join up and you do a beat. And then after that, you can do other things? Would it be good if people join this case officers on a few years as analysts or vice versa?

[00:06:52] MP: It's a Great question, because actually, other services do that. So it's not uncommon for other intelligence services. It would be a little different for us because there's so much training involved. So obviously, for an operations officer, for a case officer, there's the

operational tradecraft training. Its surveillance detection training and how to actually go about the recruitment cycle of spotting, assessing, developing and recruiting an agent. It takes a year.

So I think it's a little too hard to do that kind of cross-fertilization. And same thing on the analytic side, there is analytic tradecraft. I mean, there are schools that the analysts go to when they join the agency. So it's a little bit difficult. But what I think it brings up as a good point is that, for a long time, certainly at the beginning of my career, there were stovepipes between the two directorates. And that's really broken down. And I think I credit actually the warzones to having led that effort, because ultimately, when you're at the station in Cobbler in Baghdad, everyone's on the same team. There's operators, there're analysts there.

And I'll tell you, when I did warzone service, if I had an agent meeting, sometimes I would take an analyst with me. And that's really not the norm. But breaking down those barriers is important. I mean, look at the Counterterrorism Center as well. Again, it's a kind of a joint analytic operational unit. So there's certainly room for working side by side in a collaborative fashion. I'm not so sure you can kind of go back and forth just because the skills needed in there, kind of the two really unique skill sets. So that's kind of my view on that.

[00:08:06] AH: For a number of reasons, I was excited to speak to you, Marc. But one of them is it's not that often that I come across someone else who's read Caravans and had a really lingering effect for. Because for me, it was just so evocative and it was just so well written. And there's just something really beautiful about the book. But I know that you mentioned it in your book. Can you tell the listeners a little bit more about that and why it kind of had an effect on you?

[00:08:35] MP: So one of the things I did when I was a kid in the summers in Greece. So we go for three months. And I turn into a voracious reader, even when I was young starting or whatever, 9, 10, 11. And I would love reading James Michener, because he had these incredible stories of exotic locales. And so when I was young, I read Caravan, which is set in the post-war World War II period. But it's about a young foreign service officer, an American, and kind of going to this exotic land. And Afghanistan was a far different place then. It was not a land of extremism. In fact, it was a kind of a stop on a hippie tour. But it really kind of struck me, and I

never forgot it. And I still have the old copy of the book. It's actually behind me somewhere here in my office.

And one of the amazing things is, later on, I was on one of the teams that went. Not one of the first teams. But this is February, March of 2002. We were in Helmand Province, and I was with the Special Forces team. And I was sitting across from an Afghan tribal leader where I think we're trying to negotiate the surrender of a Taliban target, not a high value target, but a Taliban remember. And I was thinking back to that time. I said, "This is extraordinary." I mean, there are scenes like this in Mitchner's book. And Afghanistan was a far different place in 2002, far more dangerous, but it still had that feeling of exoticism. And I love that.

I think you asked me before some of the things that spurred me on to the agency. Certainly reading that book, Caravan, was one as well. But boy, just thinking back as a 10 or 11 year old reading that book, and then when I'm there in 2002. Boy! Same place. It was amazing. And I still, every once in a while, we'll go through that book and find a chapter or even a verse that I enjoyed because it was just such an inspiration for me.

[00:10:04] AH: And help our listeners understand a little bit more about that first chapter of your career at CIA. So you're put on Afghanistan. Help us understand your experience being an analyst and also some of your work on Afghanistan. This is a very interesting period. The Soviets withdraw in '89. And the Taliban are not quite in power yet. But it's an interesting transitional period, and it must have been trippy analyzing that and the early 90s and then to find yourself there 10 years later.

[00:10:34] MP: Oh, sure. And then, of course, then I went back again as a base chief in 2011 and 2012. Everything after 9/11 had an Afghan component to it and everything we did. Whether I was posted in the Middle East, there was always kind of that specter of Al Qaeda and core Al Qaeda still in Afghanistan. So what a great question, because when I started in 1993 as this analyst on Afghanistan, there was the period after **[inaudible 00:10:54]** regime fell, and there was kind of chaos in Afghanistan. And the Mujahideen and all the factions were fighting each other. And then there was the rise or the discussion of what to do with the Arab Afghans. These are the 10,000 or so. And I can't remember the exact number, but Arabs who had traveled to

Afghanistan to fight the Soviet Mujahideen. And frankly, a lot of them kind of on our side as we were supporting the Mujahideen as well.

And I remember writing a paper or contributing to a paper, I wasn't a very good writer at that time, but contributing to a paper about this. And there was a little box we had about a young, flamboyant, or charismatic, not flamboyant, charismatic, Saudi named who? Of course, Osama bin Laden and all the funding that he was doing for the Arab Afghans. And so just a really interesting time.

And it's worth mentioning, I think it really is now. And it's something that I actually talk and write about as well, because I'm really worried about the Afghan withdrawal. And that Afghan goes back into that period of an ungoverned or lawless state, ungoverned spaces. That's like a weed that grows for terrorist groups. And so I think there are some parallels that I think we have to be really careful about, because when we, the United States, and in effect, take the rest of international community's attention away from an issue, sometimes really bad things can happen.

So frankly, I've been critical of the full withdrawal. Certainly don't think that we should have 50,000 troops, but I don't see why we don't leave a residual force of 2500 or so including Special Operations and intelligence personnel. Because ultimately, I don't want to see Afghanistan go back to that country that I first started working on in 1993.

[00:12:18] AH: And maybe you can't comment on this. But I read in the New York Times a few years ago that the Afghan station went on to become the biggest station in CIA history, went on to surpass the size of the station in Saigon during the Vietnam War.

[00:12:33] MP: I'd heard those things too. All I can tell is there're a lot of people there. I mean, it was for good cause. Ultimately, that we were attacked in 9/11. And then the key role of the Central Intelligence Agency was to prevent the next attack. Now bigger is not always better. But the fact that we had such a big station and we had these numerous bases throughout the country as well is certainly not a surprise. And with all the talk of Afghanistan and 20 year war, and I think there certainly is a narrative that things went on too long. But ultimately, I think that

the men and women in the CIA should be proud that there was not a second attack. And we really did a lot to prevent that.

And so the history of Afghanistan is going to be debated, especially our involvement for a long time. But for CIA, I know that there's a lot of pride that after those terrible days in 9/11, there was not the second one. The next big one did not occur. And I think the heroes at the agency really deserve a lot of credit for that.

[00:13:18] AH: Help us understand that period when you switch over to become a case officer before 9/11. What kind of things are you up to? What kind of things do you discuss in your book?

[00:13:29] MP: Well, just training. The process of course of after switching over was really two things. It's going through the kind of the training course, where you learn the art of becoming a case officer. You learn what tradecraft is all about, whether it's surveillance detection routes, how to conduct them, whether it's a recruitment cycle. That's of course, it's critical. And the language training. And so I spent almost two years learning Arabic.

And so ultimately, there's a tremendous amount of preparation involved. And that's something that sometimes people don't think they realize when they walk in the door, the lag time between when you're hired on. And you've already gone through this incredible process of getting your clearances. But then ultimately, when you go out the door in your first tour, it can take a couple years, and you just have to have a ton of patience.

One of the things I really enjoyed towards the end of my career was mentoring younger officers. Everyone wants to jump out the door and become a station chief right away. But ultimately, the key thing is just getting the right training, getting the right language, and then getting a lot of experience. Because at the end of the career, when you have those experiences of working in a warzone or working in a high-counterintelligence environment, or sometimes there's tours where you're doing a lot of recruiting. What all that means in the end is that you're really prepared for all different scenarios that happen. How to deal with the interagency process? And so I think at the end of my career, it's not that I was the greatest officer of all time, I just had a lot of

experience. And so I knew how to handle different situations. And so it's a marathon though. And particularly after 9/11 where the pace of work was so relentless.

[00:14:46] AH: And here's a question that I would love to hear your thoughts on. Are good case officers made or are they born?

[00:14:53] MP: Oh, they're definitely made. And I happen to be kind of Greek background, so super outgoing, and have kind of a type A personality. But that's kind of a misnomer. You don't have to have that. I think that what a good case officer has to have is really some intellectual curiosity, and of course willingness to live overseas. But the idea that you're born into this. I mean, I think the training is really good. I mean, one thing that I found really remarkable, and when I would tell new recruits coming in, and they never believe me is that actually the tradecraft training is actually very realistic. And it really does mirror real life. And so we certainly can help mold officers. And then there're things that you learn from experience. But I know some great case officers who were total introverts. Some of the best cases that I know of, and I know we're on a professional podcast here. So when I talk about officers and agents, you know what this means. But American people, everyone thinks that a CIA agent is what I was. It's not. An agent is a foreigner who we have recruited to spy for the United States. But some of our best agents – And it's really interesting talking to them after maybe a long relationship with the US. They said that they would go up to an officer perhaps on the diplomatic circuit who was the quietest, who was not the most gregarious and outgoing, because they were looking for someone who's going to protect them, who's not going to draw attention.

And so here I am, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm holding poker night, or there's going to be a basketball game I'm having for the diplomatic community, or all the silly things that we try to do to gain access and just get to know people around town. We're ultimately sometimes the best agents will look at the person in the shadows. And so it's all different types, introverts or extroverts. And I've known both people with those characteristics who are great successes.

[00:16:24] AH: There's room for George Smiley on James Bond?

[00:16:27] MP: Absolutely, yeah. James Bond part, I don't know. But yeah.

[00:16:31] AH: I mean, I was just thinking, you must have received a bit of rubbing being an analytical officer and switching over to becoming a case officer, did you?

[00:16:40] MP: Not really. Maybe in the old days you would have, but not so much now. And the interesting thing is that nobody really – That's the other misnomer to about, "Well, I did go to Cornell." But the idea of needing to have this kind of Ivy League pedigree. I mean, nobody – And at least I honestly don't know where any of my colleagues went to college. And just like I don't know their political affiliation. I mean, all anybody cares about is your performance. Is he or she got on the street? Can they detect surveillance? Can they recruit? Are they good handlers? Are they good writers? Are they loyal mates in the in the station? But your previous background, nobody really cares all that much. And so the old adage of certainly of having to come from an Ivy League school, that's long gone.

My father was a professor at Rutgers University. Now he went to Cornell as well. So I ended up going there. But I always wonder why in the world I didn't go for free to Rutgers. I think he does too now.

[00:17:25] AH: But you were a double legacy at Cornell, right?

[00:17:27] MP: I was. Yeah. My kids did not go there. Because they didn't get in, I was pissed.

[00:17:33] AH: So 9/11 happens. Put us in the shoes of Marc on the day of 9/11. Where are you? How do you find the news? And how does it change your career and your life?

[00:17:43] MP: So I think I have to be careful on what I say here, because I really can't go over the various locations of tours where I served. But I will tell you that that was a seminal moment for all of the agency, not just for analysts, operators, support personnel, everyone, because I think there was a feeling that we had failed and despite all the great counterterrorism work. And I was a member of the Counterterrorism Center at the time. That was my career track. I switched back and forth between the Counterterrorism Center and the Near East Division. But ultimately, there was a feeling that we had failed, even with all the warnings, even with all the really great work. And the best analogy that you can make is my son will be happy because he's a huge English Premier League fan. He loves Liverpool. He played college baseball, but he

loves EPL, but it's a goalie, and you have to be perfect. And you know how hard that is to do. And so we let one get by. And that was kind of the feeling. And so there was this incredible mantra, there was this incredible ethos of putting her head down and really getting after it and doing all we can to stop the next attack. And that's what we did for decades.

And so there was no lack of motivation after 9/11. It was pretty extraordinary. And so it was a traumatic time. I think, myself and many others immediately felt wherever we were in the world, we volunteered for the teams that were going into Afghanistan because that was not only the right thing to do, but there was obviously a feeling that America was under attack, and just this kind of tremendous sense of camaraderie.

[00:19:00] AH: And you mentioned America there. Tell us a little bit more about your sense of Americanness. One of the things that I found quite interesting in your book, you speak about being born overseas, but coming to love, really love this country. Tell us a little bit more about your time in the CIA and your patriotism. Was that a chicken and egg situation? Did the patriotism come with the CIA? Or was that they'd already – Help us understand that relationship?

[00:19:25] MP: Oh, sure. it's I think there's nothing like living overseas in a lot of Middle Eastern autocratic countries to appreciate the United States. And I think that's another reason why you saw a lot of former CIA officers really upset about the events of the last several years because there just seemed to be some parallels of what was happening in the US. Not exactly. But ultimately, my sense of patriotism was the freedoms and the ideals and that we enjoy. That just doesn't happen in these autocratic countries.

And I tell the story of walking down the street. It was in an Arab capital. Not friendly to the United States and seeing the silhouette of the American flag. And it was important to me not just because that there was a select few Americans working outside of a US facility. But more importantly that I knew that the population of that country actually looked to the United States as an ideal even if their government and our government was at odds. And I still am kind of that corny guy who believes in the old adage of America is a shining city on a hill even with all the problems that we've had in the United States over the last couple years. I mean, I really do think that these are the American ideals and we should strive obviously to

fix things that are going on in our country. But it's still something to promote overseas. And I wouldn't have joined the CIA or worked for all those years or even talked about it now if I didn't still believe in that.

And I think that, fundamentally, one of the things that is maybe perhaps a little different for me is when I recruited and handled agents, so many of them were doing it for kind of the right reasons. Now some do it for money of course, but others really did it because America was land of political freedom, or religious freedom, or economic freedom. And so they believed in those ideals. And so when you sit down with someone and this individual, whether he's working for a hostile power, has made a decision to risk their life to help the United States for those ideals, that kind of gives you a pretty good sense of how incredible our country certainly is and should strive to be.

And so I came back from one Middle East tour. And look, I was a New Jersey kid. I grew up listening to Bruce Springsteen and hanging out in the Jersey Shore, but all of a sudden, from one of our Middle East tours I was like, "I got to get into NASCAR." So I've taken my kid to NASCAR races, which is like the most wildly patriotic thing you could ever do. My dad thought I was insane. But I think it just appealed to me to see that the American flag and all the pomp and circumstance. There was a state department, Diplomatic Security Service officer. Him and I rented an RV, and I don't know how my wife let me do this. I think this was in 2011 even before I went to Afghanistan the second time. We rented an RV and drove to the Daytona 500 and stayed there a week. I mean, this this is not something that my college professor dad ever thought he would see his son do, but I think it really has to do with just kind of this love affair with this country. And so yes, I like those stories. It still gets me fired up despite all the difficulties we've had. That's I think always going to be ingrained in me.

[00:22:03] AH: And on that topic, tell us a little bit about the motivation to write the book, because I know that there's a particular impetus behind it.

[00:22:11] MP: Oh absolutely. And so I left the CIA in July of 2019 when I retired, and kind of two things came to mind. One is I really wanted to describe to the American people what the agency was like. As you can tell now, I'm certainly still a strong supporter. I think it's an

indispensable institution. So I wanted to talk about it, because there're so many misconceptions and misnomers about it. But the other part was, by the end of my career, I had turned into a really good leader. Now I certainly wasn't a good leader in the beginning, and it evolved over time. But it was leadership, but it was a particularly kind of leadership where in times of ambiguity, at times where there was a lack of situational awareness, I started feeling really comfortable. And so when others were nervous or others wanted to flee, I had, and it's the title of the book, I had this clarity, and I called it clarity and crisis, where your happy place is in that gray area. And I started getting really comfortable and able to lead and make good decisions. And then I retired and I was like, "Well, hold on a second. This is kind of interesting to me." Now the agency doesn't do a very good job of teaching leadership. Like the US military, if you retire after 20 years and you retire as a colonel, you'll probably have spent two solid years in leadership schools. We don't do that. We maybe have two weeks.

So all of this was learned on the streets of the third-world. I certainly don't have an MBA. I don't know if these leadership principles will be sponsored by the Harvard Business School, but it really made sense to me because I was able to build teams which had this incredible sense of trust and camaraderie and then really succeed in some really tough situations. And I always did this with this idea of not having fear of failure. And so I came up with these nine principles to kind of describe how I got to this place, because I would hope that someone would read the book and get there far quicker than – It took me 20 years, but I really have enjoyed doing this and they put on the paper these principles where by the end of my career I was really good at leading when times were tough.

[00:23:50] AH: We've had a few guests on SpyCast who have basically said that this is the book that I wish someone had given me 25 years ago, or something along those lines.

[00:24:02] MP: Right, exactly. And I think that the reason why I think the book really will resonate is these leadership principles are applicable in all walks of life. But of course I'm a really good storyteller. And the agency was very kind to clear all these operational stories. So for each of the nine principles, I think I have two or three you know wild operations or really real world experiences that I talk about, and I think that's what people will really enjoy reading as well. And so that was really interesting and fun for me to go through the process

of getting them cleared. And really, I credit the agency, because I'm surprised how much they did clear and they worked with me with some problems and ultimately it's a book which I think it's also just about storytelling over my 26-year career.

[BREAK]

[00:24:39] AH: I want to take a moment to thank this week's sponsor, The Jordan Harbinger Show. Are you looking for a new podcast to look forward to each week? One that's entertaining, informative and packed with actionable content? Of course you do. You're a subscriber to SpyCast. A couple of episodes that I can particularly recommend would be *Making the Most of the Pandemic* with Gabrielle Mizrahi. I know 18 months ago we all said we're going to learn a foreign language we're going to become fitness fanatics, we're going to read 100 books. 18 months and 30 pounds later, we're sitting in front of the TV catatonic with high cholesterol and a fatty liver. But you know what? No action survives first plan with the enemy.

Next up is *How to Make Billions* featuring Brian Koppelman. That's another one that I could recommend. It's not worked for me as of yet, but I'm going to keep plugging away. That's Jordan Harbinger Show, that's H-A-R-B-I-N-G-E-R.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:25:38] AH: So if people want to know the nine lessons, they're going to have to buy your book?

[00:25:41] MP: That's right.

[00:25:42] AH: And please buy it from the Spy Museum's online store or the physical store. But just for our listeners, give us a little teaser. What are a couple of the lessons and a couple of the stories attached to them?

[00:25:55] MP: So what I was thinking of doing today is I do a lot of these podcasts and I kind of tell the same stories over. So I'm going to tell a couple different ones. But these

ones I think that I might have neglected, they're actually more powerful than others. And there's a principle that I have called family values, and that is critical in building teams that actually can operate in times of adversity, and I say this kind of openly, you have to have this sense of camaraderie and care and even love for each other. And I really mean that. So it just takes some time to do that, because ultimately when you do have times of lack of situational awareness, if you have that close-knit unit, it can be incredibly valuable because you have that trust and ability to make decisions.

So I kind of give some examples of family values that were really meaningful to me and they're personal in nature so that's why I want to talk about them today. So the first is when I came back from Iraq in 2003, I was very lucky and honored I was a recipient of the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, which is one of the agency's highest awards. And I talk about it in the book, and this is George Tenet, who is a Greek-American. He's going to be giving me this award in the bubble in front of hundreds of people. And I invited my father to come.

And you have to remember, my father is Greek. And he remembers the role that the CIA played in the mid-70s in supporting the Greek junta, which is kind of the Greek right-wing government, which committed a whole bunch of human rights abuses. And so for many years, CIA may not have been the most popular entity amongst Greeks. And so he was always very wary of actually my career choice. But he's coming to headquarters. And this is a really big deal. He's never been there before obviously. And I go to director Tenet before and I talk to him and I said, "Look, my dad really is not a great fan, but can you speak maybe privately?"

And so right after the award ceremony I see my father and Tenet together, they're speaking Greek to each other and they're off on the side, and they speak for 15 minutes. And my dad comes back and he has tears in his eyes. And I said, "Is everything okay? How'd it go?" And he said, "It went fine," but he wouldn't say anything else. And then later on I saw Director Tenet and I said, "What happened? What did you say?" And he said, "I told your dad that you were a hero." And I say that because that's an extraordinary effort that Director Tenet made that was really meaningful for my family. And so in building organizations, in building cohesive units, there are times like that that kind of I fall back on,

which I think are really important. Now if the next day Tenet had asked me to go back to Afghanistan for a year, I probably would have gone, or Iraq, or anywhere else, because it was so meaningful what he did. And it's funny my dad and I joke, he was even annoyed I put that whole story in the book. And he says to me, "You know, I still don't like the CIA." I said, "That's fine."

And I'll tell you another story too. This has to do with Afghanistan. When I was a base chief there, my mom, who was living in New Jersey, she passed away quite suddenly and it was a pretty traumatic experience. And I was literally on the Pakistani, Pak-Afghan border. It was going to take quite an effort to get me back via multiple helicopter flights, and some fixed-wing flights, and then finally an aircraft from Kabul to get ultimately back to DC and then to New Jersey where I had to bury her.

And I remember leaving the paramilitary base that I led on the Pak-Afghan border and it was terrible weather. And we have the kind of the most amazing special operations pilots on the planet. These are veterans of, I don't know, maybe Army's Task Force 160 or any kind of other specialized aviation units who then end up after they retire they come work for CIA. So decades of experience, and really the toughest most experienced pilots on the planet. And I remember we were flying and we had to go through this mountain pass and it was socked in with weather. And we were just sitting there hovering for 20 or 30 minutes. And I was on comms talking to pilots and I was like, "Yeah, let's just cut this short. Go back. This is not safe." And they're like, "Hey, we're going to do this." And when we finally landed as we're hopping bases to get me back, I went up to one of the pilots, and of course I sound like Tom Wolfe out of the Right Stuff. Every special operations pilot has some kind of southern drawl, but it's as cool as a cucumber.

And so I said, "Hey, why don't we turn back?" And the pilot, who I didn't know at all, said, "Hey, chief we know your mom passed away, and we were going to get you home to New Jersey for her funeral no matter what." And I was stunned. I had tears in my eyes. So I used that principle and family values and how you build teams that have this kind of loyalty and sense of camaraderie and sense of purpose. And I really think that's important. And I love telling those stories, because the book is by times almost a love affair towards the organization. But fact of the matter is the life of a case officer, it is a way of life. It's for

better or worse part of your identity. It's not a nine to five job. You're asked to do a lot of strange things in strange places and there's huge sacrifices that your family makes. And so I tell that story just because it's really meaningful. Those stories, they're really meaningful to me because it gave you the essence of the men and women I work with.

[00:30:04] AH: And give our listeners an understanding of what kind of things do you do to get the Distinguished Intelligence Medal?

[00:30:10] MP: Oh geez! What can I say? I have to think back, because it's sitting down in my basement gathering dust, the unclassified citation. It had a lot to do with our efforts to help round up the Iraqi regime officials who ultimately were not going to be part of the next Iraqi government. And I didn't do anything special. I was lucky I was there and anyone else could have done the same thing. I always tell that I had a very successful career and I have some fancy hardware in the basement. But it's probably because I volunteered more than anybody else for stuff rather than I was exceptional.

And so it's nice to receive those awards. And particularly when I get – As I say my, get dad to come in and see the ceremony and kind of get a sense of what I did. Because so often I would call – So I'm living in – Either I'm overseas or living in the US and something happens. I'm gone for several months. It's only when I've had kids now I worry about my children. I can't believe the angst I put my father through. He said the times in Iraq and Afghanistan, that's when he went completely gray. The love of parent for a child, you don't really think about that as much when you don't have kids. And then when you do, you certainly understand.

[00:31:08] AH: And tell us a little bit more about some of the experiences that you had in the central intelligence agency. And one of the things that I'm thinking of is how does this all shake out geographically? So you mentioned the Near East North Africa particular regions. For people that haven't been in the CIAs, are there a particular – Is there an informal hierarchy amongst regions of the world? Or does it depend on your interest? Or I'm assuming that after 9/11, it doesn't really matter if you've done graduate, work in Chilean wheat production. You need to go where the action is kind of thing.

[00:31:47] MP: No. So look, the agency certainly has, I guess, you call them different tribes, and these are experts and officers who either whether they're analysts, or support personnel, or case officers who kind of gravitate towards one region. And a lot of it has to do with the language. So if we're going to invest two years of my learning Arabic, I'm going to spend a lot of time in the Arab world.

But you know what? The fascinating thing is that so many of our issues cross different regions. So if you're an Africa division officer, now they're called mission centers. If you're an African mission center officer, or a Near East division officer, or you're an expert in East Asia, particularly on China, you might spend the majority of your career in those geographic areas. But don't forget, there's huge geopolitical. There's worry on our part, strategic worry about the Chinese influence in Africa. So maybe you send someone who's an expert on China who speaks the language to Africa, in essence, uncover what the Chinese are doing there. And they're certainly doing a lot.

Those who speak Russian I think had a career all over the world, because we battled the Soviets and then now the Russians all over. And then someone who's a counterterrorism center officer certainly has lots of different places to go not only just Iraq, Afghanistan, but globally. And so there are different tribes. And look, I mean, the joke is those who did Russian operations or the former soviet states are much better at tradecraft. It's more high counterintelligence threats. So they're very good at the long surveillance detection routes or putting down dead drops. And they always joked with the Near East division officers, "We were really good recruiters, but we couldn't run an SDR if our life depended on it." And this is just informal ribbing. And even today amongst all the former officers we all kind of joke about that. But in essence, everyone receives pretty much the same training, and it's based on your interest. But again, a lot on the language that you speak.

[00:33:24] AH: And how does it go with management? Because your book's about leadership, and you mentioned that as a CIA officer you don't get the types of investment of time that someone of a similar position in the military would get. Is it similar to other fields where the further up you go the less time you spend doing the thing that you initially joined up to do? So you're a photographer, but after a while, you're not taking photographs, you're just managing other photographers. How does it normally work?

[00:33:56] MP: I will tell you, I stopped having fun a long time ago. I joke when I say that the best part of my career was the life of a street case officer. So that's a line operations officer. You're not in management. All you have to do every day is spot assess, develop recruit and handle agents wherever you are located around the world. And because the essence, the part of the job that I love the most, and I talk about it in the book particularly when I talk about what it's like to have someone's life in your hands, when you're handling an agent. But ultimately that's not a psych 101 class. It's a psych 501 class. I mean, it's this truly incredible experience where you have this intensely personal and really intimate, not in that sense, but intimate relationship with someone who's going to trust you with their life. And in return they're providing us secret information.

And so those days of running agents, handling agents, recruiting agents, you do this for a great bit of your career and then you get promoted. And then you just kind of help train the next generation. And so then maybe you're a manager in a station, and then you get promoted even higher, and then when you're back at headquarters. And when I finally – The last job I had was the Acting Chief Operations in the Europe and Eurasia mission center. So that's in essence the head of clandestine operations all over Europe and Eurasia, from Dublin to the farther side time zones of Russia. It sounds really sexy and fun, and it really wasn't.

So it's budgets, it's personnel, it's a lot of headaches. And certainly I never saw the street. Never met an agent, never ran an SDR in the last couple years of my career, and I miss that tremendously. But I think that's like anything else, as you get promoted up, the fun ends. And one of the things that I started getting really excited about towards the end of my career was just that mentorship aspect of really passing the torch. And when I was the Deputy Operations Chief for the Middle East and then the Acting Operation Chief for Europe and Eurasia, I always would meet with the new recruits who came in the door. I felt this was really important, because I wanted them to have the sense of the responsibility and the honor that you had as being on the tip of the spear and being a CIA officer in any career track that you had. And really the American people see us as we're the ones standing on the ramparts. And ultimately I said this a million times in my career, there's nobody else. We are America's first line of defense in the intelligence community.

And so I really wanted to pass on that spirit and that ethos. And I loved the mentorship part. And that frankly is one of my principles in the book too. I call it be a people developer. Because if you can't pass the torch – No one cares about all the fancy hardware in my basement, and certainly my colleagues don't. I did a book signing a couple weeks ago right after the book came out. And one of the officers who served with me in Afghanistan who served under me came by and he said to me, he said, “You were the best leader I ever had,” and I loved that comment. That was worth more than any intelligence medal that I ever received, because this individual went on to become a Station Chief multiple times. And so I did something right. So no one's going to remember me. But certainly if those kind of who I held kind of pass the torch and train for the future, that's kind of the key thing. And that's what I loved at the end of my career.

[00:36:34] AH: And one of the things I always find quite interesting is the different generations cycling through an institution. So you join up in the early 90s and then you have a long and successful career. Help us understand your journey within the bigger journey of the Central Intelligence Agency. So you come along and there's a particular cadre of people that have been there. And then you go through the life cycle and then you come out and you're mentoring the people that are coming through. So help us understand the career of Marc and the context of generational change.

[00:37:08] MP: Sure. What a great question, because I think the agency evolved and has to continue to evolve. So my training class was a bunch of white guys. That doesn't do anybody any good. And I talk about this all the time, and I've given this advice to Director Burns, and I've written about it, because ultimately diversity is our operational advantage. And so I'm not going to make a statement about anything else about all the giant political fights that go on. All I can tell you is that when I'm an operations manager in a station and I need to send people out in the street to either handle or recruit, I want them to look differently, all of them. So I want to have obviously male officers, female officers, different ethnic groups, different sizes, because ultimately the idea is not to get caught. And I would always joke with – So we inevitably have someone who's a former Navy SEAL who's 6'2", 200 pounds with some arm sleeve tattoos. And I'd be like, “You think that this is Jason Bourne?” Well, not exactly. Because I want you to disappear on the streets of wherever,

Cairo, or Damascus, or Riyadh.” And so really having that operational diversity has been such a boon. It's been such a help to the CIA, and that was not the case when I joined. It really was a bunch of white dudes. And so the CIA is a long way to go frankly, but it's gotten a lot better.

And I think the frank realization aside from any of kind of the culture wars is that for us to win, we need to put the best athletes out there. And I write in the book a lot too about several of the best bosses I ever had were female officers. And I can't obviously say the name, but probably the most celebrated and valued member of the intelligence community in the history of the counterterrorism is a really tough female officer. I tell the story, and this is actually quite funny. I was in the Middle East. I was a manager in a station and we had a female officer go out in the street. And just by chance she was noticed by the security service. And we kind of learned about it later on through kind of a penetration. And what did they say? They said we noticed this individual by name on the street. So she was undertaking operational activity, but her husband must be the real intelligence officer. Because God forbid, a female could ever do this.

And we sat back and we were laughing. So first of all, the poor husband is then shut down because they see him, and he has heavy surveillance. They see him as the intelligence officer. But frankly in a place like that, especially in the Middle East, when a female officer can wear a burqa, it can be almost invisible on the street. Now that's our operational advantage. And if the hostile service is this chauvinist attitude, not good for the development in that country, but certainly great for us because we'll take advantage of that. And so our diversity is something just such a huge operational advantage, and I saw that was a big change over the years at CIA. And so that's good and they have to just obviously continue.

[00:39:35] AH: And would you like to talk a little bit about how you came to leave the CIA?

[00:39:40] MP: Well, that's kind of the unfortunate end of the story. Well hopefully not the end of the story. I'm only 52. So it's not the end. Geez! My birthday was a couple days ago too. But in December of 2017 I took a trip to Moscow, in essence was a routine visit to see the embassy to see the ambassador, who is a Jon Huntsman, who's kind of a legend in

diplomatic circles. Not a career diplomat, but he'd been ambassador in Beijing and Moscow, former governor of Utah. So I was in charge of clandestine operations. I was a deputy at the time actually over Europe and Eurasia. So I wanted to go see the embassy, talk to the ambassador and also meet with our Russian counterparts, which is what we do. We've always met with the soviet intelligence services during the Cold War and we still do now with the Russians. It's always good to have a channel open.

And one night early in the trip I kind of awoke to a start and I had this terrible case of vertigo and tinnitus and the room was spinning. And it turned in this awful three-year journey where I believe and I think many others that I was a victim of one of these directed energy attacks, which is commonly called Havana Syndrome. And I've been out obviously in the media talking about it a lot, because what happened after that was not a good point in my relationship with the agency because I really fought for healthcare that I didn't receive until much later until I retired in July of 2019. But I finally went to Walter Reed's Traumatic Brain Injury Center in January of 2021. And so I had a bit of a nasty breakup.

I joked with people. I think this was a CIA and I had a divorce and now we've kind of reconciled a little bit. And I think Director Burns has taken a new tact on this, and I think he's an outstanding individual and he's going to be one of the great directors. So kind of my relationship with the building has come full circle and gotten better. But it was really tough time. So I had to retire ultimately. I have a headache that never goes away. I'm certainly being treated at Walter Reed. And one of the things that I've kind of seen not only writing the book in my post-retirement career but also advocating for the health care of others who've been affected by this because there really are quite a bit, and it's going to turn out to be – It certainly is a sticky foreign policy issue for the United States when we finally find attribution, find out who did this. But more importantly, we have a lot of officers who are being injured and we've got to be able to take care of them.

[00:41:35] AH: Just for our listeners, what is a directed energy attack? Are we talking about particular types of energy waves or something else?

[00:41:42] MP: Yeah. So it seems like it's a microwave energy attack. Countries have developed devices in the past. It's a pretty insidious weapon designed to incapacitate and

injure rather than kill anyone. And the fact of the matter is US companies have developed these for anti-drone warfare. And so it's not something that's terribly novel or new. It's just the idea of that this is being directed at US government personnel. I think that's something that is obviously taken – It's a form of hybrid warfare that we haven't seen before. But the journey that kind of I've been on and other victims as well, and I'll tell you there're US intelligence officers and plenty of US diplomats, Department of Commerce officers, others who are affected in Havana, Cuba who are in far worse shape than I am. And it's really sad. And the government didn't treat them well. And I think there's a lot of involvement by the hill, by congress now, to ensure that people get proper medical care. But this is going to be one of those things similar to Agent Orange in Vietnam, similar to gulf war syndrome after the first gulf war where the government's initial response really wasn't ideal. But eventually we'll get it right and we'll get people the treatment that they deserve.

[00:42:38] AH: I was thinking reading about Havana Syndrome, it made me think of a guest we had on not too long ago, Jack Devine, and he spoke about the Moscow rules. And even during the worst of the Cold War there are things that the CIA and the KGB wouldn't do to each other. But one of his larger points was that those norms and standards, some of them have just been wrapped up and thrown by the wayside.

[00:43:05] MP: Well, they have. And I saw that. Look, I saw that before I was injured. There's no doubt. I mean, we're dealing with – And let me just preface this because all my friends who are listening know I'm a Middle East officer. The last two years I spent overseeing Russian operations, but I'm not a Russia expert. But I know what I saw. And this would be backed up I'm sure by my former colleagues as well. Is look, it's a Russian government led by Vladimir Putin that is really not kind of played by the diplomatic norms. It's a country that has continued to engage in election interference not only in the United States but also across the world, in Europe as well, it's a key battleground right now. Obviously they're trying to kill dissidents and opposition leaders, ALEXI Navalny, but also assassinations in Europe and abroad. They've committed atrocious war crimes in Syria. The Russian Air force has killed thousands of civilians. And what's the most recent kind of nefarious activity is all the cyber attacks and the ransomware attacks. Now maybe private companies in Russia, but still under the tutelage of the Russian government.

So I think you have a country that continues to violate diplomatic norms and those old Moscow rules don't apply anymore. And I think that the United States and the west really continue to try to struggle on how to deal with Moscow and with Vladimir Putin who really, I mean, sanctions haven't affected this. And so as kind of continued Russian misbehavior is seen, the US and the west we're really going to have to kind of up our game in countering this. And just what we've done in the past certainly has not worked.

[00:44:22] AH: And tell us a little bit more about what the future holds for you, Marc.

[00:44:26] MP: Yeah, sure. So I'm way too busy in retirement. I've over taxed myself just as I did. One of the things at Walter Reed is I get treated for the traumatic brain injury. I see a lot of therapists and kind of universally they're kind of astounded that I've done everything wrong, which is work too hard. They said I have to take care of myself more. But honestly, I'm having fun talking about the book. I mean, I really think people are going to respond to it. Certainly I'll do some consulting with private companies because they want to hear how my leadership principles would apply to their lines of work. But I'm involved in so many other things as well. Because of what happened to me and my injury, I talk a lot about wellness. I think that really in the intelligence and the special operations world, there really is a renewed focus on people taking care of themselves. This is what I learned certainly going through Walter Reed's program. And you see this amongst some even elite units, the Navy SEALs and others, where people practice things like meditation, and yoga, and deep breathing techniques. And the first responder and the police and firefighter community, I work with them as well, because ultimately you want to extend the career of operators. But that's taking care of yourself and that's something that none of us did for a very long time. So that's kind of something that I really enjoy doing.

And then most importantly is trying to spend time with my family. I spent a long time away from them. Both my kids are in college. My wife just retired from the agency as well. And so now we have some time to spend together. We can go to the beach. And hopefully with the pandemic kind of coming to close somewhat, do some traveling. I got to get back to Greece, see my peeps. And you know when I go back there, it's quite amusing. I think the only bigger celebrity from the United States is George Tenet. But I've gotten treated very well going back there, which is kind of surprising to me frankly. But there's nothing – The

Greeks love to see the Greek Diaspora, how they do. And so I get treated like a conquering hero when I go back. It's a lot of fun.

[00:46:07] AH: You mentioned there a lot of you never looked after yourself. Is this because the operational tempo was so high that you didn't have the luxury of doing that or was this because it wasn't part of the culture of the CIA? Or was that a little bit of both?

[00:46:21] MP: Right. And so there's so much of all of what you just said. So the operational tempo never goes away especially after 9/11. But there's also that mantra of just working non-stop and you go serve maybe a two-year tour overseas and you're expected to kind of crawl up that stairwell to the airplane at the end of it. So there's some of that that is legitimate and there needs to be done. But really, I think we have to kind of get away from that mantra because your career is a marathon and the health of an officer is really more important.

I tell a story in the book, and it's under the principle. I call it humility is best served warm. But humility I think is a really important trait for an intelligence officer. It certainly was for me, because I got kicked in the face a lot even though I had a lot of success. But I tell the story, it has to do with wellness. I tell a story of we were in the Middle East and my son – My wife was pregnant and she was going to deliver back in the United States. We didn't want to – it was a kind of medical care wasn't great in the country we're living in. So we come back. I have two or three weeks of paternity leave, and immediately like the day after my son is born we get a call that an agent who I was handling triggered an operational meeting in East Africa. So I'm supposed to then go all the way back across the pond and that's – Now, life as a CIA officer, I'm not the only one who can do this. There's a backup officer 100% capable. But nope, I have to be my Mr. type A personality. I have to be the one. Super important meeting. Of course it wasn't. And so I went. I left.

And I remember sitting in a dingy kind of alleyway, it was a structure that wasn't complete. It was dirty. I was in kind of full **[inaudible 00:47:46]**, full Arabic dress. I had a beard. I had a little Glock 19 strapped to my side. And for two weeks, and I waited and waited, and the agent never showed, and the whole thing was a bust. The op just didn't happen. And when I came back and told my wife I felt really guilty. And over the years I really – And I tell that

story in the book, because it's really important, because first of all someone else could have covered the meeting for me. And number two, these are I'm kind of writing checks that eventually I'm going to have to cash. And there was no need to do this. And I had a very understanding spouse who had the same job frankly. But boy, I look back at that over time and I realized that was a mistake. And I was really humbled by that. And so your longevity as an officer is tied so much to your physical and mental well-being, your family life. And so the days of kind of the old CIA case officers who kind of worked themselves to death and ended up alone in alcoholics. Like that's really not good. You can see how it happens. But we can do a lot more to prevent that now. And that's one thing I really like and enjoy kind of writing and talking about, because I think that's really helpful for the next generation.

[00:48:45] AH: I think I've covered most of the ground that I was hoping to. I feel like I could speak to you for another few hours, but maybe the best thing to do is just to have another podcast taking up another angle at some point.

[00:48:57] MP: I know the next angle for the podcast, because so much of the book I write in my comparisons to espionage and baseball. And baseball is another passion of mine. My son is a really solid baseball player growing up. He's playing in college now. But I love the parallels to athletics and to baseball in particular, because it's a game where you face adversity constantly. You fail all the time. You fail seven out of 10 times, you're hitting 300, you're an all-star. And there's so many parallels to the espionage business. So we could do a whole podcast on the comparisons between the two. And frankly, I'll make a pitch for the book. There's a ton of baseball in the book, whether it's about the teams I love, the Boston Red Sox, or the Washington Nationals, or also just our high school team, the James Madison Warhawks where my son played and was a captain. And every one of these principles has a baseball analogy. So we can do a baseball podcast, themed podcast next time. I would love that.

[00:49:46] AH: That would be a lot of fun. I was just thinking there about the Houston Astros and the World Series a couple of years ago. And they were blending high-tech espionage, was low-tech.

[00:50:00] MP: Oh my goodness! Oh my crazy Twitter feed. So my Twitter feed @mpolymer. I have to give it a plug. I think I've got 20,000 followers or so. And I don't take myself seriously. So Harper Collins when I wrote the book were like, "Would you please stop tweeting all your stuff about controversial things?" And I did to some extent. But I also make fun of myself a lot. And I talk about the dive bars that I love of the world. And I talk about food all the time, as my belly's getting bigger in retirement. I've done comparisons of like the best chicken sandwich between Chick-Fil-A and Popeye's. But the latest kick I'm on is when I was in Afghanistan 2011, I think I weighed 210 pounds, was benching 355 on the bench press. And so I've decided at the age of 52 I've got to get back to that. And I'm not there. I neither wait or bench press. But getting closer, certainly on bench press. I think I'm up to 315 or 320. And I make the joke that I'll donate a thousand dollars to a TBI charity, a traumatic brain injury charity. But the response has been fantastic. I mean, people are totally into this. And so it's really fun. And I will tweet about serious issues, the Afghan withdrawal or things like that. But then when I do stuff like this, it's really great response. It was something the other day of what's the best snack at a baseball game? Is it Twizzlers or sunflower seeds? An know you get 900 responses. It's great.

[00:51:09] AH: I'll need to have a look for that one about the chicken wars. That's an important one.

[00:51:13] MP: It is.

[00:51:15] AH: Well, thanks ever so much for your time, Marc. And yeah, to be continued.

[00:51:19] MP: Thanks so much. And again, thank you for mentioning the book. I think people are going to love it. And I hope to be around the museum in the future either signing books or talking about it.

[END]