



# The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from Al Qa'ida to ISIS. By Michael Morell with Bill Harolow, New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2015

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***The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from Al Qa'ida to ISIS.* By Michael Morell with Bill Harolow, New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2015. ISBN 978-1-4555-8566-3 Notes. Appendixes. Pp.xvi, 362. \$28.00.**

Men and women in the military and intelligence community who witness decisions that influence our country's security can serve their nation one more time by reporting on what they saw and heard. *The Great War of Our Time* is such an effort that distinguishes itself from similar books by its topicality and easy reading.

The author draws from a deep well of experiences and events. His CIA career included being the presidential briefer, the CIA's number three official, then its deputy director and two stints as its acting director. Michael Morell started at the CIA out of college as an economic analyst. An assignment that earned him the notice of George Tenet just before Tenet became the CIA's director. The meat of the book starts with Morell's tenure as the executive assistant to Tenet.

Tenet and most, but not all other CIA directors receive favorable comments from Morell. The book gives the author's insights into many of the well-known officials with whom he worked. Morell lauds Tenet for his humanity and intelligence and for the focus that Tenet applied to counterterrorism before the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Porter Goss, on the other hand, surrounded himself with outsiders from the house intelligence committee and gave them too much power to the detriment of the CIA, according to Morell. No person receives warmer praise than Leon Panetta whom Morell describes as an excellent director and a wise man who was self-effacing, smart, and supportive of his people.

Presidents Bush and Obama are both gently criticized for certain decisions or traits, but also portrayed as having a human quality that may surprise their detractors.

In addition to the personalities and decisions of presidents and CIA directors and the events leading to them, two themes run through the book. The first is that analysts are capable, smart people who are the voice of the agency but who are not accorded their due respect. The first instance of this theme is Morell's assertion that Michael Scheuer, the CIA analyst who ran Alec Station, the CIA's unit that tracked and studied Osama bin Laden, received less

support because he was an analyst in charge of the unit instead of an operations officer.

The other theme is the CIA's war with al-Qaida. The book recounts the attention the CIA focused on al-Qaida prior to the September 11 attacks as well as the conflicting assessment of the intelligence that was obtained.

After moving on from being the presidential briefer, Morell encountered Scooter Libby on Vice President Cheney's staff who demanded that Morell's boss withdraw a 2002 report generated by a study group that Morell headed to examine the tenuous connection between Saddam Hussein's regime and al-Qaida. The report, which found no such connection existed, was confirmed when the files of the Iraqi intelligence agencies had no records supporting the contention advanced by Libby and the vice president that Saddam's regime supported al-Qaida.

The pre-invasion assessment of Iraq recounted by the author seems prescient in view of what has since transpired. Morell believed Saddam was not an imminent threat. "As we approached war, the views among many Middle Eastern specialists at CIA were decidedly antiwar. Many at the Agency were concerned that bringing down Saddam would open a Pandora's box" (98). More stomach churning than the Pandora's box comment is learning that the CIA never did an analysis of what was likely to happen post-invasion.

As part of its operations against al-Qaida, the Agency has employed a variety of tactics including its covert prison system for storing detainees, enhanced interrogation techniques, and armed action by unmanned aerial vehicles and Morell discusses each in detail. A fundamental lesson highlighted by the author is that al-Qaida lost capability when it was under pressure for its own security. When pressure is eased, it has greater capabilities.

Drone strikes, which started under President George W. Bush and continued by President Obama, are the single most effective tool against al-Qaida, an opinion held by Bin Ladin according to documents captured during the raid that killed him.

In Morell's view, even if drone strikes create radicalized persons who become terrorists, there is no practical alternative. This belief reveals the thinking at the Agency. Unsaid but reasonably concluded from Morell's discussion is that the CIA believes the al-Qaida threat is so great that it must employ repeated

drone strikes even at the cost of building an environment that fits the narrative used by al-Qaida and ISIS to recruit and build a following.

Books like this one are also worthwhile for what can be drawn from the descriptions. Take the diversity of opinion on how likely the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan contained Osama bin Ladin. Morell told President Obama that the circumstantial case for WMD in Iraq was stronger than the one for Bin Ladin being present and he rated it at 60% likely. Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense and former CIA analyst, thought the intelligence was weak and several times referred to watching the decision for the rescue attempt of hostages in Iran end in Desert One. The female intelligence analyst (apparently the one portrayed in the movie *Zero Dark Thirty*) deeply involved in the assessment put the probability at 95%.

The disparity reflects different experiences. Morell had been burned by the WMD question. Gates judged the intelligence through the lens of Desert One. As Morell points out, the analysts at the Counter Terrorism Center who were highly confident were influenced by a string of successes and not having experienced an intelligence failure in their shorter careers.

Having risen to a high position in the CIA, Morell found himself attacked by politicians arising out of the Benghazi brouhaha. Morell addresses accusations that he had been a shill for the Obama political cause in a large chapter devoted to the topic.

In the Benghazi chapter, Morell's defense of the analyst community reveals one of its shortcomings. When asked to deliver information to the White House about the attack at the Benghazi compound, CIA analysts used the reporting they had received but did not communicate with the Libya CIA station.

Morell writes, "That is simply not how intelligence analysts operate. They are analysts not investigators. They wait for information to come to them." Relying on a protocol with which you're very familiar is understandable, but wouldn't the president expect that the information his intelligence agency provided was the most up to date and accurate? This episode suggests the CIA expected the rest of the government to conform to its procedures instead of seeking to provide the most usable intelligence product.

The experiences of Mr. Morell are worthy of reading and reflection. The book benefits from the organization and storytelling skills of his cowriter, Mr. Harlow. There aren't many inside accounts this well told.

*Steven O'Hern*