

Terrorism as a Form of Political Violence

Interviewer

Today is November 9, 2012. We're in the studios of the Center for Oral History with Lieutenant Colonel Liam Collins. Welcome, Liam it's good to have you here.

Liam Collins

Thank you.

Interviewer

As I mentioned off camera, we're going to want to get you to sit for another sitting to talk about your personal history, how you came to the Army, how you came to West Point, and we'll go into some of your Army career there. But I'd like to focus this discussion today as an interview that we'll be able to put into our counter-terrorism archive, because of the work that you'd done as the director of the CTC, the Counter-Terrorism Center. Did I have that right?

Liam Collins

Combating Terrorism Center.

Liam Collins

Combating Terrorism Center.

Liam Collins

Â Â Â That's all right, yeah.

Interviewer

Combating Terrorism Center, I'm sorry. I always just know it as the CTC, so.

Liam Collins

I know we chose it yeah.

Interviewer

But also and weave in there some of your own personal experience, of course, in Special Forces 'cause it seems to me you have a unique straddle here, right, because you actually are an academic in the study of terrorism, counter terrorism, as well as having actually fought the fight, right?

Liam Collins

Â Â Â Yeah.

Interviewer

So let me just ask you just broadly, where do we stand now in our fight against terrorism?

Liam Collins

I guess that's a tough question. I think if you look at it.

Interviewer

I'll say in advance that we've asked you not to step into any territory that is not security clearance, so you'll let us know if there's a gap in your explanation because you can't really get into something.

Liam Collins

Yeah. I mean if you look, we've been I mean the terrorist threat's been around for a long time. A lot of people, it's a tactic, but at the same time, it's a tactic that some groups predominately choose. You can't defeat terrorism, just like you can't defeat political violence. It's just a form of political violence, so we'll never be able to defeat terrorism.

Interviewer

Usually when people say this, they mean the present threat involving Islamic extremism, right?

Liam Collins

Well, yeah, if you look at specific groups, if you look at al Qaeda or some of those specific groups. Yeah, they're not defeated. They're definitely you know al Qaeda is an umbrella term for kind of the larger, you know, other groups that take al Qaeda's name on that they aren't necessarily practice the al Qaeda ideology in name, but kind of take it for what it's worth. It's franchising it, effectively. I mean we've had some successes, but they're still alive and well.

Interviewer

What is the hardest thing about fighting the form of terrorism that we experience today as such a threat?

Liam Collins

Some of the challenge with fighting it I mean today is it's a non state actor, so really, as a government, we've really kind of gotten our grasp, how we go after non state actors. And the other.

Interviewer

Is that a legal issue, then, mostly?

Liam Collins

Not so much. I mean some of it's got some legal underpinnings. I mean what are you allowed to do under various international law? But a lot of times, if you look at what you read in the papers, I mean for the most case you have host nation permission before you're doing anything, is what it would appear like. But yes, some legal aspects to it, but it's more just the.

Interviewer

Well, put it another way. Because it's you referred before to it being a tactic, and even

if we define it as I just did a minute ago, as sort of Islamic extremism evidenced by these groups, and then al Qaeda, some of them al Qaeda only in name, some of them more active than others. And you refer to it as a non state actor, there's no state accountability, right? There's now no one to negotiate with. There is no one to sit down at a table with. There's no Army, even, with uniforms.

Liam Collins

Right.

Interviewer

All the things that people talk about as making this particular war, if we call it a war, different than a traditional war.

Liam Collins

I mean to me, we're at war with certain organizations that practice terrorism. I mean in 1998, bin Laden declared war on the U.S. even if we didn't recognize it as a war at the time. I mean make no mistake it's a war in their mind. But a lot of times, they're seeking sanctuary in countries that don't necessarily have a strong rule of law, whether it's Pakistan or Yemen. I mean countries that really have never governed completely the country. And those countries are in a tough situation, because if we come in, we don't have a lot of credibility within their nation. So if the U.S. comes in to do something, then it reflects negatively on their leadership as a country. It's just challenging from that perspective, and we try to do it unilaterally, there's other challenges with that.

Interviewer

How is it different than organized crime, because in a sense, you know, the Mafia could declare war on the Justice Department, essentially, by saying, you know, "Come get us." We're going to destroy things.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I think the political I mean the end state, really, is most terrorist organizations really have a political I mean they're using their violence for a political objective. I mean it's for a political objective. And when you think of criminal Mafia, they're really going more for economic, is what their objective is is trying to get money, so fundamentally.

Interviewer

I only ask this question because I mean I know in the law framework, there's always a question is whether we should treat terrorist acts as criminal acts or as acts of war, right?

Liam Collins

Yeah, and if you go historically and you look across the U.S., we've gone back and forth how we've done, other nations in Europe, or Israel. Some have taken more of a legal aspect, criminalizing it, and others have made it more of a war, fighting it as a war, and militarize it. So there's pros and cons to both ways to do it.

Interviewer

Is there something unique about this terrorist threat as opposed to terror through history

â€™cause you said before itâ€™s been a tactic since the beginning of time, really.

Liam Collins

I think to the U.S. what makes it different is its effectiveness in the fact that its capability. I mean you might have organizations that might want to do harm on the U.S., but they donâ€™t have the capability. And what changes over time, and if you look historically, I mean going back to the 1900s when dynamite was invented, and terrorist organizations started using dynamite, is that other weapons come about, theyâ€™re going to use that. You know, Timothy McVeigh using the bomb he did. And so kind of the goal hasnâ€™t really changed, but what it is, itâ€™s more lethal now, just because as they get more able to weaponize things.

Interviewer

So itâ€™s the access to more lethal weaponry, really, thatâ€™s changed things.Â I mean 500 years ago, they could throw a rock through a window, but now thereâ€™s access to materials for much greater damage.

Liam Collins

Right, so thatâ€™s a piece of it, and then with the proliferation of media, the same thing. I mean back 100 years ago, it was the newspapers. Then they could spread their work, â€™cause a lot of times using the violence, itâ€™s instrumental violence to kind of get the message out. And if theyâ€™re doing an act and it doesnâ€™t get reported, then they kind of donâ€™t really get the bang for their buck for doing that. So now when you got 24 hours news media, that if they conduct an attack, it lasts a lot longer. Everybodyâ€™s aware of it, where before, it might have been buried more.

Interviewer

And the growth of the communications media have allowed for them to networkize, if thatâ€™s a word, a little bit more, too.Â Isnâ€™t that right?

Liam Collins

I mean the way I look at it is in the old days, if you had one kind of an outlier you know, one person out of a thousand, one person out of 10 thousand, which is pretty radical, heâ€™s just kind of isolated in a city. Heâ€™s just kind of on his own. Where now, through the internet or through other means, that person that was just kind of a radical by themselves, that wouldnâ€™t necessarily be able to act by themselves, can actually link up with others more easily, and is more likely to act now, either through the encouragement, or through the training or resourcing of others. Theyâ€™re actually more capable now, so even if the numbers, to me, havenâ€™t increased historically, their capability probably has, â€™cause of just from that mechanism.

Interviewer

Would you say that when you look 20, 25 years out, from the studies youâ€™ve done, from the work youâ€™ve done, that the terrorism threat can be quelled? Or do you think that thereâ€™s an inevitability with the increasing portability of weaponry, the communications media you just described, the explosion in technologies, the ability to constantly morph into new forms in order to be able to elude counter terrorism strategies, that weâ€™re going to face this as a more lethal threat?

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean I don't see it going away any time. I mean the only reason it'll ever go away is if those that choose to use it believe it's ineffective, and a lot of them choose to use it because they believe it's effective. And a lot of times, I mean terrorism is a weapon of the weak, as I like to say, because they choose that out of the other tactics that they have because they can't fight something conventionally. They can't go at it some other way. So the best tool that they have is to use terrorism, because they don't have a lot of other options, and so that's what they go with. But if you see historical.

Interviewer

Just like people make this connection with the American Revolution, right? I mean which is that we were the weaker, and therefore some of the "terrorist" acts of those days.

Liam Collins

Right, and if you look at George Washington, he you know, I'm not a history expert my understanding is he wanted to fight the British conventionally. That was his training and background, and really turned towards more of an irregular warfare, guerilla warfare, when he saw that he couldn't fight him symmetrically, so he chose to fight them asymmetrically. So it's just kind of a natural thing. But again, going forward, I mean everything leads me to believe between the proliferation of the media there's always a mechanism to be heard, the ability to link up with others. The ability to you know, it's easier to find mass-casualty producing weapons or capabilities out there, that I think it's only going to grow in the future. I see no reason for it to stop. I mean it may not be religious based in the future. I mean you look, and there's been waves in the past where it changes, where it's more on the right, or it could be for the independence after World War II. So kind of those choosing to use it have changed over time, but I don't see any reason why it would go away.

Interviewer

What scares you the most about it, when you study this? What scare you most looking out?

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean kind of two things. I mean really I'm not overly scared with terrorism by itself, despite the fact I've been running the Center. I mean part of what we do I think is gain a better understanding of it for what it is, so that way policymakers don't underreact or overreact to it. It's kind of they can base that on some understanding of what their actions will do. Going forward, I mean I think the nexus of terrorism with weapons of mass destruction and really, not even weapons of mass destruction, really. Not like the chemical or biological or radiological I mean those, if you look, it's really hard to weaponize any of those things. It's probably more likely to come from somebody else. And even then, those threats don't really scare me. It's more of.

Interviewer

It's hard to weaponize those because they need a more specific delivery mechanism?

Liam Collins

Yeah, it's just really hard to do it. If you talk a lot of the biological stuff, you know, like

anthrax or something else, I mean you really got to have a good dispersal mechanism. It really is hard to do something that's causing significant damage, significant number of deaths. What concerns me, you know, one is the potential nexus with a nuclear weapon. The probability is extremely low to actually weaponize something with them, though Pakistan gives me cause for concern, or other not really Iran so much, because it's a fairly strong state. I wouldn't see it being in their interest to do that.

Terrorism Conducted by 2nd Generation Americans
Interviewer

So you're worried about Pakistan because of the instability of the political framework there.

Liam Collins

Right.

Interviewer

In Pakistan could lead to leaks. And also I guess you're also speaking to the radical nature of the intelligence service there, and others that may infiltrate the government is that what you're saying?

Liam Collins

Right, and not so much that the government would give it to them, but just because there may be some within government that are kind of radicalized, and we don't really know how they're securing it. It might not be that hard for someone I mean you've seen attacks on some of their premier military bases in Pakistan that it might not be that hard to get in there. But even if you get a weapon, it's not as simple as just detonating it. There are a lot of safety precautions in place with those weapons, so even then you've got to transport it, and then weaponize it in some way. Otherwise all you're going to end up with is a dirty bomb. And then that doesn't really scare me by itself, other than the overreaction, which that is what's concerning. We would've had some unreal I don't doubt that the U.S. would have some unrealistic expectation of what we would have to do to clean some area up, you know, spending.

Interviewer

Let's go back. Explain to the viewers what a dirty bomb is.

Liam Collins

Yeah, it's like a dirty bomb, basically just taking some kind of radiological material and detonating it basically so it spreads the radioactive material all over. The real threat from that is pretty negligible I mean if you look at the science of it. The likelihood of everybody getting cancer is pretty minimal. It's going to leave some residue that's going to be a little bit higher than the norm out there, but it'll still be within some safety level. But I think we'll have an overreaction that will cause us to spend millions and millions or billions of dollars, let's say, if they did it in New York City, to clean up several city blocks of material. And then at the same time we're putting cell phones or whatever up to our heads, and probably exposing ourselves to cancer through other ways that are probably more risky, but we're forcing that way. Anthrax, for example I mean it's terrible for those that lose their lives, but if you're talking five or six lose their lives from anthrax, the overreaction that we would have to that, spending millions or billions of dollars

to try to mitigate that risk for what really is a relatively low threat, in that we have people shooting each other all the time in domestic crimes.Â Or if you look at the crime of any given city, theyâ€™ll rightfully say, most chiefs of police will say, â€œTerrorism doesnâ€™t concern me. Iâ€™ve got 50 or 100 murders a year,â€ however many. Thatâ€™s really a greater threat to them. So itâ€™s really the overreaction that we do because of it.

Interviewer

And of course, that is actually the goal of the terrorist is the reaction even more than the act.

Liam Collins

Exactly. So the act of violence, really thatâ€™s just whoever they thatâ€™s really not their goal, isnâ€™t whatever that violence theyâ€™re inflicting there.Â Itâ€™s really that larger message that theyâ€™re sending out there.

Interviewer

Why is it, do you think, that we tend to not be able to equate, as you just did, the greater danger in so many other factors violence in the inner city, domestic violence, car accidents, for that matter, right by comparison to I mean here we are, 12 years after, or 10 years after, 11 years after 9/11, and we have not had another major domestic terror attack in that time, right?

Liam Collins

I mean, yeah, not to that level.Â I mean weâ€™ve had other attacks, or attempted attacks.

Interviewer

Right.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean I equate it to car crashes all the time, too, for example.Â I mean we canâ€™t stop terrorism, but weâ€™ve got some political reasons why we have this unreal expectation.Â But we could stop all traffic fatalities, if we wanted to.Â We could stop them by just making the speed limit five miles an hour.Â And we wonâ€™t do that, â€™cause itâ€™s too much.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s not an acceptable.

Interviewer

Right.

Liam Collins

And everybody recognizes when they get into a car thereâ€™s some risk associated with that. And people have accepted that.Â But for whatever reason, we still havenâ€™t as a nation accepted the fact that any time you step out your door, even if youâ€™re in your house, that thereâ€™s a small, tiny chance thatâ€™s less than the chance of being struck by lightning, and being killed by lightning, that you could be killed by a terrorist incident. I mean thereâ€™s nothing you do to protect yourself from lightning. Thereâ€™s things we

do to protect from terrorist incidents, but I think the government has also kind of set up this unrealistic expectation that zero is an acceptable level. And I mean itâ€™s just not a realistic level, but thereâ€™s been this expectation from the government that we can effectively protect everybody. And the fact that the threat is emanating from to some externally, that they have this unrealistic expectation that you can have zero, when at the same time, you canâ€™t reduce murders in a city to zero.â€” Itâ€™s just not possible. So thatâ€™s the part.

Interviewer

Is it because we had some kind of the imagination takes off with the terrorist threat? That it is out of the dark shadows, itâ€™s people who want to hurt us because of who we are?â€” Whereas you think youâ€™re protected from the murder rate because you can control your own sphere of activities, and youâ€™re not putting yourself in danger? I mean Iâ€™m just curious what you think is the reason for it.

Liam Collins

I mean I havenâ€™t figured out the total reason. I mean what I think it partially is, I think itâ€™s part of the policy-makers elevating the threat to higher than what it is.â€” Kind of building up an expectation that zero is possible. And we talk about a culture of resiliency, but really we donâ€™t have a culture of resiliency if we freak out every time something happens.â€” If you look at the Israelis, I mean theyâ€™ve been exposed to it for a long way before we significant exposure to terrorist acts for a lot longer than the U.S. And they kind of live their daily lives, and kind of accept it for what it is.

Interviewer

Well, of course, you could make because theyâ€™re geographically and historically I mean their threat is so much more immediately in front of them, right, â€”cause itâ€™s only a few miles away. And theyâ€™ve had this threat since the day they were born as a nation, that is whereas weâ€™ve been protected for two oceans for most of our history, and we donâ€™t think of foreign wars being fought on our soil.â€” So itâ€™s a whole different kind of experience we feel much more protected.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean weâ€™ve had the oceans, and really havenâ€™t you know, Canada and Mexico, for the most part of our history, really no issues there. So youâ€™re right.â€” Weâ€™ve really never faced that threat, and so weâ€™ve never lived our daily lives worrying, having to fear about attack from abroad. Though a lot of these terrorist attacks now arenâ€™t really going to be necessarily emanating, planned, and conducted from abroad. I mean a lot of them are going to be now more inspired from those organizations, linked in that way, but I think less likely to actually be the al Qaeda or somebody else planning abroad. Itâ€™s working with Americans that want to do harm to our country more than anything else.

Interviewer

Is that right you think itâ€™s more domestic in the end.

Liam Collins

I mean I think going forward itâ€™s easier, because they recognize, okay, where are our weaknesses?â€” And thatâ€™s where our weaknesses lie, because of the protections we

give to our citizens, where if you're talking somebody coming into the country, it's a lot harder for them to potentially get in. We might have intelligence on them, might draw scrutiny, might draw surveillance on them when they come into the country. And so they recognize that you've seen if you look at Times Square Bomber. I mean he went back to Pakistan just for a couple weeks to get the training. And they rushed him out of there before he could really perfect his technique, because they were afraid if he was there too long, it might draw additional scrutiny so they could get him back. I mean those are the kind of things that we're going to see. And then we've seen other things. If you looked at some of from bin Laden's, from the documents that were released publicly, you see him actually critical of the trial when Imzasi says that he's I might have the wrong name there, I got to go and verify. But when he basically took an oath to the U.S. that he would do no harm to the U.S. And bin Laden was actually concerned about this, because it doesn't look favorably on Islam if here he's violating his oath he made to the U.S., and saying, "Okay, in that case, what we should use is we can't use people that gain their citizenship, because they've taken an oath against the U.S. not to harm it. We've got to take some that are born Americans, or don't become Americans, because they have never taken that oath." An American hasn't taken that oath.

Interviewer

"Cause he believed in the sanctity of the oath.

Liam Collins

Right. They believe that you shouldn't violate an oath.

Interviewer

Yeah even if the oath is to the great Satan or whatever.

Liam Collins

Right, just because it undermines at least, again, from bin Laden's point of view others in the organization obviously didn't feel that way. But some of the at the higher level, several of them felt that way.

Interviewer

Yeah. I want to come back to the bin Laden papers and all, but you touched on something that's a major issue here, which is that you said the protections we give to our citizens have the risk embedded in them that those protections can be used against us, isn't that right? So I don't want to be putting words in your mouth here this is a leading question, I'll warn you. But I mean are you concerned that in this perhaps overreaction to terrorism that we might be inspired to limit the traditional freedoms that we have always identified ourselves with?

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean that's always there's always a tension between the democracy, I mean the liberties and security. There's inherent tension there's things you can do that enhance both of them. But sometimes it does come down to a choice of something that's going to provide you more security, but it's going to reduce liberties. So that's really for the public, it's for the policy makers to kind of come to figure out what is right on that. We've seen historically times when we've gotten it wrong. We put Japanese in.

Interviewer

Internment camps

Liam Collins

Internment camps after World War II, or during World War II.

Interviewer

Even before yeah.

Liam Collins

So I mean youâ€™ve seen times in history where that pendulum has clearly swung too far.

Interviewer

And of course weâ€™ve usually done that in time of war, and now weâ€™re in a point where we have this kind of perpetual war of a different kind.Â So I mean just what happens traditionally is that we tighten up civil liberties in wartime, and then we release them after wartime.Â But I mean here we are in our longest period of war, I guess, in history, and we also have a war that we feel probably has no definable end.

Liam Collins

Right. And the challenge is, I mean whether itâ€™s I mean the difference is previously, you could tell when somebody was arming. Theyâ€™re moving troops on the border. Theyâ€™re mobilizing their forces. You could kind of see if somethingâ€™s coming.Â ou could see the Japanese building up. We didnâ€™t necessarily know when or if they were going to attack us, but clearly we could see that capability building. But now when youâ€™re talking about the lethality of weapons or something, I mean like the 9/11 attacks. Something relatively unsophisticated, that you could do significant damage, with little to no warning, depending if you keep your operational security being protective about it, so that kind of the flash to bang or the warning is so much shorter now than what it used to be. And with the lethality, especially if youâ€™re talking nuclear weapons or something, thatâ€™s what leads to that concern. Yeah, as far as the debate on civil liberties, again, thatâ€™s just you got to let those fights will be fought, and sometimes theyâ€™ll go to far one way or the other.

Interviewer

What do cadets need to know about counter terrorism right now, would you say? If you were establishing the curriculum for the Academy as a whole, what would you think they need to know?

Liam Collins

I mean what they need to understand is what it is, like what the objectives of these groups are, because combatting terrorism different counter-terrorism tactics are going to be different, depending on what the political objectives of the organizations are. So understanding not all terrorism is the same. Not all groups have the same desired end state. And just having a better understanding of what the groupsâ€™ goals and objectives are what is the root cause of that political violence, really. Thatâ€™s it, understand the political violence.

Understanding Political Violence

Interviewer

So understand culture, understand politics, understand religion, you're saying. These are things well, of course, going back 100 years, these are the kind of things that were never taught at the Academy, but they're now critical, you're thinking, to the education of a cadet.

Liam Collins

Right. And if you go back over the last 30 or 40 years, if you look at the wars we've fought, I mean most of them are not the large conventional battles. Yes, we without a doubt have to be completely proficient in those tasks, but I would say that we over train and over educate and over exercise our forces on those tasks for what I say is a symmetrical foe. And if you look around at the universe today, there's nobody that's going to fight us on a symmetrical battlefield, because.

Interviewer

So cadets don't get enough education in the asymmetrical wars that we're more likely to be encountering.

Liam Collins

Right. If you just look back, I mean whether it's Kosovo, Bosnia, Haiti, all these other things that we historically have put under other names. Military operations other than war, low intensity conflict which I've never understood the term, because if you're in the conflict and you're getting shot at, it's pretty high intensity. But effectively kind of it's just we have a culture where we just want to fight the large conventional battle, which doesn't we have to without a doubt be able to do that for our nation when we need it. But if you look kind of the first Gulf war, maybe going into the first opening weeks of going into Iraq, but that really is the easy part. And the hard part is what do you do after that? What do we do in Iraq after that? And if we don't have any understanding of what that is if the cadets don't as Lieutenants or Captains and Lieutenant Colonels if we don't train them and educate them on that, then we shouldn't be surprised with the result that we give our nation.

Interviewer

And that's train them in a tactical sense, you mean.

Liam Collins

It's both. I mean some of it's tactical and some of it's thought, because some of it you just can't train tactically. I mean how do you train nation-building or something tactically? Some of that's more an intellectual thing that you have to do, which doesn't really work well when we have a culture that wants to basically train somebody, go out and simulate it, go to the field and do it. And some of those you just can't do any other way than kind of increasing intellectual capital of the force.

Interviewer

This is a big Army question, though, right? I mean because yes, we have this tremendous conventional force we really have thought through, and we have no reason to think we couldn't face off any conventional enemy. But there are those in the Army who think the kind of asymmetrical warfare you're describing should not be the work of the Army.

That nation building is the kind of process that takes decades, and that it involves skills that are really not Army skills. Isn't this a fight sort of going on within the Army itself right now, intellectually, I mean?

Liam Collins

Yeah, and I think one of the reasons the Army has always turned away from it is because it's hard. It's hard. We don't want to do it because it's really hard. Why would we want to do something that's hard? But if you look historically, every time the nation, when we need it to be done, we are the free labor of the nation. I mean State Department, without a doubt, has a role to play in that, but they don't have one to two million people, depending on if you're counting Reserves and Guard, that are just there, available to go deploy to do things. US AID, same thing their numbers are so small, their budgets are so small they just aren't capable of doing it. You look historically, the Army's always been the one that they've turned to to do it, and we just aren't prepared to do it, I think.

Interviewer

We're not intellectually prepared to do it is what you're really thinking.

Liam Collins

Right, I think that we're just not intellectually prepared. And terrorism falls as one of those things. How do we fight terrorism, though that as a CT fight I think the military can embrace, cause again, we go out, find, kill. You know, how do we kill or capture these? So that piece of it, right? So the kinetic piece of the CT they get, but the other pieces are tougher to get. And it's not just the military alone that has to do this.

Interviewer

At the CTC, so you study all parts of it, not just the kinetic part of it.

Liam Collins

Right, so we study all parts of it within the Center.

Interviewer

And the other parts I take it the way you're describing, those are the harder parts in a sense, right?

Liam Collins

I mean those are the harder part. If you look, we've created the most amazing hunting killing machine known in the history of the Earth that can find almost anybody anywhere, and pretty effective at it. But that's only a piece of it, and everybody recognizes. Anybody that's fought in Afghanistan or Iraq knows you'll never kill your way out of most of these things. It's not like the old conventional battle, where you're trying to do it's just different. You're not going to kill your way out of it. That's just buying you time, or it's a piece of that mechanism.

Interviewer

When you look at a war like Afghanistan, does it look wrong headed to you? I mean given the amount we can commit to that, both politically and economically, and in manpower, to

be able to solve this problem in a fairly primitive part of the world with tools that we have or are willing to expend?

Liam Collins

Yeah, it really depends on what the goal or kind of the end state, what the vision is that we have for what we want in Afghanistan. And that will really tell you if what we can do is feasible, if we can in terms of resources, if itâ€™s something that we can accomplish.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean thatâ€™s kind of the under governed states is kind of the thing. I mean if you look at Somalia that really hasnâ€™t been a great place for al Qaeda to stage out of historically, â€™cause itâ€™s so bad. There kind of what they found is it wasnâ€™t great for them to operate either, â€™cause it was such a mess.

Interviewer

So they need some level of stability, do they?

Liam Collins

So they need some level of stability.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Liam Collins

I mean what they get in the northwest frontier province and some of the federally administered tribal areas is I wouldnâ€™t say itâ€™s a lack of governance. Itâ€™s kind of a lack of central government. So they do have stability in those regions, itâ€™s just not the Pakistani government necessarily enforcing that. They donâ€™t have the monopoly of violence to run that country in that area. Doesnâ€™t mean itâ€™s lawless in those areas.

Interviewer

Tell me what the CTC does, so letâ€™s go to that next.

The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC)

Liam Collins

Yeah, so what we do at the Combating Terrorism Center is focus on basically providing future leaders, which are the cadets, and current leaders and practitioners with basically the intellectual tools needed to understand the terrorist threat, is what we do. So we do that through three pillars. We educate, we research, and we advise is probably not the right word, but we give advice where it sees fit.

Interviewer

Itâ€™s like a think tank, then, in a sense.

Liam Collins

Right, so itâ€™s kind of a hybrid. So kind of like a think tank, for lack of a better term. Itâ€™s really hard to come up with an exact comparison to it, but itâ€™s like a think tank is

probably the closest thing because I look at it as a nexus between the academic world, because we're up here, a lot of academics, very few actual uniformed military members in the Center. We bring in some of the brightest scholars, give them time. You know their focus, again, is teaching the cadets, but if we really want them to stay at the leading edge, we've got to give them time to research and stay current with what's going on. And so the research is the byproduct of coming to give the best instruction we can give to the cadets. And that research can then inform policy makers, operational force, whoever, and kind of.

Interviewer

How do you establish the research I mean do they establish their own research choices, or are you working on contracts from the Pentagon, or are you coming up with them on your own, or.

Liam Collins

So I mean we are independent on that nobody from the government. I mean we're housed here at West Point, but we're privately funded, so none of the basically, nobody's getting funded from the U.S. government. So it gives us that academic freedom that we need when we're first starting up that reputation, 'cause it doesn't do us any good to produce something if anybody thinks we're just a mouthpiece of the U.S. government. And if you kind of look at what we've done historically, I don't think anybody would ever accuse us of that, previously or definitely not now, because we may say stuff that's not always the party line for the government. So when it comes to actually figuring out what research we like to do, we want it to be relevant. We want it to be useful to kind of shape and inform the debate that's going on to try to understand, shape the policy makers and the operational force that just don't have an understanding of what's going on out there. Anything we can do to help them with that then if the politicians want to bring the politics in, they can, but at least let the politics be based on fact and understanding what the organizations are, what some of the tools that they have within it, before they are just basing it off.

Interviewer

Describe some of the work that the Center's done over the years.

Liam Collins

Yeah, so I mean some of the stuff relatively in the last few years that we've done is we've been looking at the Hikani network starting about three years ago. An example of how this research idea came.

Interviewer

Describe what the Hikani network is for the viewers.

Liam Collins

Yeah. So the Hikani network, what it is, it's the organization that provides sanctuary for al Qaeda, going back to pre 9/11. They provided sanctuary for them, but they're kind of between their reach is on the southeastern part of Afghanistan and Pakistan, so they kind of reach in there. So the question is.

Interviewer

A A A Basically, the border region.

Liam Collins

Right, in the border region, so why they can

Interviewer

Funded by whom, how do they get their money?

Liam Collins

Yeah, so that's one of the things we're looking at is how do they get their money? So if you look at it, that's one of the research projects that we looked at, is how do they get their money? How are they funding themselves? And what you find out is they have kind of a licit and illicit funding stream. They get it from all different places. Basically, they monopolize think of them as, in some ways, like a criminal Mafia type organization. You know, it's the Hikani family kind of running this, controlling the New Jersey and New York area or something. I mean that's what it is that they do, and they get it from chromite smuggling, to regular smuggling. They have ties into the financial markets in Pakistan. I mean all different ways that they're getting money. And even if they're getting it through legal means, it's being funneled to devious type of operations. And then others are just.

Interviewer

They keep laundering, you mean.

Liam Collins

Right, getting laundered, so even the stuff that they're getting legally, it's being laundered for illegal type of activities.

Interviewer

What do we know about the Hikani name, family, the whole origins of it?

Liam Collins

So they're going back to the 1980s. They were one of them that supported the fighters going into Afghanistan, so long history going back to the ISI.

Interviewer

Fighting the Soviets.

Liam Collins

Fighting the Soviets. So a long history going back with ISI, the Pakistani Intelligence Service, kind of getting support and working closely with them. So they've had that kind of support going back, but as of even in the mid 2000s, we just didn't really understand who the Hikanis were. So if we're talking reconciliation in Afghanistan, and you want to reconcile with the Hikanis, what does that mean? What is the goal of this organization mean? So we had a pretty good like I said, the intel community does an amazing job building the link, the diagram of who the Hikanis are. They got the lines going. They got the network understood fairly well. But the look was kind of 2001 forward. No one

had kind of looked back pre 2001. So what we did is kind of look back at what did they say in their own documents? They were publishing their magazine, Jihad, not Jihad, but it was called The Fountainhead. So what did they publish in there? And if you look a lot of their stuff, I mean theyâ€™re definitely ideologically based. A lot of what they did when bin Laden was getting sanctuary in Afghanistan from Mullah Omar, and where was he living? He was actually living in Hikani territory.

Interviewer

Mullah Omar was, at the time, the head of.

Liam Collins

The head of the Taliban, yeah.

Interviewer

The head of the Afghan state, isnâ€™t that right?

Liam Collins

Right, the head of the Afghan state, and head of the Taliban. And when bin Laden would do something, and get up there and do some kind of media messaging, Mullah Omar would basically tell him, â€œHey, stop doing that just donâ€™t do it anymore.â€ And then bin Laden continued to do it because he was getting the sanctuary, you know, from the Hikani family.â And if you look at a lot of bin Laden declaring his fatwa in 1998, well, you see kind of this rhetoric coming out through the Hikani is actually preceding that fatwa. So.

Interviewer

Now, no one else is doing this kind of thing? No one at the Pentagon is studying it? No one at the CIA is studying this?â Not the think tanks?

Liam Collins

Yeah, not that we saw, but really, we didnâ€™t even know the gap existed out there. And what it was for us is we sent an element over to Afghanistan for four months to kind of work with the Task Force over there.â It was two months. And kind of bouncing around the country, and it wasnâ€™t until we were over there that really we understood there was this gap of understanding who the Hikanis were historically. You know if weâ€™re going to reconcile with them, what does that mean? Because the debate was are they just a Mafia organization, â€™cause if they are, theyâ€™re economically motivated, well, then thatâ€™s simple, right? Effectively, you can buy them off, or economically. But if you get down to them, theyâ€™re ideologically based, and they really are kind of believe in what al Qaeda believes in, thatâ€™s completely different. You canâ€™t really reconcile with al-Qaeda. You canâ€™t, because itâ€™s not an organization you can reconcile with. Their political goals are.

Interviewer

You mean in the overall Islamic extremism threat as we described it before, the balance between those who are religiously and idealistically motivated and those who are more cynically monetarily motivated.

Liam Collins

I mean within any organization, or you look at any rebellion over the years, I mean different organizations. Some attract more of, as Jeremy Weinstein calls them, you attract some of the true believers, and then others are kind of the profit motivated. And so it's how the organization forms.

Interviewer

You know.

Liam Collins

No, but for al Qaeda, I think it's they're mostly ideologically motivated. I mean with the Taliban in Afghanistan, that's kind of Taliban's an umbrella term that encompasses almost anybody that's anti government, with the true Taliban being Mullah Omar and the ketasuric Taliban. But Taliban's kind of a broader term that could be anybody that's kind of a rebel.

Interviewer

Taliban is also more state-centered, isn't that right? I mean they're still like a political party, right? So their desire is not the same as al Qaeda, am I correct?

Liam Collins

I mean they're more of a political party. They do have some of those same beliefs kind of as al Qaeda, but they don't have al Qaeda's goals.

Interviewer

So with al Qaeda, with this idealism, killing is the only response, right? Or containment?

Liam Collins

With any organization like that, you've always got the few that you just the really hard core believers who you're going to have to kill or capture, whatever. You can't fundamentally reform them. That's who they are. Some you can reform, and then the rest, what you try to do with any kind of insurgency or any kind of thing like that is you're trying to get the fence sitters. You're trying to convince them not to go over there. You're trying to show them that there is no the goal that al Qaeda has is not feasible. They can't accomplish what their vision is. And so you're trying to really get focused on the fence sitters through political or other informational methods to try to influence them. But yeah, there's always a hard core group you're going to have to kill or capture on these organizations, you know, to be effective.

Interviewer

Tell me some other work that the Center's done besides the Hikani network. What are the other sort of landmark pieces of work have you done since the Center was established?

The Bin Laden Documents

Interviewer

Well, we look forward to seeing your dissertation as well, then. Thank you for coming in today.

Liam Collins

So one of the I mean we've done one looking at the Horn of Africa. This is a number of years ago, and again, this kind of went back, we talked about a little bit earlier, you know. It was "The Misadventures in the Horn of Africa" or something I think was the title. And it was kind of the same thing the understanding the belief that hey, these completely ungoverned areas are a safe haven for terrorists to operate from. And what we found is their experiences weren't so great there, because if it's really chaotic, then it really doesn't help them for what they're trying to do there. So we did that, and that was around 2008, I think, and around the same time, then that's when we had the first bunch of Somali diaspora youth from mostly up in the Minneapolis area went over to the Horn of Africa to join al Shabab. And basically which is the terrorist organization down there that's sought over the years allegiance with al Qaeda, and eventually got it after bin Laden died. But some actually go out there and go to join al Shabab, and actually what's recognized as the first American suicide bomber was one of them that went over there to do that, so kind of shaping that debate. Understanding at least a little bit of what's going on there. And then most recently, probably the most significant in terms probably of reading, is we kind of contextualize the bin Laden documents that were released, and we wrote a report to go along with that.

Interviewer

We do I just wanted to ask you, bin Laden it's been a year and a half, I guess, since bin Laden was killed, right? Do you see there's been a significant result in his death in terms of the reduction of the threat?

Liam Collins

If you look historically at organizations, if you take out it depends what the role of the leader is, really, what the effect of taking out the leader is going to be. You see in some organizations, taking out the leader is going to be effective and it kills the organization. Typically, it's most effective when you have a really charismatic leader.

Interviewer

Well, he was certainly a charismatic leader.

Liam Collins

Right that's really controlling things operationally, so effectively, like a commander that never lets anybody else step up in his place. And the other piece of it is usually most effective when it's in the beginning years of the organization. But by then, it was almost 10 years after 9/11. He'd already been in charge of the organization for a long time. And the fact that all these other disparate kind of al Qaeda in Iraq, al Qaedas in the Islamic Maghreb, al Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula the fact that all these others were kind of popping up that really weren't even completely subscribing to his al Qaeda's ideology, we didn't believe that taking him out would be the death blow to the larger movement.

Interviewer

But significant nonetheless, I take it.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean I think without a doubt it's significant, 'cause it does send the

message to anybody that wants to join the organization that might be thinking about it that we can find you. Youâ€™re not going to totally be safe. Itâ€™s without a doubt significant. Itâ€™s just not going to you got to put it in context to what it is.

Interviewer

You were at the CTC when it happened, I take it, the SEAL raid.

Liam Collins

Yes.

Interviewer

Did you have any pre knowledge of it?

Interviewer

Did you have any pre knowledge of where bin Laden was likely to be

Liam Collins

I mean I thought he was in Pakistan, but other than that, I didnâ€™t have any idea.

Interviewer

When you say Pakistan, you thought he was over the border?

Liam Collins

I thought he was probably in the federally administrated tribal area. That was where I thought he was at, just pure as a guess, not looking at any intelligence or whatever else. Just thatâ€™s what my gut told me where he was at, but I figured it was Pakistan. I just wouldnâ€™t have picked there.

Interviewer

Yeah. Letâ€™s talk about the bin Laden papers now. Tell me what they are, and what you all have done with them.

Liam Collins

Yeah, so what we got was basically 17 documents.Â And I think rather than just kind of releasing them.

Interviewer

Where did the documents come from, and.

Liam Collins

So the documents, I think what the DNI, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, I think what they wanted to do was release some of the documents. â€Cause weâ€™ve seen historically thatâ€™s one of the things that we do. Anything.

Interviewer

The documents that were recovered during the raid.

Liam Collins

Right, so documents recovered during the raid. And you can tell, I mean historically, anything that you can do can shed light on the organization. I mean one of the things that we did was back in 2008, we looked at at this time, everybody recognized that for the most part al-Qaeda was killing Muslims. They weren't killing Americans. They weren't killing Westerners. They were killing Muslims, and this kind of undermines their rhetoric. So we do anything you could do to expose the organization for what it is. It's going to make them look bad. So in that case, what we looked at for the report "Deadly Vanguard" was looked at, so okay, basically every al-Qaeda attack between 2004 and 2008, and who was killed, based on country of origin, because you can't necessarily tell what religion they are. But based on country of origin, we looked from 2004 to 2008, and it was something like 85% of the deaths from al-Qaeda's attacks around the world, or al-Qaeda affiliated organizations, 80 to 85% victims were from Muslim majority nations. And then if you look just 2006 to 2008, taking out the Madrid bombings and the 77 attacks in London, that number jumped up to 98%. And when we actually went to go get our facts, we didn't go to Western papers. We didn't look at the New York Times or Washington Post, because people would accuse those of just being mouthpieces of the government.

Liam Collins

We actually went to Egyptian papers, papers in the region, for our sources, and put it all out there, so anybody could check our facts who'll write to their papers and see it. And so when we released that report, basically the internet chat rooms went off. All the kind of jihad chat and all those, they went crazy, because people were saying, "Hey, what's going on here? Why are we killing Muslims? Is this true?" And people went in and then you had some that say, "No, it's not true." And then you'd have others who'd say, "Well, we looked at these papers, and that's what they're saying," so they look at the deaths. So anything that can expose them for who they are. And these ran as headlines in almost every paper in the region, with like "Blood at the Hands of al-Qaeda" or something, different things. I'm getting the title wrong, but I mean basically discrediting them for who they are showing them for who they are. So in this case I think rather than and the community understands. I mean Special Operations Command, anything else, they understand.

Liam Collins

There's certain classified documents they were captured, they were classified. Why because there's some immediate tactical value that the documents may have. They may shed links to other people in the network that may not be exposed, that might go underground if they know that they're being sought after. And then on the operational level, sometimes there's things, understanding these organizations a little better, and there's a reason why you want to keep things classified. But I think most people within the intelligence community, and definitely within the Special Operations Command, and Admiral McCraven, they understand the benefit of getting these documents declassified. Getting them out there for the public to see, getting them out there for the world to see, to expose these organizations for who they are. So I think that's a goal. I don't know if there's more documents out there. I would assume that there is more.

Interviewer

But they released these documents to you.

Liam Collins

Right, so they released 17 of these documents, and I think the reason was recognizing we only have a 24 hour news cycle here. And if they just released, "Hey, here's the 17 documents," without any kind of contextualization understanding of what they are, the media would just kind of go to whatever kind of sound bite, whatever thing looked the most interesting, without really giving the public or anybody else an understanding of really what this is. So I think what they wanted to do is release it to somebody and I'm sure they had discussions of where to release it, and probably other think tanks and stuff came to mind. And ultimately they decided to give it to us to kind of contextualize the documents when they come out, and that way we can provide that context, instead of again just looking for the one sexy thing saying, "Petraeus is the man of the hour, and go after Obama, and don't worry about Biden," or something. Because that's what they'll run as a headline, even though if you look, that's like on page 20 of a 30 page letter by bin Laden that really.

Interviewer

That is in a letter by bin Laden.

Liam Collins

That is in a letter by bin Laden, but that's the thing they're going to run with, "cause that kind of sounds nice and sexy, a good headline. So when we release the report, the idea is hey, the executive summary kind of summarizes it, and why are we suited for it well, we collectively have 30 or 40 years of experience just doing this an expert in ideology, an operational aside for me. Other expertise looking at this organization and putting it all together, there's no way somebody that even if they just covered this for their living as a reporter could really have that kind of academic understanding of what the organization is.

Interviewer

What was the headline for it, as you guys saw it in the context that you learned?

Liam Collins

Yeah, I mean so some of the debate at that time was I mean there was an ongoing debate is Bin Laden the puppet master pulling the strings for all these other organizations out there al Qaeda, Islamic Maghreb, al Qaeda in Iraq, al Qaeda in the Arabian peninsula. And what you clearly saw from these limited documents, and we recognize it's only 17, and no doubt there's others that might say other things. But clearly, from these you could still gain some stuff. There's things you can't tell, but it's clear that he was not the puppet master pulling the strings. There's clearly debate within the organization, within senior leadership about what's the way to go forward. Some are saying, "Hey, we need to cut away these other organizations. They're bad for us. They're bad for our al Qaeda brand. They're killing Muslims they shouldn't be doing this."

Interviewer

Based on the research that had been done.

Liam Collins

Oh yeah, our research and data, but they recognized it as well, â€™cause they could see it. And they said, effectively, â€œItâ€™s bad for our brand.â€ And some of them were saying, â€œHey, we need to cut them away if they do this. We need to publicly apologize for the deaths that theyâ€™re doing.â€ Effectively saying theyâ€™re not following in our case we would say the Geneva Conventions, the laws of war but in them, they werenâ€™t following the Muslim law of war, effectively, in the way that they were going about doing a war. Doing a suicide bomb outside of a church they were very critical of doing something like that. â€œWhy are you doing that? If youâ€™re going after a certain target, go after them a little more strategically, without taking upâ€.

Interviewer

Whoâ€™s saying this?Â This is bin Laden saying this.

Liam Collins

Adam Gadahn was saying it, one of actually, an American in al Qaedaâ€™s the senior American thatâ€™s in al Qaeda, so he was saying this.

Interviewer

And whatâ€™s bin Laden saying?

Liam Collins

Bin Ladenâ€™s kind of in the middle ground. Then you had Zawahiri, whoâ€™s now al Qaedaâ€™s leader, who is basically saying I think he kind of recognized al Qaeda really hadnâ€™t done anything in a long time. I think he recognized, â€œHey, these are the ones that are actually out there doing something. We should just take everybody into our fold.â€ If you go back originally, the only one who got their allegiance with bin Laden was al Qaeda in Iraq, and I think he recognized how much that damaged his brand, effectively, and so he never really did that with anybody else. Al Shabab wanted to join al Qaeda. Bin Laden kept turning them down, turning them down, turning them down, and after he died, the Zawahiri gave their allegiance to al Shabab.

Interviewer

What is the form of these documents? Are they really documents? Are they transcripts of conversations that were taped? Or what were they?

Liam Collins

No, so what my understanding of what it is is basically I mean the way that they communicated is I mean bin Laden was clearly savvy, or he wouldnâ€™t have lived as long as he did.Â And the ones that last longer are the ones that actually know how to practice good operational security, or OPSEC, as we call it. So understanding how they couriered their messages and how they talked to one another kind of tells us what these messages probably, what kind of form they took. And what you can kind of get from it is effectively, what he would do is draft again, going back to I think it was 1998 or something. At that time, we knew where bin Laden was because we could geolocate him using MR SAT satellite phone.Â And the U.S. News & World Report article, I think it was, talked about this, and then bin Laden never came up on the phone ever again never came up on a sat phone again after that.Â So he clearly is reading whatâ€™s going on, and adjusting his communication methods because of that.Â So it looked like what he was doing, and other senior members of the organization again, junior members werenâ€™t. If you see

them constantly getting targeted, they obviously weren't practicing these same techniques.

Liam Collins

But bin Laden wasn't doing anything over the phone, anything over the internet, nothing like that, because he suspected what some of our capabilities or fearful what some of our capabilities were. So everything he did was basically through courier. He would type a message, you know like type a document, think of it like a Word document or something. Type the message. Put it on a storage device of some kind, a thumb drive, something like that. He would give it to a courier. Courier would come to his house, no more than once or twice a week, as he describes in his you know he gives specific OPSEC guidance to his people. Don't come here more than once or twice a week, because if you do, you know he describes the area of Pakistan where they're living is basically under constant aerial surveillance or surveillance of the U.S., and they will be able to detect anything that's out of the normal. So don't have more than one or two couriers, and don't have them come more than once or twice a week. So the courier would come to his house. Then the courier would go deliver that message to someone else's courier. And then he gives again specific guidance. He would, again, believing that this would avoid detection, meet this courier in a tunnel, in a closed air market, somewhere.

Liam Collins

Go meet that courier. Hand it off, and then that courier will go deliver the message to the intended recipient. Then that recipient was given specific instructions a lot of time to delete the message which clearly bin Laden didn't do, because he had a lot of at least these old messages on there. And then that message would go to whoever that other senior individual, and so that's kind of how they communicated.

Interviewer

Let me get this so Zawahiri is somehow in there, too, though. Is he creating his own documents on his own thumb drives, or how do you get this exchange you're describing between bin Laden and some of the other senior leadership, and the differences of opinion that they've had?

Liam Collins

Right. So what we get is basically because it looked like that was the only method of communication they were having. They weren't picking up the phones and talking. They weren't meeting.

Interviewer

Just thumb drives or whatever.

Liam Collins

Yeah, and they weren't meeting one another, because that again would draw risk. I mean they might be, but at least very, very infrequently. So you could see what they were feeling and what their thoughts were because of what they were typing in this letter. And you definitely see where Zawahiri was kind of at least again, it's only a limited number of documents. He doesn't appear, even though he's leader of al Qaeda now, he kind of seems like he's not on the inner circle, to some extent, from the exchanges that

they have.

Interviewer

But the idea is that I'm sorry to be so literal about this, but it's fascinating. So bin Laden would write something, would go by courier to another courier to another courier, eventually end up at Zawahiri. Zawahiri would write something back, and be just like a.

Liam Collins

Right.

Interviewer

Like a pigeon, in a sense.

Liam Collins

Right. So I would take the message. I would give it to my courier. That courier would go, okay, let's say to the mall, give it to another courier. And that courier would go to the person, my intended recipient. So each person, whether core you know again, from what he says in those documents, each one would have one or two couriers. And they were the ones that would go and meet and exchange that, so then it would take, if you think about it and again, in the documents he gives specific guidance. Don't have a courier come to your house more than once or twice a week. So if I give you the message, you take it the courier would deliver it to the other courier, who delivered it to the recipient, just to get a response back, that's going to take at a minimum three days.

Interviewer

Oh, sure.

Liam Collins

Probably more like a week.

Interviewer

Yeah, because.

Liam Collins

And that's if they're collocated in the same area.

Interviewer

And you say that they're not getting on cell phones, one courier to the other, saying, 'I need to meet you at the mall.' This has to be.

Liam Collins

Yeah, that I have no idea how they're doing that, but how they're working the courier piece wasn't clear from the documents. But yeah, you're talking I would say at least a week to get a turnaround for anything, if you're within the same geographical space. If you're going farther than that, then who knows? But yeah, so very slow method, and you clearly see bin Laden, clearly, again within the same documents, saying, 'Erring always on the side of security,' recognizing that it

doesn't do any good to get an operational act planned if you're just killed and you can't execute it. So he recognizes slow is you're ineffective if you're dead, so he recognizes whatever. And the other interesting insight into it is what he basically says in one of the letters is, "You know, despite the fact of the American superior technology, if you're caught and we've lost brothers" as he called them "we've lost them because of our poor operational security. It's not because of their superior technology. It's because people have lapsed in doing good operational security." And so basically putting the blame on them, that this is why we're getting caught. It's not because of what their capabilities are. It's because we're not being careful enough. You can't have these lapses.

Interviewer

Any personality emerge in this? Can you see who he was by reading these?

Liam Collins

I mean there's not enough.

Interviewer

It gives him sort of a.

Liam Collins

Yeah, there's not enough on that. I mean the problem is other than like one of them, they're almost all from 2010, 2009-2010, so it's only kind of a snapshot in time, exchange with too few of people to really tell. So you can't really tell who he is. I mean you can tell that he's clearly OPSEC savvy. You can tell that he clearly believes, hasn't really changed what he believes the organization's goal is. Hasn't changed the belief in what tactics are acceptable and what are not for example, killing Muslims is not acceptable. And effectively, killing civilians isn't acceptable. The difference in the U.S. is we're all culpable because we have a democratic government. We elect our leaders, therefore we're all culpable for our nation's leaders, but in totalitarian states, this wouldn't necessarily be true, because they don't elect their leader. Clearly you kind of get those insights into him. You clearly see like Adam Gadahn is kind of on the inner circle, and Zawahiri, again, just from these limited number of documents we see as just really doesn't appear to be clearly some fundamental differences of opinion from bin Laden, so you get those kind of insights from the documents.

Interviewer

Insights into Adam Gadahn at all, though, or not, as a personality?

Liam Collins

Â Â Â Yeah, not so much as a person. You just kind of see his ideology like that, but you can't really get any more from that. It's too limited of a sample to get a good feel for that.

Interviewer

Now, are you expecting to get more of these from?

Liam Collins

Yeah, nobodyâ€™s.

Interviewer

DNIâ€™s releasing them, is that right?

Liam Collins

Right. And we havenâ€™t gotten any. We hope that thereâ€™s more coming lâ€™m sure. Again, itâ€™s just.

Interviewer

Thereâ€™s thousands of these, right? Thatâ€™s our understanding, at least, is that a lot was recovered.

Liam Collins

Â Â Â Yeah. I mean I have no idea, â€™cause all I know is the ones we were given. I didnâ€™t see any others. I havenâ€™t been told how many, if thereâ€™s any others exist. But my belief is if heâ€™s got a computer that has these on, thereâ€™s probably more on there as well, and I think itâ€™ll just take time. I mean I have every reason to believe, like I said, Admiral McCraven and others, they recognize the benefit of getting these out there to the public. Not only the U.S., but around the world, to kind of expose the organization for who it is, and kind of show them for who they are.

Interviewer

You refer to the jihad chat rooms. What are these, and where do you find them, and can an average internet user find them on his own?

Liam Collins

Yeah. I mean thereâ€™s probably all different kinds of jihad chat rooms, but the average user is just not going to be able to get into the real good ones. â€™Cause the real good ones, they recognize again, not recognize, but suspect what U.S. capabilities are, and they donâ€™t want to let anybody into the chat rooms for fear of what could be exploited beyond that.

Interviewer

So theyâ€™re all password protected in some way?

Liam Collins

Most of them are seriously theyâ€™re password protected, and you can only get in some I donâ€™t even know if they let you, some of the more elite ones, I guess, for lack of a better term, wonâ€™t let any new members in, or theyâ€™ll only.

Interviewer

But you all can crack them here, is that right? You said you were watching what was happening in the jihad chat rooms.

Liam Collins

No, well, this was back in.

Interviewer

Oh, youâ€™re talking about this is when.

Liam Collins

Like 2008 or something, you could see what they were saying on there. They were more open.Â Theyâ€™ve clamped down since that time.

Interviewer

I see. And in that case, youâ€™re watching them react to the release of the work that you guys had done yourselves.

Liam Collins

Right. Yeah.

Interviewer

You have Arabists over there, I take it, at CTC, too people who know Arabic and have studied the Arab culture, and I assume thatâ€™s part of what youâ€™re.

Liam Collins

Right, exactly. I mean the only way to really understand stuff is go to the original. You got to read it in the original language and understand what the original language is. I mean itâ€™s like when we got the bin Laden documents, we got them in the English translation, but we got them in the original Arabic. Well, any time you translate, thereâ€™s going to be a loss, and so that was the other key thing is some of the translations werenâ€™t pieces of translations werenâ€™t totally correct.

Interviewer

What do you do, you give them to several people to translate so you can?

Liam Collins

No, but in this, we just posted it as we got it, so what we posted on the internet was just what we got. But when we actually writing it.

Interviewer

You got your translation from DNI along with the.

Liam Collins

Right, so we got both. So when weâ€™re actually looking at it and studying it for what itâ€™s saying, we have somebody that understands the original language, Arabic, thatâ€™s actually reading it, â€™cause if you just read the English version, you might actually come up with a little different conclusion. So yes, definitely relied on those, or whether itâ€™s a Pashtu linguist, or an Urdu linguist, youâ€™ve got to have that expertise to really, really understand what theyâ€™re saying.

Interviewer

And you really come from the operational side, which weâ€™ll get into when we get into your personal story in another interview. But in your work at the CTC, and your work studying counter terrorism in the past few years, what would you say has been the most profound insight youâ€™ve had? I mean just the thing when you look back you say you know this because of the work that youâ€™ve done?

Liam Collins

Whatâ€™s the question?â€” Iâ€™m.

Interviewer

Well, just when you look back you came into this work having had operational experience.

Liam Collins

Oh, right.

Interviewer

And now youâ€™re in more the academic, the sort of thought, the idea study, I take it, so youâ€™re looking at it from you look at the same object from a different side. What has been the most profound thing that youâ€™ve discovered in doing that?

Liam Collins

Yeah. I mean I donâ€™t think thereâ€™s anything to me, maybe â€˜cause Iâ€™ve learned it over the years, so it wasnâ€™t like I didnâ€™t come in with totally wrong preconceptions, then I saw something and was like, â€œOh wow, Iâ€™ve had this all wrong over the years.â€

Interviewer

An operational guy what does he need to learn that youâ€™ve learned in the past few years? And would you wish that he would learn, in terms of that or maybe you feel that itâ€™s on the operational side, thereâ€™s.

Liam Collins

Yeah, I think it depends on what level the operational I mean if someoneâ€™s going out and conducting the operations, I think they have less thereâ€™s less for them necessarily to know than at the higher levels. Part of it is that we still donâ€™t know the answers to, that weâ€™re still trying to figure out. I mean how do you really take down a network? What is the critical node for the network? I mean those are things we still donâ€™t have answers for. We suspected taking out bin Laden thatâ€™s not going to kill it, right. I mean thereâ€™s other pieces to it, but what are the some things we still donâ€™t have answers to. Some things weâ€™ve learned over the years. There is no you canâ€™t just you know, in some ways itâ€™s like looking for somebody thatâ€™s going to commit suicide, right? You canâ€™t just do that with the police canâ€™t do that, right? The best intel forces in the world arenâ€™t going to be able to detect that. The same thing you canâ€™t detect somebody thatâ€™s radicalizing. You can maybe detect somebody from abroad trying to come here and conduct an act. But you canâ€™t detect radicalization the police, the intel, especially with our protection of civil liberties you just canâ€™t do that. And so the best defense on that is friends and family, the things you kind of see somebody turning in a different direction, you know, somethingâ€™s not normal. So those things that we provide

insight for the law enforcement community, those kind of things. A But I mean it's just a complex phenomenon. You can't just it's too hard to say that like, "Hey, here's the one thing that you can learn about it," because it really spans all kinds of different disciplines. It's too hard to say like, "Here's the one or two things," even.

Interviewer

Sure. Let's go to one last question, and this has been great. We look forward to having you back to talk about your personal story a little bit more. But you're working on your dissertation for your doctorate. Tell us the subject, and tell us whether any of the work you've done the past few years relates to the work you're doing on your doctoral thesis.

Liam Collins

Yeah, so I'm working doing the dissertation is on military innovation in war. And so one of the things that kind of led me to this is I saw some good examples of innovation, and then some wars, what is the Army doing? It's kind of slow to grasp change when it should be changing, and it's not really doing this. And if you look at some of the stuff that's been written on the academic side historically, there's a decent amount of stuff on innovation on the interwar period, but really not that much of how the Army and military innovates during war, and during conflict. And to me, that's the most critical piece. I mean it's critical to do it in between as well, to kind of get you in the right direction. But the conflict that we want or the conflict that we expect, when we find ourselves there, it's always going to be different than we expect. So how do we innovate quickly, and do that as quick as possible, one, to get it done with as soon as possible, two, to be inexpensive as possible, for a number of reasons. Minimize the loss of life, minimize the expenditure on the country, so if we can do that quicker, that's we're going to be more effective.

Interviewer

So what were you looking at as your focus?

Liam Collins

Yeah, so really kind of for case studies I'm looking at the modern period in Iraq starting from there. So as we found ourselves, came to the realization, hey, we have this IED, this Improvised Explosive Device threat, and growing realization we're facing insurgency, what were some things that we did from an organizational side to change? And the reason I'm focused and then I'll look at a couple case studies historically, just to see if you can expand it beyond that. But thought process, if I go back too far, what explains it back in World War II really may not apply anymore, because the world has changed now. So kind of starting here and moving back, so looking at some cases of one is the development of the Counterinsurgency Doctrine, which at the time when I first started this, not much had been written on it. Obviously, a lot has now, but they've come at it from a different way. I'm going to look at the development of the Asymmetric Warfare Group, which came out of the IED Task Force, the Improvised Explosive Device Task Force, when they first had this realization of IEDs, so creating this organization to go spread this knowledge out throughout the Army. With the MRAP, the Mine Resistant vehicles, why did it take us so long to get those when we already had the technology existing on the shelf?

Interviewer

Why did it take us so long?

Liam Collins

That one I'm still trying to work on. I think part of it you know some might say, there's some arguments, okay, it's not the vehicle for counterinsurgency. But then you see some Marine Corps Generals saying it basically didn't fit their vision for war. Why do we want this vehicle, because we can't put it on a platform and launch for an amphibious assault? It just doesn't work.

Interviewer

So it sounds like one of your critical discoveries here is that the bureaucracy, or the history of the Army, or of the Armed Forces, can weigh down innovation just by the inertia of not wanting to respond when things.

Liam Collins

Right. But at the same time, historically, the Army and the military, despite everybody saying it's not an innovative organization, we've seen historically how they do successfully innovate, and in amazing ways. So what helps us do that, and fights that inertia? And then the last piece that I'm looking at is kind of the innovation of the find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, the F3EA cycle that we call, and kind of the bringing in the ISR, the Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance platforms to kind of find individuals and decimate the network. And I think that one, General McChrystal's got his book coming out this month, assuming it's still on schedule, and that should provide some more insight into that. So that's probably the most relevant from kind of a counter terrorism perspective.

Liam Collins

All right thank you.

Interviewer

I appreciate it.