



The Latest in Counterterrorism with Nicholas Rasmussen (10/2/18)

00:00:25 Noah Rauch: Good evening. Welcome, everyone. My name is Noah Rauch. I'm the senior vice president for education and public programs here at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. As always, I'd like to extend a special welcome to our museum members and those tuning in to our live broadcast at 911memorial.org/live.

Tonight, we are joined by Nicholas Rasmussen. Formerly the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, he currently serves as senior director for counterterrorism programs at the McCain Institute for International Leadership in Washington, DC, and as Distinguished Professor of Practice at the Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law at Arizona State University. He also serves as an intelligence and national security analyst and contributor for NBC News and MSNBC.

00:01:09 Rasmussen is a senior national security professional with over 27 years in U.S. government service, including serving at the Department of State and on the National Security Council under Presidents Bush and Obama before being appointed director of NCTC in 2014, a position he held for three years. Rasmussen is also the recipient of the highest honors the U.S. government awards to intelligence professionals and career civil servants, including the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal, the Director of National Intelligence Distinguished Service Award, and the Distinguished Presidential Rank Award.

00:01:44 Most importantly, though, he is a graduate of Wesleyan University, both Cliff and my alma mater. Our alumni committee would be very proud right now. Nick has graciously offered us his sought-after perspective on other museum projects, and we are extremely fortunate to have him

here to share his experiences and his insights into the current state of terrorism and counterterrorism policy.

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So with that, please join me in welcoming Nick Rasmussen, in conversation with executive vice president and deputy director of museum programs Clifford Chanin.

(applause)

Clifford Chanin: Thank you, Noah. And welcome to our alumni event.

(laughter)

Clifford Chanin: You know, I think to start—and thank you so much for taking the time in coming here.

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Nicholas Rasmussen: And I will say, when I say, "It's an honor to be here," that's not a throwaway line in this setting. So it is an honor to be here. So thank you.

Clifford Chanin: I think we should get you to talk a little bit about what NCTC, National Counterterrorism Center, is, because it is one of several decisions and statutes enacted after 9/11 that created a new structure within the intelligence community to try to figure out how to avoid the surprise that, among many things, 9/11 represented.

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Nicholas Rasmussen: That's exactly right. As you, as you can imagine, if you don't remember, and if you were around, you do remember, we went through a period of very painful introspection after the 9/11 attacks, because it was clear that something had broken down in our national security apparatus. Somehow, this had been allowed to happen.

00:03:22 And so, among the, among the reforms pursued, recommended out of the 9/11 Commission and ultimately put forward in the form of legislation to the Congress, or by the Congress in the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, was the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center. And its purpose and function was relatively simple and straightforward. It was to become the single repository for all terrorism-related information available to the U.S. government.

00:03:53 So whether the information was collected by the C.I.A. with human intelligence operations in some far-flung place overseas, or if it was the National Security Agency collecting signals intelligence on our terrorist enemies, or if it was an FBI case file about a terrorist, a potential terrorist potentially operating inside the United States-- all of that information would be made available to analysts at the National Counterterrorism Center, so that we could bring to the president, to the policy makers, a clear and complete picture of what threat we faced as a country. Because, clearly, we didn't have that at the time of 9/11, where we had left hand and right hand in our government, each with pieces of the puzzle, but not the entire puzzle.

00:04:39 So you can argue 16, 17 years on, whether we are all the way there yet. I wouldn't argue that we are all the way there yet, in that information-sharing environment that we need, but we are considerably better than we were at the time of 9/11, having taken many of those lessons to heart. But it is always a work in progress.

00:05:02 Clifford Chanin: I think-- and you might be able to elaborate a little on this-- I mean, there are literally personnel from across the intelligence community, who sort of become the conduits for their agency's intelligence findings that are fed to NCTC, and that they sort of do a joint analysis of things so they can bring their own particular perspectives to an issue that's on the table.

00:05:23 Nicholas Rasmussen: So my workforce at the National... my colleagues at the National Counterterrorism Center, numbering a little over 1,000, would have included, roughly, a little more than half who were there permanently, who were, in a sense, full-time cadre, belonged to the

organization. That is where they were likely to spend the big chunk of their career. But the other 40% to 45% was, as Cliff suggested, on assignment, or detail assignment from another agency or department of the government.

00:05:54 So on my NCTC group of colleagues included C.I.A. officers and analysts, FBI agents and analysts, National Security Agency officers and analysts, and almost every three-letter government acronym you could imagine, up to and including individuals from the state and local community of law-enforcement and first-responder professionals. I had Las Vegas Police Department represented. I had the State... The State of California's Homeland Security Office represented.

00:06:26 So the idea was, through all of these different professional perspectives brought together in one place, there is strength and greater value in the analytical picture that comes from having all of that fused in one place. And I know I found myself learning all of the time from these individuals who had very, very different and disparate experiences across their professional careers.

00:06:52 Clifford Chanin: Can you give us an example of an incident, a case, something where this kind of concerted, cooperative effort actually produced a result that's a very different outcome than the 9/11 result and the siloing of intelligence?

Nicholas Rasmussen: Well, I mean, one of the areas of continued threat that we face is in the area of aviation. You know, it's no secret that our terrorist adversaries, whether they're al-Qaeda or Islamic State, ISIS, continue to prioritize the effort to bring down airliners, preferably Western airliners, with the objective of disrupting our way of life, our economy, our politics-- all of that.

00:07:36 And so that is a continuing threat vector. It continues to be front and center in the work that my colleagues in the intelligence community and the broader homeland security community are doing, but I would argue

today, when that work is done, it is done in a much more holistic fashion today than it was done at the time of 9/11.

So you would have, as we gather around the table to assess and respond to these threats, you would have experts at the table who would know every bit of information available to us on who the bad guys are, who are these individuals on the ground in places in Iraq or Syria or Yemen or Afghanistan or Pakistan, who are doing this-- trying to do this.

00:08:12 But you would also have homeland security professionals around the table who understood our vulnerabilities in a very serious way, who understood what technical capabilities we have to detect explosives, what capabilities we have to monitor and track people moving in and out of the country, all of which are much more advanced than they were at the time of 9/11. And you would just have a much more team-sport approach to the counterterrorism work that we're doing.

00:08:37 And that's not... this is not to cast aspersions on the community of professionals pre-9/11 who had responsibility for this. In most cases, those individuals were, in a sense, on their own little island. The terrorism problem set was theirs to manage without necessarily the support of the whole of government at the time. Because the whole of government wasn't focused on counterterrorism.

00:09:00 Now, as I said, it is very much a team sport, and it involves literally every discipline within our government that you can imagine. And that, I think, produces some strength. We are a harder target for terrorists to attack here in the homeland than we were, certainly, at the time of 9/11, but I would argue getting harder as a target every year.

00:09:18 Clifford Chanin: And one of the things that's of interest-- and we have seen this increasingly, because the passage of time makes it more logical that younger and younger people would be coming into the kind of work that you do. Some of whom, certainly in the military-- perhaps not quite yet at NCTC, in the intelligence community, because they're a little older

when they come in-- but younger and younger people coming into this line of work, where the threat remains.

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And yet, there is no real memory of 9/11 itself. And as you know, we've developed programs here that are focused on different actors in the intelligence community, and NCTC has brought groups here. But I wonder if you could talk about, you know, the challenge of the seriousness of the threat and the way in which people who were on the job or came on the job just after 9/11, they know viscerally what this is.

Nicholas Rasmussen: Sure.

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Clifford Chanin: And yet, younger people who have the same level of responsibility and the same level of care for what needs to be done, they don't really know what 9/11 is.

Nicholas Rasmussen: It's a terrific question, and it's something that I spend myself, spend my time thinking about a lot right now, because that community of terrorism and counterterrorism professionals who surged to the problem in the aftermath of 9/11, we're now 16, 17 years on. Some of us have aged out of the business. I mean, I'm technically "retired" from the government, though I don't feel retirement age.

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But as you can imagine, people who, professionals who, for a long time, you know, 15, 16, 17 years, were really running hard at this problem, nights, weekends, holidays, you know, a tempo that was sustained, a wartime footing that was sustained for well over a decade-- and not just in the military but across our intelligence community and across even our homeland security community-- some of that naturally, over time, has to settle into something you would call more normal.

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And I think some of that has started to happen. Some of that has happened because I think we've had success at preventing large-scale homeland attacks from external actors. We haven't had an al-Qaeda

successfully carry out an attack inside the United States, or an ISIS. We've had individuals inspired by those organizations, but that's a different-- we can talk a little bit about the distinction. But that's a different thing.

00:11:39 At the same time, we've also seen in recent years other national security issues kind of crawling up the priority list, as they should. I'm not arguing that terrorism and counterterrorism is our pre-eminent and only national security concern. We think about Russia, China, North Korea, cyber vulnerabilities that we have-- all of those are important national security issues that demand their fair share of the pie, in terms of people and resources.

00:12:04 But, Cliff, to get to your point, that means now that I... If I'm working on counterterrorism issues in the government, I may not have first claim on resources the way I might have had at the time, in the aftermath of 9/11, when you could count on having the very best officers in the largest numbers, and you could, you could literally get anything you asked for.

00:12:26 Now, in that population of officers entering government service now, as you point out, may have been as young as five or six or seven years old at the time of 9/11. Unless they had a direct personal connection to New York City or Washington or a family member involved in the attacks, they may not have personal memories or a sense of what a traumatic experience that was. And so to get to the educational programs part, as I was leaving NCTC, we felt an affirmative obligation to provide that, that memory experience for our younger officers.

00:12:49 And so within the last couple of years of my tenure, we created a 9/11 Remembrances Program, which gave officers at all levels-- entry-level officers for sure, but anybody who wanted to participate-- an opportunity to spend two days out of their normal work cycle engaged in an effort to simply focus on what happened at the time of 9/11. And it includes a visit here, which you guys have very kindly hosted, but also to Shanksville and to the Pentagon. And a lot of conversations internally with individuals who, where they were serving on that day and what role they played in the recovery from 9/11.

00:13:36 And what seems like just a nice thing to do I would argue is an essential thing to do. It is something that will remind young people who are working in the intelligence community at the National Counterterrorism Center why they're doing what they're doing. They shouldn't need to be reminded. You walk in the front door, and you see a piece of steel in an acrylic case, and you know exactly why you're doing what you're doing. But I think it has had a profound impact on our younger officers, when I was still in government, to see and hear and touch what you have here at the museum.

00:14:10 Clifford Chanin: Yeah, it's, you know, sort of meeting with these groups and speaking with them quite frequently, it is remarkable to see the dividing line between, you know, those who remember and those who don't. And, you know, the handoff is happening, as you say, in government now. It's just the natural progression, where younger people are first coming in the ranks, and then they move into mid- and senior-level leadership. And all of a sudden, you know, this is now their job, and that emotional sort of memory tie back isn't strong, the way it was ten years ago.

00:14:43 Nicholas Rasmussen: But the good news here is, what I haven't seen at all, is any lessening in the eagerness of young people who want to serve. I haven't seen that in any way at all. When we are out there talking to people about career paths, there is still an intense, burning desire with a lot of our young people who are pursuing higher education in national security-related topics, that they want to take this education, and they want to contribute, you know, in national security.

00:15:10 So I'm not at all discouraged. This is just a reality of the counterterrorism bit of it that we need to aid with some more memory devices, I would argue.

Clifford Chanin: So let's talk a little bit about where we are now in terms of the safety of the country, and, you know, the challenges it remains to

face. You know, in more recent years and months, the area held by ISIS in Syria and Iraq has shrunk dramatically.

00:15:38 It hasn't completely disappeared yet, but their room for maneuver is much less than it was. And so the question is, what difference is it that make in terms of the threat? Does it change in certain ways? Or is there sort of a constancy that remains?

Nicholas Rasmussen: In some ways, all of the above. There... I would be the first to tell you that there is not a direct, linear connection between territory held and threat, such that if you eliminate territory held, you, you know, drop off the cliff, in terms of the threat that we face. And I think we've seen an evolution of that threat picture in recent years. And I alluded to it a few minutes ago.

00:16:18 We are today more at risk here in the United States from individuals who are inspired by these terrorist organizations operating overseas, motivated by them, grabbing onto the ideology of these terrorist organizations operating overseas, rather than serving as deployed operatives of these terrorist organizations overseas. And there's a difference.

00:16:38 So these individuals, in many cases, are here already. They may have had a long period of radicalization, growing up here, or the course of their young adult years and adult years. And so that kind of threat, which is, if you listen to the director of the FBI, when he gives his annual testimony every fall-- and I participated in that when I was director of NCTC-- he would highlight, and I highlighted that these home-grown extremists are our biggest, most likely threat on any given day here in the homeland. And that doesn't go away all at once just because ISIS's territory has been shrunk pretty dramatically.

00:17:17 Now, you're not going to get me to say that that's a bad-news story that ISIS is losing its territory. Obviously, that chips away and eats away at the narrative, the ideological underpinnings of what these individuals may be believing in. But that's, there's certainly a lag effect between the time

that that, that narrative gets undermined and the population actually begins to shrink of those, of those potential extremists who want to do something here in the homeland.

00:17:45 But lost in that should not be the fact that there is really good news. We have done quite a bit to make it much, much more difficult for a terrorist organization like ISIS or al-Qaeda to organize, plan, and carry out that very complex, multi-actor, ultimately, potentially catastrophic attack here in the homeland. And the far more likely scenario today are those individuals who, as I said, radicalized here, but often have much more limited capability than these actors who may have fought in a war zone in Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria.

00:18:21 So I know our political leadership would find it more convenient if we could kind of "end the war" by winning in Iraq and Syria, defeating ISIS, destroying, dismantling, all those D-words we use about terrorist groups. But in my mind, that is something that comes more over time, and there is not any one moment at which you can say that has happened.

00:18:45 Clifford Chanin: You speak in, at one point, in an article that I came across, a phrase of "the democratization of terrorism," which I think has to do with this idea that the ideas are out there, and anybody, particularly given technology nowadays, anybody can latch onto anything and fashion themselves into a warrior on behalf of this cause.

00:19:08 Nicholas Rasmussen: That's accurate. And, you know, again, I've got to be careful when I talk about that being a particularly concerning type of threat, because it makes it sound in some ways like you're hearkening back to the good old days of sleeper cells, when you knew who the bad guys were, and they were card-carrying members of a group like al-Qaeda. And that certainly seemed like its own really significant challenge at the time, so I don't want to say that that seems less formidable as a terrorism problem then than it is now.

00:19:39 But from a strictly law-enforcement and intelligence perspective, it is a harder problem set, because how do you identify who that individual is

before they actually carry out, take some action that, you know, shows what they are? We were particularly good at collecting the kind of intelligence that would tell us who the most dangerous bad actors were in al-Qaeda or al-Qaeda's affiliate groups.

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We were very good at collecting that intelligence. We could map the network. We could, over time, figure out who were the most concerning bad guys, and we could develop strategies to go after them, disable them, to disrupt them, you know, ultimately to take them off the battlefield. Much, much harder to identify who is that individual who is developing this radical agenda in their own mind, self-identified, maybe moving from being a passive consumer of radical material on the internet, the same way lots of people could consume material on the internet.

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But then over time, deciding to act on that agenda. And how do you know when that's going to happen? And what tools does the bureau, FBI, or local law enforcement, police departments around the country, what tools do they have to be able to identify and anticipate who that individual is before it turns into something horrible, like the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Florida or the Boston Marathon bombing, something like that? So better news in one respect, but much harder problem set in another respect.

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Clifford Chanin: Yeah, yeah. And, yet, ISIS has sort of a rationale for its successes and also its failures. And you know this. We've had in previous conversations here, you know, the notion's been raised that, you know, those who join the cause of ISIS from a distance have this heroic narrative.

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And they're sort of joining a cause that elevates them to a level of heroism in defense of something pure that's been sullied, and that's accessible to anybody. I mean, do we, have we made any headway in terms of countering that narrative and the appeal of that kind of heroic self-image that people seem to be looking for?

00:21:52 Nicholas Rasmussen: I would say, you know, some headway has been made, simply because we've had success on the battlefield, and that, as I said, begins to undercut the validity of that narrative. Unfortunately, one of the things that I think has made ISIS a particularly difficult challenge for us is that they've developed a narrative that seems to cope equally well with success and failure. Failure, losing the physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, can be explained away as simply temporary setback on the way to the kind of ultimate victory that is forecast.

00:22:25 And so there's almost an explanation for either success or failure. And that, that's frustrating. At the same time, I think facts speak for themselves, and the fact that the caliphate has been rolled back, the fact that ISIS is not as able to do today what it was able to do as recently as two, three years ago, that speaks for itself. And the challenge that the group will have will be sustaining that appeal over time.

00:22:54 One of the metrics we had while I was serving in government was the number of fighters from foreign countries who would move to the conflict zone to try to join the caliphate, join the fight. And that number mounted by the thousands over a several-year period, until we were up near somewhere around 40,000 individuals from around the world who had tried or succeeded in getting to Iraq and Syria to somehow participate in the fight.

00:23:20 That number hasn't gone down, because it was an aggregate number. But the rate of accumulation has dramatically slowed, almost to a trickle. And that has a lot to do with the battlefield. But those individuals, should they choose to try to act on ISIS's behalf, can choose to act where they are and pose a threat, whether that's here in the homeland or in Western Europe or, indeed, anywhere in the world.

Clifford Chanin: Western Europe seems to have a much greater exposure in this regard. I realize there are Americans who have gone over, but they're certainly fewer in number. And the Europeans are seeing some return.

00:23:56 Nicholas Rasmussen: That's absolutely right. The Europeans find it more challenging for a number of reasons. One is just pure physical proximity. It is easier for individuals who want to join the conflict or wanted to join the conflict to get there. They could literally travel by train or car or, you know, get to Turkey and get into Syria and Iraq to participate. And then by the same way, move themselves, remove themselves when they wanted to.

00:24:21 And then Europe was also a more challenging counterterrorism environment because these foreign fighters who would come back had well-established extremist networks, already, you know, second- and third-generation individuals who already had a very extreme, extremist mindset, who were, you know, pre-existed ISIS. And so there was much more of a platform or a basis, a network for these individuals to join than we would see here in the United States.

00:24:50 And then if all that weren't enough, kind of the volume and speed of the migrant flow into Europe, particularly Southern and Southeastern Europe, overwhelmed the capacity of most of the European states on the front lines to be able to really know with confidence in those early days who was coming into their country and, you know, what threat they may pose, so...

To be clear, I don't conflate the migrant flow that the Europeans were coping with with refugee issues that we discuss here inside the United States. Those are two very different phenomena. But, clearly, our European colleagues had a bigger, tougher, harder problem, and they weren't nearly as well resourced to cope with, as I think we would be here.

00:25:33 Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about al-Qaeda, because a point you make repeatedly is that while ISIS has in recent years taken a lot more attention than al-Qaeda has, al-Qaeda remains, it has its own logic, its own outposts and affiliated organizations, and still continues to think about ways that it can attack the United States. So what is your assessment now of the strength of al-Qaeda, and particularly in contrast

to ISIS? You know, does one go up when the other goes down? Is there any kind of relationship there?

00:26:08 Nicholas Rasmussen: You know, once a year, when I was director of NCTC, I was called upon, as I said earlier, to give testimony, along with the secretary of homeland security and the FBI director. And we would kind of tier and rate the various threats that we faced as a country, and I always resisted the idea of ranking. You know, "ISIS is our number one, al-Qaeda is our number two, Hezbollah is our number three."

00:26:30 Because I think the business we were operating in, we, we kind of operate with a zero-tolerance- for failure mindset. And if your number-four priority comes out and does something that bites you, what does that say about how you are approaching your responsibilities? So I always look, you know, even as ISIS grabbed and held onto much of the public attention and media attention, I don't think we in the intelligence community, and certainly not at NCTC or C.I.A. or FBI or NSA or D.O.D. or the State Department, any of our colleagues in government, ever deprioritized or took our eye off the ball with respect to al-Qaeda.

00:27:12 The beauty of the work that we were doing was that we had the privilege of having multiple number-one priorities and not having to choose what was your real number-one priority. And so... But there was no question that in terms of volume, ISIS was taking up more of our time than al-Qaeda was. And yet, there were pockets of al-Qaeda, either affiliate groups or individuals known to be al-Qaeda operatives, who were very, very, very much high on the threat spectrum in terms of their particular activities being a direct and immediate threat to the U.S.

00:27:46 And we would do what was necessary to collect intelligence about those al-Qaeda-affiliated individuals and do what we could to mitigate and disrupt their work. And that was all happening at the same time as we were carrying on a very vigorous counter-ISIS campaign. And, again, one of the underreported stories of the whole war in Syria is how it, bad as it was in terms of, you know, providing sustenance for ISIS, it also allowed al-Qaeda to kind of take advantage of the security vacuum and the chaos

of Syria to, for al-Qaeda to kind of gain a foothold in that part of the Middle East, which previously it had not had.

00:28:26 And so now, if you asked me where I would be most worried about al-Qaeda operating, Syria is among those places, in part because it's so difficult for, for us to collect the kind of intelligence or engage in the kind of counterterrorism action we would need to to get at that threat. But, yes, you've got al-Qaeda still operating in Yemen and in the Arabian Peninsula, and in South Asia, but I look at Syria and think, "That's a place where al-Qaeda may be able to carve itself out a foothold." And it's very difficult for us right now to do something about it.

00:29:02 Clifford Chanin: You know, I'm interested, we've had this conversation a number of times, and I'm interested in your view on the difference between al-Qaeda and ISIS. And so, you know, is this just a gang war, or does it come down to something substantive, in your mind, that really marks them as different from one another, even though they both have us as an enemy?

00:29:23 Nicholas Rasmussen: You know, we would occasionally ask that question internally in our intelligence community sometimes, "What are the prospects for a merger of ISIS and al-Qaeda? And is there a chance that they will set aside their differences and come together in some unified way?" And the answer back from the analysts that I trusted on this was usually, "Not likely."

00:29:42 That there was enough of a philosophical cleavage in the way that the two separate organizations looked at the world and looked at the way that the caliphate narrative is supposed to play out in their vision of the world, that it was unlikely that they would kind of reconcile that difference. At the same time, there was always also some degree of rivalry and competitiveness between the organizations, certainly at a leadership level.

00:30:15 And then to kind of make it even more complicated, you could point to certain places around the globe where the foot soldiers who fell into one

camp or another really didn't necessarily abide by those disagreements among their bosses, and that they actually managed to work together at a tactical level in some locations pretty successfully, which made it even more complicated from our perspective.

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And it was always difficult for us to kind of say, you know, in that circumstance who exactly is doing what. Is that an ISIS-affiliated organization? Is that an al-Qaeda-affiliated organization? Or is it simply an extremist organization? And, unfortunately, that often left us kind of wondering which tool do we use in our arsenal, because there were some tools we would use for some of those threats and some for others.

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Clifford Chanin: You know, you had an interesting conversation, speaking about what your analysts came up with. And I'd like you to recreate it for us. Apparently you posed the question to them, "How does this all end?" And they came up with some semi-reassuring scenarios.

Nicholas Rasmussen: Well, I mean, I asked the question at one point, "How do we get beyond this period of jihadism?" For lack of a better word. Is this a phenomenon that burns itself out over time? Is this a phenomenon that we are destined to live with, at least in some form, over the course of, you know, whatever our lifetime or professional, personal professional lifespan is? And I asked the question in a very simple way, "How does it all end?"

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And we convened a conference that included participants from inside and outside government, from other country, partner countries, with whom we work very closely. Because it's not a classified question. It's really more of a, "How do you feel about this?" And the answer, to the extent there was a consensus answer, was-- to the question of, "How does it all end?"-- the answer was, "It doesn't." It doesn't, if by "end" you mean disappear.

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But it wasn't as pessimistic an answer that came back to me as it may sound. Because what came back was an answer that said, "Effective counterterrorism policies and operations can shrink the size of this

problem, can localize this problem, can reduce it to a size where it is managed by the actors in that location, the government of country X or country Y, and it can be reduced to a size where it doesn't necessarily represent a transnational threat, one that requires as much direct U.S. government, U.S. military, U.S. intelligence involvement in stopping that threat."

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So that, on the optimistic end of the spectrum, was what we ought to be aiming for. You know, you don't eliminate terrorism. You bring it to a point where it is not a primary, a source of primary national security concern.

Clifford Chanin: But do we understand it well enough to sort of keep a maintenance level of attention on this? Or is this something that all of a sudden flares back up in ways we hadn't anticipated?

Nicholas Rasmussen: Yeah, and that's a good question. And this is, you know, again, something I worry a little bit about, when I, as I referred earlier, the national security pie is now being divided up into more and more slices.

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And so there will be a tendency to have, you know, some pull of resources away from the counterterrorism work that we do, again, not because we've "won" or declared victory, but because we've had, in relative terms, success-- we haven't been attacked in the way that we had been at the time of 9/11. And yet, there are other things that are more pressing right now.

And as I was leaving government, I know my successor was likely going to be facing an environment where he or she will have to argue more vociferously to maintain status quo on resources, rather than having a situation where you could always count on growth or first call.

00:34:07 And, again, I can't argue with, that's a wrong-headed way to approach it, if I'm thinking government-wide, but it also begs the question, "Do we have to wait for that flare-up to happen, when something terrible happens, in order to, you know, have the pendulum swing back the other way?" I hope the answer is no.

00:34:25 Clifford Chanin: But you made the argument that, you know, President Trump has, and Secretary Mathis have spoken about-- Mattis-- have spoken about this importance of Russia and China as, you know, principal adversaries. That's a very different kind of war fighting, a very different kind of preparation. But you also made the point that both in the Bush and Obama administrations, there was this desire to pull back from this focus on counterterrorism, and yet, they weren't really able to manage that, certainly not to the degree they'd hoped.

00:34:54 Nicholas Rasmussen: And I argued in an op-ed piece, along with a colleague, that that should be instructive, and that we shouldn't necessarily set out to kind of "de-invest" or disinvest, divest from our counterterrorism work. Because if we do, then we're likely to invite that, that resurgence that you were talking about, Cliff.

00:35:16 On the other hand, you can understand from, you know, the president's perspective, someone who has responsibility for the whole pie, why do we spend, year after year, decade after decade, an increasing share of our national wealth to solve or to deal with this one particular problem, when there are other pressing problems, as well? And I think it's a, it's a discussion worth having.

00:35:45 Bringing a bias to it that I did, though, you know, in some ways while the threat is more manageable in some ways, I also argued a little bit earlier that it's more complex in some ways. And so I know the very narrow sphere I had at NSC, at the National Counterterrorism Center, we were being asked to do much more in the last two years of my government service related to issues of vetting, of people coming into the country-- immigrants, refugees, literally anybody who would be admitted into the country under whatever immigration program.

00:36:17 And that was necessary and important work, but very labor-intensive work. And yet, I wasn't necessarily being given a whole bunch more people with which to accomplish that work. And so that was having to come at the cost of other work that we were doing. And so those kinds of resource tradeoffs, it's very much inside baseball. I get that. But it signals a change from where we were, I would argue, just a few years ago, where I could have just said, "We'll grow bigger and keep doing more."

00:36:44 Clifford Chanin: So let me shift a little bit. You know, your long experience in the intelligence community, as I said, through three administrations. Yet, you know, the current administration is one where the president himself has repeatedly and consistently taken aim at the intelligence community-- the FBI in particular, but others, as well, depending on what the issue is-- and I'm wondering, this doesn't seem like a passing fancy. This seems to be something he's going to stick with.

00:37:12 What impact does it have on the community itself and on the people who are called to make their evaluations, make their judgments, and have to pass it up a chain of command that ends with the president, who is, on an almost nonstop basis, attacking them?

Nicholas Rasmussen: I guess I'm going to choose to be a glass-half-full kind of guy on this, because I really do believe, that most... if you talk to most individual officers at whatever level in the intelligence community, their sense of, of mission, their sense of satisfaction for a job well done, their sense of purpose is not tied day-to-day with what they see on TV, what they read in the newspapers.

00:37:57 And I actually, when talking to my colleagues at NCTC, I even chided them, "And if it is, it shouldn't be." I often told them, "If you are sitting around wondering what the president-- this president or any president-- thinks about your work, that's probably not the best use of your time. You know why you're here. You know what the costs are, what the stakes are. And focus on that."

- 00:38:21 All that said, it is not... It can't be a positive thing to have public confidence in our institutions-- and the intelligence community is a big one of those institutions-- undermined, as you say, repeatedly and in ways that, you know, that there's no, in a sense, no fighting back against. So my concern is less about whether that affects the morale or the sense of purpose of an individual officer doing her or his job, because I think we can work through that problem.
- 00:38:51 What I worry a little bit more about is what it potentially does to the pool of people who are willing to think about going into public service at the front end of their career. If they feel that they want to just turn away from the public square entirely and go do something else. And that, you know, bothers me more than what, you know, a mature serving officer at the FBI, the C.I.A., or the National Counterterrorism Center should do.
- 00:39:20 And I've had young people talk to me about careers in public service and say, "Well, not for me right now. Maybe I'll go do something else. And when this sorts itself out, come back." And I... it's... you know, a lot of times when I talk to people, they're from Wesleyan or my graduate institution or anybody who wants to talk about career paths, a lot of times I do the, "On the one hand, on the other hand. Here are the benefits of doing this, and here, you think about that."
- 00:39:45 But that's the one area, when somebody says that to me, I kind of want to grab them rhetorically by the lapels and say, "That's crazy." Because, you know, the idea that someone who had an opportunity to join, whether it's the C.I.A. or the Defense Department or the FBI, would pass up that chance because of the current political climate, I think is crazy. Your opportunity to serve may only come once, and you may not be able to redo that choice ten years into your career, if you're doing something else and you've decided the environment is somehow better.
- 00:40:24 So I really have been kind of aggressively prescriptive with some people I've talked to and said, "You know, the president isn't going to care much about you when you're an entry-level analyst, and you shouldn't care very much about him, either. As with any profession, in the early years of a profession, you should be focusing, in my mind, on skill development

and developing, you know, professional experience in whatever form you can get it. And so that should be, if you're, if you're entering the workforce, that's what you should be focused on, not the big-picture stuff."

00:40:58

Clifford Chanin: Fair enough. I'm, I mean, you know, the big picture...

Nicholas Rasmussen: It doesn't mean I like it, though.

Clifford Chanin: No, no, of course not. I mean, it's impossible to imagine liking it, because, you know, the corrosive effect of this over time, it's not just, you know, one assault or one comment. It's, it's a constant theme.

00:41:13

Nicholas Rasmussen: But I should also say, though, I want to give a little bit of a shout-out to some of the leaders of the intelligence community who have stood up, and even in the face of pressure or... I mean, my boss before I left, former senator Dan Coats, the director of national intelligence, on a number of occasions has spoken very clearly and very forthrightly on the issue of Russian involvement in elections, for example, even when, you know, he knew that the words coming out of his mouth or the statement on the piece of paper was likely going to put him in some degree of hot water with, with his boss.

00:41:46

And so I think that... those things are noticed by the workforce in the intelligence community, when their appointed leaders speak truth to power, even when truth is not popular, that is far more heartening to them than I would say the president's comments are disheartening.

00:42:08

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask about that, the investigation into the Russian interference in the election. That was the collective conclusion of the intelligence community. And I realize that's not, as we spoke before, a particular counterterrorism issue. But I wanted, you know, to get some clarity on this idea that, you know, this is not a collection of random

opinions. This was the professional judgment of the collective wisdom of the community itself.

00:42:37 Nicholas Rasmussen: Well, and I think I shorthanded my way through the discussion of the post-9/11 reforms to focus on NCTC and the creation of the National Counterterrorism Center. But certainly, there was a much wider reform of the intelligence community that brought together or that created the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, O.D.N.I., the DNI, as I said, Director Coats and Director Clapper before that.

00:43:01 And it was their responsibility to bring from the entire intelligence community, to the degree possible, a common, agreed intelligence position on either policy issues when required, or on analytical issues. And in this case, I think, the mantra you kept hearing over and over again was, 16 I.C. agencies, all intelligence community agencies, all believed the same thing.

00:43:26 And, obviously, not all 16 are created equally. I don't think I'm offending my Coast Guard friends if there are any Coast Guard friends in the building here, if I say that Coast Guard intelligence's view on the Russia hacking thing was as important as NSA, the National Security Agency's, or C.I.A.'s or FBI's.

But what the power of that view, when brought together in that way, is that you've got everyone across the spectrum in the intelligence community, everyone who has some purchase on the issue, everyone who has collected any bit of information or has any bit of expertise on the issue has been, that expertise has been brought to bear on that intelligence question.

00:44:05 And in this case, what was coming out of that was an unambiguous, very clear conclusion that Russia, and not just Russians, but Russia had meddled in our election. Now, obviously, the intelligence community stopped short of offering a judgment as to whether that was dispositive in the results of the election. And I think there were probably different views on that within the intelligence community.

00:44:31 I don't know, it wasn't my area of responsibility. But I thought there was enormous power in what was brought forward, which was not some wishy-washy, mealy-mouthed conclusion about "may" or "might" or "could have." It was a declarative, and declarative words in an intelligence community judgment are not always present. So there was, I thought, tremendous power in those words.

And then that's why, as I said, when Dan Coats repeats them publicly, even, as I said, when it's probably not popular with his immediate boss, I think there's enormous... that provides an enormous boost to the intelligence community.

00:45:10 Clifford Chanin: A related question is, you know, the impact on our intelligence, law enforcement relationships with our partner countries. We depend on them, they depend on us. These are long-standing relationships, working together, whether on the battlefield or behind the scenes in law enforcement. Are these sort of political storms that pass elsewhere in the relationships between national intelligence agencies?

00:45:37 Nicholas Rasmussen: I actually see it from both sides. On the one hand, I think the intelligence relationships that we have invested in over... and certainly in the counterterrorism world in recent years are largely the kinds of relationships that go on, regardless of what's going on in the media or what the politics of the moment are.

00:45:59 So I think, I think back, you know, take, for example, Brexit, the United Kingdom going through the Brexit experiment, experience right now. You have the president of the United States being very critical of Prime Minister Theresa May in the way Brexit is being conducted. But that has no impact whatsoever on the cooperation that is going on between the FBI and their British counterpart, C.I.A. and their British counterparts, or me, when I was still in government, with my British counterparts.

00:46:28 But I wouldn't just wave my hand and say it doesn't, you know, conflict doesn't matter at all. What I think probably does matter more, potentially, to intelligence cooperation, is unpredictability. If the United States is viewed as unpredictable or not reliable in its broader foreign policy. You know, will we stand up for an ally? Will we remain committed when involved in an overseas, you know, campaign, or will we, at the first sign of trouble, look to kind of pull back?

00:47:01 That, over time, I would argue, has the potential to eat away at those intelligence relationships. The stuff you see kind of on TV or with leaders yelling at each other or criticizing each other, I don't think actually eats away at true intelligence cooperation. And I'm not just speaking in the Trump era on that. I felt the same way during the Bush administration, when many of our European partners, for example, really were at odds with our policy with respect to Iraq. They were very critical of the Bush administration's approach to Iraq.

00:47:30 And yet, on counterterrorism matters, we were hand in glove, as I recall it, working very, very carefully and closely together. Not because they all shared our policy objectives all the time, but because it was in their self-interest to do so, and most intelligence cooperation ultimately depends on self-interest-- people doing what they need to do to protect their own people. And that means working with us and us working with them.

Clifford Chanin: And that is something that, in your experience, was unaffected by the political storms that we were seeing?

00:48:04 Nicholas Rasmussen: Or if affected, only at the margins. I just didn't see a tremendous diminution of that kind of cooperation, or a time-out or a hiatus and that kind of thing. I'll give you an example, a real-world example. At the time of, some of you may remember the Manchester attack that the U.K. suffered in the spring of 2017, at this concert in the United Kingdom, in Manchester.

00:48:29 Well, even as the British security services and local police were carrying out an aggressive investigation to try to identify anybody who might have

worked with the perpetrator or be connected to the perpetrator, what happened here in the United States? Well, it leaked out into the press that we had the identity of the perpetrator, the name of the individual who carried out the attack in Manchester. And somehow, that was published. I can't remember what the outlet was, but it was published.

00:48:56 Well, that drove our British friends and partners crazy, because it happened right in the midst of their investigation. It was basically as much as warning anybody associated with that individual that, "Hey, the cops are on the lookout for you. You know, go to ground or get out of the country or whatever you need to do." So they were really upset. And you heard things like the head of the Metropolitan Police, or at least some senior leaders in police positions in the U.K., saying, "No more information to the Americans. Can't handle it. They'll leak it. We're cutting them off."

00:49:31 And I think within an hour or two of that event, that development, I got calls from two of my U.K. colleagues saying, "Yes, we're pissed off. "Don't, don't think for a second we aren't. But don't take seriously what we just said about not sharing intelligence, because that's not in our interest, and we won't, you know, we're not going to cut off our nose to spite our face. So we've got to find a way not to have this information spill out, and you guys got to do better."

00:49:59 They were not uncritical of us. But they also said, "Don't believe what you're hearing on TV. We're going to keep sharing intelligence, because we need what you have, and you need what we have." So I took that as a pretty good example of why that flow pretty much continues, despite the politics.

Clifford Chanin: And as I understand it, those relationships are not just confined to the U.S. and the U.K. This has been, really, decades-long efforts to build up the cooperation and have true partnerships that seem permanent in the structures themselves.

00:50:30 Nicholas Rasmussen: I think that's right. And I think, you know, if there's a silver lining, and there really isn't, but if there is a silver lining in the ISIS experience over the last few years, it is in some ways the democratization of terrorism around the world. There are many, many more countries around the world that have an ISIS problem-- more, many more countries that have an ISIS problem than had a purely al-Qaeda problem.

00:50:53 And so I knew that when I found myself sitting across from the Latvian interior minister for a meeting, because the Latvians were deeply concerned about what ISIS could do. It was, I just, you know, you're used to dealing with a certain set of countries that are our close partners. You know, our British partners, our Saudi partners, our Israeli partners. But we really ended up in the ISIS experience, there almost wasn't a country in the world that we didn't have some need to exchange intelligence information with, whether it was in Latin America, you know, East Asia, you know—anywhere in the world.

00:51:29 And so in some ways, that has led to an investment in those relationships that I think, that will be, you know, pay dividends in the long run. And, again, it's not a silver lining, but it's something that I think, you know, is a benefit from what, the experience we've been through jointly.

Clifford Chanin: It's certainly a learning opportunity. We're going to take a couple of questions from the audience. And I would ask you to raise your hand and wait for a microphone to get to you. So that gentleman there, and I think we'll have... hang on one second. You, sir, will get a mic.

00:52:06 Audience Member: First, thank you. I'm trying to understand what is within the scope of the NCTC. So, for example, a cyber attack on the computer systems on a plane to bring it down. Is that in scope?

Nicholas Rasmussen: It's a good question. I mean, when it's happening, yes, because until we've ruled out that it is a terrorist event... I mean, example, if the finger ends up being pointed at Russia, for example, that is state action and would largely fall under the domain of those in the

intelligence community working the Russia account and the cyber account.

00:52:50 It doesn't mean my analysts aren't looking at it, but in a sense, you know, baseline responsibility shifts to them. On the other hand, if someone, if an individual affiliated with a, ultimately found to be affiliated with a terrorist group tries to carry out cyber operations that target our electrical grid or our water supply, or something like that, that's very much in scope.

00:53:15 Legislatively, the one area that is out of scope for the National Counterterrorism Center is pure DT, domestic terrorism. Anything involving terrorism tied to, say, a white supremacist agenda or some other agenda other than kind of a globally recognized, a recognized global terrorist organization's ideology. And I don't know that I would have, if I were writing the legislation today, that I would draw that bright red line, because I think the more we understand and the more we look at those phenomenon, the individual who carries out an attack here in the United States tied to that kind of ideology is not all that dissimilar to an individual who is doing so on behalf of ISIS.

00:53:59 And so I had clinical psychologists working for me at NCTC who were deeply invested in understanding how that process took place. And there really isn't a lot to distinguish the way that process works in one case versus another. But the state actor operating as a, you know, in a state-versus-state conflict, I would argue, is the distinguishing factor that would put it in somebody else's basket first.

00:54:23 Clifford Chanin: Another question, this gentleman here. Just hang on for a mic. No, he goes second row.

Audience Member: Good evening, wonderful presentation. About a year, about a year and a half ago I traveled with some "New York Times" reporters to Berlin, and then after that, I went on my own, flew into the airport, into Brussels, where I lived as a kid back in the early '70s. But I

flew into the airport that had, you know, six months prior, had the terrorist incident.

Nicholas Rasmussen: Sure.

00:54:55 Audience Member: I spent some time walking through the neighborhoods, the Muslim neighborhoods where a lot of the terrorists had been recruited from for the, what's called the, what happened in Paris. And then about, let's say a week later, I went on Eurail, and I stayed a week in Paris.

And I noticed-- I didn't notice so much in Brussels, on the streets of Brussels—but in Paris at the time, this would have been around a month before our election that elected Trump, you could notice the refugee situation, you know, refugee tents on the Paris streets. They still had a tent city in Calais that they hadn't torn down yet.

00:55:33 My comment and question basically is that a lot of the people in the, say, in Paris that are inducted into this are disenfranchised third- or fourth-generation young men from North African countries in general-- let's say Algeria, Morocco, things like that-- in the banlieues, in what you'd call their projects and in the prisons. If it's a socioeconomical situation over there, like, they can't take... The French or the Belgian can't take care of the situation of getting them full employment or inducing in them... How are we able to take care of the situation where a lot of the ISIS is being recruited out of that area?

00:56:13 Nicholas Rasmussen: Well, that's obviously something, um... I mean, in terms of, from a U.S. perspective, in terms of purely playing defense, you know, we look to the French and to the Belgians to do what they can over time to shrink the pool of individuals who might be susceptible to recruitment. But that ends up, as you suggest, with the question being a societal problem and, you know, and a socioeconomic problem, not a pure law enforcement or counterterrorism problem.

- 00:56:41 So I've always thought of kind of a lot of what we do with counterterrorism work as buying time. You try to engage in effective law enforcement and intelligence to keep ourselves safe while we try and solve, or somebody else tries and solves, underlying, more systemic problems that create, you know, the situation that we find ourselves in.
- 00:57:02 That is not a very satisfying strategy, because what it means is, you're pedaling as fast as you can to play, as I say, offense and defense, while also pursuing, you know, you're not going to change that reality in the suburbs of Paris with one government intervention or even a surge in government programming from, you know, directed from Paris. That's going to take time. So what the French are having to do is both pursue that, but at the same time, they're also taking very hard-edged measures to amp up their police and military capabilities to literally police their own streets.
- 00:57:26 So is that an ideal outcome? No, but I would argue that's probably the only way to approach it, to try to buy time while, you know, longer, more systemic solutions are developed.
- Clifford Chanin: The gentleman here. One over here.
- 00:57:57 Audience Member: When you were talking about the distance between 2001 and now, it's going to get further and further away. I was wondering if the 9/11 Museum might set up some kind of program with my alma mater, N.Y.U., and maybe Georgetown, and maybe UPenn, or Wesleyan, or some other schools. But maybe for new recruits.
- 00:58:25 Because I know I was tried to be recruited while I was at the University of Georgia. I was a senior. And I chose not to, but several of my friends did. So I'm wondering if, even if they're in grad school, maybe there could be another C.L.E., or type of program where new recruits could go to these two universities, work with this, and get a proper education over eight, nine months, and then come back the way we do in banking, and we send people for their MBA.

00:59:01 Clifford Chanin: You know, I mean, I think one of the things that you talked about earlier, and it's a fascinating question, you know, you didn't see a drop-off in interest. You do encourage people to go into this. But is there a way that you can really create a sort of reliable channel at this point?

Nicholas Rasmussen: Well, I think one of the things we saw in the years since 9/11 is a growth in... I mean, as you would not be surprised, the university system kind of over time pivoted in the direction because of a demand signal.

00:59:34 And, you know, there's a whole generation of people now who've pursued academic study in the discipline of homeland security. 20 years ago, you wouldn't have seen those words, those two words next to each other in a course catalogue anywhere, and now you have, you know, major universities with undergraduate degrees and graduate programs in the discipline of homeland security.

00:59:53 We're going through the same thing on the cybersecurity front now. Everybody is looking to bolster their cybersecurity credentials by pursuing academic training. So I think it is available out there for the person who is interested in pursuing it, the kind of specific training that would make you, you know, a really effective practitioner in counterterrorism and homeland security work.

01:00:18 On the other hand, I think we're also perfectly content-- or at least we were when I was still in government-- to welcome in talented generalists, people who've had that, you know, liberal arts education, or that... Actually, the thing I was the most in need of as I was departing government service was, I needed to be able to hire more data scientists, individuals who had real exposure and experience, both academically and professionally, with manipulating and understanding large pools of data and how to draw out what is the important parts of those data sets.

01:00:53

So I don't think there's any one pathway that I would want to steer people into, to say, "You need to do this so that you can work in our, you know, in our field." I would hope, I mean, I would like to think we're still able to attract the best and brightest across all of these different fields. And, again, traditional skills that you develop through a liberal arts education-- you know, reading, writing, comprehension, briefing skills, the able to speak and talk on your feet, manage complex ideas-- those are, that's what you want in your analytic, in your analytic cadre.

01:01:29

Clifford Chanin: Well, we began with a Wesleyan pitch, and now we close with one. But that is all the time we have tonight. But please join me in thanking Nick Rasmussen.

(applause)

Nicholas Rasmussen: Terrific, thank you.