A Conversation with Former CIA Director Michael Hayden

Mark Mansfield

Former CIA Director Michael Hayden—known for making good, efficient use of his time—has kept a brisk schedule since leaving office in February 2009 after a nearly three-year tenure at the CIA. In addition to being a principal at the Chertoff Group, a security consulting firm founded by former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, he serves as distinguished visiting professor at George Mason University's School of Public Policy, writes and speaks publicly about intelligence and national security, travels frequently, and still finds the time—and marshals the energy—to train for 10K runs with his wife Jeanine.

Now that he has been out of government for well over a year, I wanted to ask him to reflect on his years at CIA—the accomplishments, the challenges he faced, and the positions he took on some controversial issues, including the detention and interrogation program.

On the morning of 6 May, I had the opportunity to get together for breakfast with Hayden at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami Beach, where he had just arrived to address a large group of corporate executives about leadership. (I am currently serving as the CIA's officer-in residence at the nearby University of Miami.)

Hayden spent the better part of an hour discussing his years at CIA. Following are excerpts from our discussion.—MM

Mansfield: You had a different mission, and had other equities to consider, when you moved from principal deputy director of national intelligence to becoming director of CIA in May 2006. How easy or difficult a transition was that to make?

Hayden**:** It was actually a fairly easy transition. Here's how I handled it. There were a couple of issues that were up in the air when I got there. The "lanes in the road" between CIA's CounterTerrorism Center (CTC) and the National CounterTerrorism Center (NCTC), and the question of moving analysts up Route 123, to Liberty Crossing**.** And once I was at the Agency, I came in and said, "Guys, we're done talking about this, and I'm handling this by fiat. Here are the lanes in the road, here's the number of people going up Route 123, and we're done. We're *done*." That's off the table, now let's focus on CIA.

What was the most surprising thing to you about CIA, once you took the helm there?

Actually, I was pretty familiar with it, but there was one thing that struck me. I kind of expected it but didn't understand how deeply important it was. And that was the fact that there were multiple cultures inside CIA. I frequently talk about when looking at the Agency from Route 123, you think it's a singular noun. But on most days, at best, it's a collective noun, and on some bad days it's a plural. Each of the four big directorates has its own culture. But I respected the cultures; they were there for a reason. And I didn't want to destroy them or threaten them, but I wanted to overlay them with a stronger Agency culture. You could have the kind of "fighter pilot" mystique in the National Clandestine Service (NCS), or the "tenured faculty" mystique in the Directorate of Intelligence (DI), but there were still some unifying themes that made you a CIA officer. And we set about to do that, fairly gently, but I thought it was important.

What do you think was the CIA's greatest achievement or achievements during your tenure? What are you proudest of?

I am most proud of taking the fight to the nation's enemies. Classification concerns prevent a lot of fine print on that, but I've said publicly, we gave President Bush a list of people we were most mad at, in the tribal region of Pakistan, in July 2008. By the time I left office, more than a dozen of those people were dead. There's a reason why the country has been protected, and the Agency doesn't get enough credit for it. I mean, you have to acknowledge the outstanding work of America's armed forces and law enforcement itself. But what the Agency did to dismantle the al-Qai'da leadership … I'm most proud of that.

What would you like to have accomplished at CIA, that you didn't get done?

We set in motion, the strengthening of a common Agency culture. And just to elaborate on that, we did it with our longer on-boarding time, a longer communal on-boarding time before people went into the directorates. We did it by strengthening some corporate-level functions, namely CIO [Chief Information Officer], CFO [Chief Financial Officer], and HR [Human Resources]. We did it by having a strategy that we asked everyone to contribute to—we put it on the internal Web site and asked for comments. That overall effort probably needed more time. Frankly, I've gotten the impression that if you don't give that sort of thing energy from the front office, there are enough impediments so that it just doesn't move. So I just wish I had a little more time to get that irreversible.

Are there certain experiences that former CIA directors had, or situations they handled, that affected the way you ran the Agency?

I always said—and it was politically correct but also very true—that I was standing on the shoulders of the people who served before me. You won't find a whisper or comment—let alone a criticism—about those who held the job before. Because it's not right and, frankly, I don't think it would be accurate. I know George Tenet well. I have said publicly that I thank God that George made some incredibly difficult decisions. I don't know how I would have decided them, but I thank God George made them, because, since George did, I didn't have to.

Let me elaborate. There should be other people thanking God that George Tenet made those decisions. I'm talking about political leadership. Because if George hadn't done that, we would not be in as good a position as we are in today. These things that are easy to criticize in hindsight would not be in the rear-view mirror, but in the windscreen. And they would have to be making these decisions now.

If you could have a "do over" for something that happened when you headed CIA, what would it be?

On the question of the destruction of the [interrogation] videotapes, which, frankly, weren't created on my watch or

destroyed on my watch, I didn't realize how big a deal people could construct. I think inherently it isn't as big a deal as it has been made out to be, but I should have been more sensitive that people would have made it as big a deal as they did. And rather than just kind of handle it routinely, and just kind of let the information go forward, I probably, in retrospect, would have called a little more attention to it to the Congress—put a little more of a bell and whistle on it when we informed them—so that when the press finally got it, we could point to a more clear track record of how we did indeed share that with Congress and others. That was a misstep on my part.

What got you through the most challenging times?

When I met Director Panetta for the first time, my notes were on a 3 by 5 card. One of the things I told him was, "Leon, you're inheriting the best leadership team in the federal government. If you give them half a chance, they will not let you fail, the way they would not let me fail." The people that I had at the Agency were the best support system I've ever had.

What was the best personnel decision you made?

Bringing two people back to the Agency—Steve Kappes [from retirement] and Michael Morell [from brief service at NCTC].

Keep in mind that when I got to the Agency, my instinct was that the Agency didn't need a hell of a lot of change. If anything, the Agency needed to be settled down, not shaken up. So one of my themes was continuity, but I did bring several folks in.

When I was told the president was going to nominate me for the job, I asked Mary Jane, my executive assistant as PDDNI, to find Steve Kappes. She tracked him down, at a cell phone. He was on a train platform in London, with [his wife] Kathleen. I said, "Steve, would you ever consider being deputy director of CIA?" He said, "It depends a little bit on who is the director, Mike." And I said, "Well, I'm not at liberty to discuss that, but I am the one making this phone call." He said, "I'll get back to you." He called me about two hours later, and said if the president would have him, he would serve.

So that was the best personnel decision?

Yes. For lots of reasons: decent man, wonderful operational experience, and a nice message to the workforce. This just wasn't the "DNI guy" coming to somehow interfere with the strong track record and autonomy of the Agency.

Some observers have been surprised at how ardently you defended—and continue to defend—CIA's detention and interrogation program. Particularly, considering that the most aggressive and controversial enhanced interrogation technique—waterboarding—was last used more than three years before you became CIA director. Why did you take this approach, when you easily could have taken a different tack?

A couple of thoughts. And clarity here is very important. I didn't quite defend all the [enhanced interrogation] techniques. I certainly didn't defend waterboarding. Remember, I said earlier that George Tenet made the tough decisions that I thank God I didn't have to make. People ask me, "Well, what would you have done?" and I say, "I thank God I didn't have to make that decision," and that's as far as I go. What I did was point out that whatever you may think of this, it worked and we did indeed get life-saving intelligence out of it.

So the point I would make to folks who say, "I don't want you doing this, and it doesn't work anyway," I would point out, "Whoa. Stop. The front half of that sentence, you can say; that's yours, you own that, 'I don't want you doing it.' The back half of that sentence is not yours. That's mine. And the fact is it *did* work. So here is the sentence you have to give. 'Even though it may have worked, I still don't want you doing it.' That requires courage. That requires you going out to the American people and saying, 'We're looking at a tradeoff here folks, and I want you to understand the tradeoff.'" I can live with that tradeoff. I can live with the per-

son who makes that tradeoff. Either way. That's an honorable position. But I felt duty-bound to be true to the facts.

There's a second element. I felt morally obligated to the people in the Agency not to allow them to feel as if they had been abandoned by the senior leadership. What they did was done out of duty, not enthusiasm. They weren't volunteers; they were thrown into the breach. The republic asked them to do things that were very difficult, and they did them. And they did them frankly knowing that there would be a day—after the republic felt safe again—that some people would begin to question their actions.

I often say the reality of the intelligence world is an element of the political leadership that wants to be free to criticize us when they feel endangered, for not doing enough, and they want to be free to criticize us for doing too much when they no longer feel in danger. That's not just unfair and unjust, it's inefficient. It's no way to backstop an intelligence agency. So, you know, most of this didn't happen on my watch, and I've been somewhat identified with it because of the positions I've taken publicly. But I couldn't see myself doing it any other way.

It has been reported that you wanted to stay on as CIA director, for a period of six months or so into the new administration. What was your reaction when President Obama decided to go in a different direction?

I wasn't surprised. The reason for staying on was to try to create the reality that the D/CIA job is not a political job, that the D/CIA job is a professional job. I was put into it as a professional intelligence officer. Keep in mind that this was the first presidential transition after the creation of the DNI. One would expect then that the DNI, as the DCIs, mostly but not exclusively, had "changed out," that it would be the DNI position that would "change out." My prime reason for wanting to stay on for a short period of time was to kind of drive home the point, that this wasn't a political post. The president decided to go in another direction. When the president gave me a phone call one evening and said that was what he was doing, that was fine. But again, my view was for the broader message that it wasn't a political position.

On that score, do you think there should be a fixed term for the CIA director, as there is for the FBI director?

You know, that's one way of fixing it. But I'm a little reluctant to vote for that. The president has got to be very comfortable, there has to be good personal chemistry, between the president and the D/CIA. And locking in an incumbent for a period of time, well, that actually might be a formula for other problems.

There has been a lot of talk about "risk taking" at CIA. Did you sense or encounter a risk-averse mindset while you were at the Agency?

I'm familiar with the accusation about the Agency being risk-averse. Frankly, I didn't find it while I was there. I have told people that when the history of the Agency during this period is written, Americans will be very proud of what the Agency did, in terms of taking risks. Now I will say that the events of the past year don't help. When you have a previous president's covert action program made so public, so much a part of discourse. With field officers, they think they've got a social contract, not with the president, but with the government …that the government has their backs—politically, legally, morally. And so, if that social contract is torn, I don't mean to exaggerate here, it's a little bit like an infidelity in a marriage. I mean, you can get back to it, you can have reconciliation, but it's never going to be the same.

How can CIA's relations with Congress be improved?

When I was leaving CIA, I talked to Director Panetta. I said, "Frankly Leon, I am leaving you an organization that on most days, hits most gears and is chugging away. Except one thing, and that is the relation-

ship with the Hill. So in answer to your question about what can be done to improve the relationship with Congress, I obviously don't know. Because if I did, I would have done it. But that's a relationship that has got to work. That's the oversight the American people need to have, because we can't tell the American people everything we're doing. We have to tell Congress that. And it has gotten very caustic and very political. The only advice I can give is go down there, tell them the way it is, and tell them the way it is as often as you can.

Do you think the CIA is too reliant on foreign liaison services?

No. I know that's an accusation that's out there. But there's a reason all those [foreign intelligence] people come visit us at CIA Headquarters. We're big, powerful, technologically savvy, global, and we have a broad global context into which we can put events. Our liaison partners are local, focused, and culturally nimble. That's good partnership. Those things complement one another. We are an espionage service. We conduct espionage, and we have friends who can help us.

As mentioned earlier, you served as PDDNI as well as director of CIA. Some say the ODNI is just another level of bureaucracy-that it is duplicative and unnecessary. What is your view now?

Unfortunately the DNI has two jobs, either of which would overwhelm a person. One is senior intelligence adviser to the president, the other is smooth functioning of the Intelligence Community. It's very hard for a DNI not to focus on the first, largely because the president insists that he does. If you do that, that means the smooth functioning of the community, by default, tends to drift to the DNI staff. That is not a formula for success. Staffs don't run other staffs; staffs support principals. So to the degree the DNI can free up some of his time and energy—and personally help govern the community—to that degree I think it helps. In the military, we talk about commanders talking to commanders. I guess in the IC, it would be directors talking to directors. So that CIA's HR is not being tasked by DNI's HR … that the CIA director may be tasked by the DNI, and the director may use his HR to respond to that tasking. When you're able to establish that kind of relationship, then I think we're more likely to succeed.

You said during your CIA confirmation hearing that the Agency needed to be out of the news as source or subject, but you did lengthy interviews on Meet the Press, Charlie Rose, *and C-SPAN. Why?*

It sounds a little bit contradictory, and on one level it is. On another level, it's not. What I learned at NSA is that people are going to write about you. I take the point—out of the news as source or subject. But you need to be out there talking, and creating an identity of and for the Agency, during times when people are not criticizing you. If you are only out there in response to accusations, they are defining the dialogue, or the accusations define the dialogue. Go out there and fill up that space with some reality about CIA. Because if you don't go out and fill up the space, then CIA is like a vacuum. And the first negative story about CIA is like a gas. And that negative story acts like a gas in a vacuum. It fills it up. And so in one way it's contradictory, but in another way, it was at least trying to create an identity for the Agency, so that Americans had some sense of reality before the next storm hits. And as you know, the next storm is going to hit.

Do you think the media acted responsibly in reporting on intelligence matters during your tenure? I know that's a very general question. Where did they do well, and where did they fall short?

It is a general question, and it's a mixed bag. They returned my calls when I said, "I really don't think you should go with that story," and they asked why and you would then have to have an adult conversation with them. You would have to explain why, and very often they would act responsibly. I think the [December 2005] *New York Times* story on the terrorist surveillance program was irresponsible. Even the *New York Times*' public editor thought their [June 2006] story on the SWIFT program [for

accessing international financial data] was irresponsible.

There were other incidents like that. It's a difficult question. I've got a lot of friends in journalism. I still maintain contact with them. I think I have an appropriate role to play in trying to articulate American intelligence in an unclassified way to an audience that finds it very difficult to understand. So I would just leave it at that; it was a mixed bag.

You strongly advocated publicly disclosing the role intelligence played in detecting the nuclear reactor in Syria. Why did you advocate this?

It was a very complex political problem. First of all, when we became aware of it, it became very important to keep it secret. Arguably secret, because it had to be dealt with in a way that didn't create a war in the Middle East. And the more public it became, the more difficult it would be for the Syrians to act responsibly. So no question that it needed to be kept secret.

But after a time, after the facility had been destroyed, there were two lines working—because you had two bad actors here, the Syrians and the North Koreans. With the Syrians, you needed to keep it secret, otherwise they might do something stupid if they were publicly embarrassed. With the North Koreans on the other hand, we were moving in the direction of a new arrangement with regard to things "nuclear," including proliferation. And so, the fact that we knew the North Koreans had done this very egregious thing, I felt would undercut the confidence in the treaty when, sooner or later, it became more visible, more known, more public. So we had this line with the Syrians where you've got to keep it secret, but that was fading over time. Conversely, with the North Koreans, the imperative to make it public was growing over time, as we were getting to a firm agreement. I think the lines crossed about the first of the year—remember it was discovered largely in April [2007] and destroyed in September [2007]. By about December or January [2008], I think that's when it's crossed. So we at the Agency became very strong advocates for making it public. But in an intelligence process way, we knew that we had only told a few members of Congress, and the legitimacy for keeping it closely held was eroding as we got further away from the destruction of the facility, and therefore from any likely Syrian reaction. We had an additional impulse to tell Congress.

On a lighter note, what are some of the funniest things that happened during your time as CIA director?

Oh, there were more than a few. It was a common occurrence that we would have a senior-level meeting—it would be very serious, it would be very important. Most of the folks would leave the room afterward. Three senior leaders—me, Kappes, and Morell…and maybe [former Chief of Staff] Larry [Pfeiffer]—were still in the room. We all come from similar backgrounds. We all come from industrial towns. We all come from blue-collar families. We all went to the same kinds of colleges. We had a sense of kinship. And, more than once, one or the other would look at the other two or three of us and say, "Do you even believe we're talking about this stuff? ((laughter)) We're actually involved in making this decision?" ((laughter))

On the subject of sports for a moment, why do you use sports metaphors so frequently?

I grew up playing sports. There's a reason why the ancient Greeks emphasized athletics—to create the whole person. They are a mirror of life. There's hardly a circumstance I've met in my professional life that I can't feel echoes of something that happened on a baseball field or a football field, with me personally. That's probably why we have our kids play sports.

Are you glad that you are not CIA director any more, or do you miss it?

Yes and yes. I'm very happy doing what I'm doing now. I enjoy the freedoms—freedom to say some things, freedom to pick what it is I want to do. I miss the people. I miss the mission. But you can't do any of this forever, and it was probably a good time for me to move on.

Would you ever consider returning to government service in some capacity?

"Not bloody likely" would be the way I would put that. Obviously, you should never say never. Intelligence officers never use those adverbs like "all" or "never." But I'm very happy where I am. Shortly after leaving government, someone whom I really trust in the private sector gave me counsel along the lines of, "Now be careful about what kinds of jobs you accept and what you do, because when you come up for confirmation again." I said, "Look, look. Stop. OK? I don't anticipate that ever happening." ((laughter)) And that's how I still feel.

How do you think history will judge your tenure as CIA director?

It's a very good agency. I got an opportunity to allow the Agency to be itself. And it really did a lot of things to make America safe. There are so many phony urban legends out there about the Agency—from Jack Bauer and Jack Ryan all the way to Jason Bourne, to criticism that we constantly undercut presidential policy by cooking intelligence estimates and then leaking them. They're all outrageous. I'm fond of saying that these [Agency] people are just like your friends and neighbors, and if you live in northern Virginia or Maryland or DC, they probably are. They're just solid Americans who are very talented, doing things no one else is asked to do, and no one else is allowed to do. That's a special vocation. And I mean that in the religious sense of the word. It's a vocation.