

The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from AL QA'IDA to ISIS

Michael Morell. (Twelve, 2015) 362, photos, index.

Reviewed by Hayden Peake

Following Allen Dulles's precedent, many former senior CIA officers have written memoirs of their CIA service. While several came to the agency from military and political careers, the majority had served in the clandestine service. Former agency analysts have taken up the pen less frequently. The first was Ray Cline (1981)¹ followed by Russell Smith (1989),² both former deputy directors of intelligence (DDI). Robert Gates, who served as DDI and director of central intelligence (DCI), joined them later, in 2006.³ Although each covered some challenging events in the CIA's history, none stirred as much critical scrutiny as the most recent contribution, Michael Morell's *The Great War of Our Time*.

Typical of CIA memoirists, Morell includes an account of how he found his way to the CIA. He studied economics in college, planning a life in academia. Then came the unexpected suggestion of one of his professors that he consider the CIA. On a lark he applied and was accepted in 1980 as an intelligence analyst. Most of the first 16 years of his career was devoted to dues-paying assignments on East Asian economic issues. In 1996, George Tenet, then deputy director to DCI John Deutch, assigned Morell to lead an interagency study that examined whether sufficient emphasis was being given to "open source" information in economic matters as opposed to collection by clandestine sources. Morell writes that Tenet was pleased with the result, and 18 months later, when Tenet became DCI, he made Morell his executive assistant (EA). From there, his career took off.

While cautiously avoiding immodest puffery, *The Great War of Our Time* is the story of how Morell handled a series of challenging positions under six directors, each of which he discusses frankly. He also includes occasional vignettes of their impact on his family life. After serving as Tenet's EA, Morell spent a year as President George W. Bush's daily intelligence briefer and was with him on 9/11.^a Next he was appointed deputy to the direc-

tor of intelligence, and by 2009 he was deputy director of CIA itself. Throughout this period he was "obsessed by the issue of terrorism." (xii) Thus, his book is heavily devoted to the actions CIA and the Intelligence Community undertook to deal with the threat, including failures, successes, and controversies the efforts engendered.

CIA attempts to alert the president and the community to al Qa'ida threats before 9/11 are particularly interesting. Threat reports titled "Bin Laden Attacks May Be Imminent" and "Bin Laden Planning High-Profile Attacks" were read as indicators of possible deception by the vice president; the defense department, Morell writes, saw deception in all of them. (41) Then-DCI George Tenet rejected these assertions with characteristic firmness. The president, however, took the warnings seriously, writes Morell, as he did the 6 August 2001 briefing titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike the US." But when asked for specifics, Morell had to respond that there were none. Some in the White House later wanted to tell the 9/11 Commission that Morell had told the president at the briefing "that there was no need to worry," though he had not done so. (72) The incident made clear to Morell the political sensitivities involved in the issue. Morell challenges the 9/11 Commission conclusion that the "September 11 attacks resulted in part, from a failure of imagination," (59) and he explains his objections in some detail.

After a year as the presidential briefer, Morell was ready to leave the demanding, high-stress—and career enhancing—position and was appointed deputy to the director of intelligence. While there, he was involved with the analyses leading up to the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003. He also oversaw CIA support to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations about supposed Iraqi possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Morell candidly admits the WMD estimates were wrong for a variety of reasons.

a. Morell's description of that day appeared in *Studies in Intelli-*

gence 50, 3 (September 2006). It is available in redacted form at http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/DOC_0001407035.pdf

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Regarding the Powell speech, he describes extraordinary efforts to get it right. He notes the unusual direct involvement in the WMD discussion of Vice President Dick Cheney and the CIA's reliance on what turned out to be fabricated information from a source known as CURVEBALL. Morell acknowledges discussions with analysts and collectors who had opposing views, but he does not comment on inputs from Tyler Drumheller,⁴ the Chief of the Europe Division of the Directorate of Operations, who claimed to have warned the DCI of doubts about CURVEBALL. Morell notes only that he saw nothing "to suggest that either [John] McLaughlin [Tenet's deputy] or Tenet was made aware of the dispute at the time." (97) Nevertheless, he apologizes to Secretary Powell for the analytic disaster.

As to CIA's view of the Iraq war, he frankly adds that notwithstanding the admonition to avoid recommending policy, "I believe we did have a responsibility prewar to produce a detailed analysis of the likely postwar scenarios... but that paper was never written." (98) Morell does present an extended discussion that answers the question "how could we get it so wrong" from both the analysis and collection points of view. In the end, a major unintended consequence of the war, writes Morell, was that "al Qaeda... was given a new boost by a narrative that said the United States was intent on bringing war to Muslim lands." (107)

In the summer of 2003, Morell's assignment to the DI ended, and he became the CIA's analytic liaison in the United Kingdom. The intelligence topics of concern—Iraq and al Qaeda—remained the same but he acquired new perspectives and contacts. But the circumstances around his working out his next assignment in 2006 will spark reader interest if not cynical amusement. It was a time of "enormous tension between the CIA and the newly created DNI," says Morell. (125) And when offered several positions in the community, the players engaged in a bureaucratic food-fight over decision authority. Even congress was peripherally involved. In the end Morell was a casualty, and he came home to the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC)—another new organizational element that functionally duplicated some of the work of the CIA CounterTerrorist Center—and he writes that it was not his first or second choice.

Four months later, demonstrating a resilience that characterizes his CIA career, Morell benefited from

an unusual circumstance, when in May 2006 the new director of CIA, Michael Hayden, appointed him the CIA executive officer, replacing the disgraced "Dusty" Foggo. Morell was now a "member of CIA's senior leadership team." (127) At this point, Morell's book provides a view of an agency in turmoil and discusses how Hayden moved quickly to "turn the situation around," (128) while simultaneously supporting actions against terrorist operations that were "foiled by the excellent work of the intelligence community and the FBI." (130)

Morell remained executive officer under Leon Panetta, the DCIA appointed by President Obama. He describes Panetta's "rough start with the Agency" because of his views on torture expressed to congress during his confirmation hearings. But Panetta clearly enjoyed his job, and he gradually earned the respect of all after he repulsed DNI attempts to usurp traditional CIA responsibilities. Panetta and Morell worked well together, and by May 2009 the director had appointed him deputy director of CIA. Morell retained this position until his retirement in 2013. In the period, he twice served as acting director, after the departures of Panetta and Director David Petraeus.

From the director's suite on the seventh floor, Morell gained direct knowledge of IC and CIA roles in major operations and events. Examples include congressional oversight, White House politics, the enhanced interrogation program, the Bin Laden operation, the Snowden affair, the drone program, the Benghazi "talking points," and developments in the Middle East. Morell gives all brief, though substantial and incisive attention. In these discussions, he does not avoid the moral issues that confronted the agency, and he makes his positions clear explicitly and implicitly. The final chapter sums up his views on what needs to be done to meet the national security challenges of the future. He calls it "the most important chapter in the book" (321) and it is worth close attention.

The Great War of Our Time tells a story of US intelligence—the good and the bad—from a uniquely wide-ranging perspective. Michael Morell had an extraordinary career and his memoir should serve to guide those who follow in his footsteps.

