



The CIA Headquarters Complex, 2004. (Photo: CIA)

In Their Own Words: Views from CIA

Joint Interview with Michael J. Morell and Andrew Makridis

Interviewed by Joseph Gartin

Michael J. Morell was deputy director of CIA during March 2010–August 2013. He was acting director of CIA from July 2011 to September 2011 and November 2012 to March 2013.

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We're here to talk about IRTPA, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004, which by design had pretty profound effects on CIA, including on the Director of Central Intelligence's leadership of the Intelligence Community, the CIA's relationship with the president and other customers, and what we came to refer to as the lanes in the road on issues like counterterrorism. Before we jump in, though, for the benefit of our readers, can you orient us to the arc of your careers and your intersections with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the effects of IRTPA.

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In Their Own Words

Michael, could we start with you? You were with President George W. Bush on 9/11, and the following year you joined the then-Directorate of Intelligence front office as an associate deputy director for intelligence. So, you had a front row seat on pivotal issues of the day—al-Qa'ida, Iraq, among others. And then from a variety of roles, you watched IRTPA unfold.

MM: Yes, but even before that, I had a ringside seat into the al-Qa'ida issue pre-9/11. I ran the President's Daily Brief for two years. I was seeing everything that President Bill Clinton was seeing on terrorism and al-Qa'ida. Then I went to work for George Tenet as his executive assistant, and I saw how obsessed he was with al-Qa'ida and all that he was doing to drive the CIA and the Intelligence Community.

You mentioned George Tenet and the leadership of the Intelligence Community. I think it would be fair to say that there was both great impact by that DCI leadership of the Community and yet there were limits of what the DCI could do. How did you view that at the time?

MM: I never saw George get frustrated at not being able to get what he needed from the IC. And to be fair, there were only a handful of agencies that he really needed—the National Security

Agency, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, and the National Reconnaissance Office. The rest were important in their worlds, but not critical to strategic intelligence and keeping the president informed. There were certain legal limitations to what he could do. But he was so mission oriented that people wanted to follow him. If he picked up the phone and called Mike Hayden at NSA, for example, Hayden would follow because George was so focused on the mission and, as the president's intelligence adviser, George could say, "The president needs this." That's power.

Director Richard Helms said, "You have to be in the room." It sounds like a lot of that authority of the DCI pre-IRTPA came from the innate leadership of the CIA director and his relationship with the president.

MM: Absolutely. And George was a special person, with special leadership skills. So, maybe with a different director, it would have been different.^a Maybe I would have had a different experience. Maybe I would have seen frustration. Tenet was a great leader, and that included not only leading people at CIA, but also leading people throughout the Community.

Those early years—2004–2006—were fairly tumultuous. I want to

read a short quote from your book because I think you really get that at the heart of the conversation and those early years of implementing IRTPA. You wrote, "Inside the CIA, the view was that the DNI was demanding changes that were either duplicative of what CIA was already doing or were actually putting the country at some risk. And there were many issues to be worked out, and there was a fight over almost every one of them."^b

MM: In terms of CIA's view of this, let me say two things. CIA opposed the creation of the DNI. Remember, everybody except the 9/11 families were against this. They really drove this. The Bush administration was against the DNI. In that debate period, the views at CIA were, "We don't need this. This is not necessary." And that rested on two arguments. One was the DCI has the authorities he needs. There's not a lot of frustration about not being able to get the Community to support the strategic mission.

The other was that any problems that existed and that contributed to—not caused—9/11 had been solved in its immediate aftermath. The relationship between the FBI and the CIA, for example, that was a result of law and regulation and norms and behaviors, those were gone within days and weeks after 9/11. To be fair, CIA's

a. For a survey of the performance of all past DCIs in this respect see CIA contract historian Douglas F. Garthoff's book *Directors of Central Intelligence as Leaders of the U.S. Intelligence Community, 1946–2005* (Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005).

b. Michael Morell with Bill Harlow, *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism from al-Qa'ida to ISIS* (Twelve, 2015), 125.

Interview with Michael J. Morell and Andrew Makridis

opposition to the creation of the DNI was based not only on what I just said, but it was also based on a view that we're at the top of the heap and we don't want to give that up. That, unfortunately, was part of it.

That was pre-IRTPA. Post-IRTPA—and this gets to the quote you read—it was, “This is damaging.” That was based on the fact that the DNI was taxing us significantly. Every year a piece of our budget went over to the DNI. They were taking money and resources away from us. And for the things that they were standing up, in many cases they were duplicative of what CIA already did. The National Counterterrorism Center is probably the best example. Our view was that we were doing CT analysis post-9/11 as well as it could possibly be done. Why did we need an NCTC? The resources that went to that were being taken away from us and others. We saw that as not helpful and even damaging to mission.

Those were the views of many, probably the majority, of CIA officers. But I also had my own views. One was that, at the end of the day, the DNI, it seemed to me, had less influence on intelligence issues than the DCI had. Think about it this way: Under the old system, the DCI had complete control over CIA and some influence over the rest of the community, due largely to the fact that the DCI was the president's intelligence adviser.

But, in the new system, the DNI has only limited control over CIA and arguably no more influence over the rest of the IC than the DCI had. Let me go back to what I said earlier—the DCI's influence over the IC came largely from his role as the president's intelligence adviser. In the new system, although the law gives that role to the DNI, in practice it has mostly been DCIAs who have played that role. In fact, I can think of only one case in which the DNI has played that role.

My other view at the time, which I still believe, is that whether you're talking about a small unit or an entire agency or even a community of agencies, you can organize those in a variety of different ways. Every one of those ways has its own strengths and its own weaknesses. But how well you actually perform depends much more on leadership and the quality of the workforce than it does on the organizational structure you choose. People focus on structure because it is easier to change than leadership skills and workforce talent. And therefore, they over-focus on it.

Now, having said all that, over time I came to see value in the DNI. It was helpful to a CIA director because it allowed him or her to focus on CIA, which is a full-time job. Remember that some of the DCI's time was taken up with issues related to the rest of the IC and that took him away

from CIA. One counter-historical example: Had the leaks by Edward J. Snowden occurred under the old system, it would have been the DCI, the head of the CIA, sitting in all those congressional hearings, which would have been unhealthy for CIA. I also think that there was benefit to the president because before the DNI, only one part of one agency determined what the president saw. After the DNI, the entire community decided, including making sure the president knew of important differences of views. Those are benefits.

Andy, your career also intersected with some pretty momentous events and the creation of the ODNI. You came from the weapons and proliferation side of the house, which I always thought that as a CIA officer you were integrating the IC before integration was cool. Can you give us a sense for maybe some key inflection points for you in the early 2000s?

AM: I was working for John McLaughlin on 9/11 and then succeeded Michael as President Bush's briefer and did that until 2004. I left before the creation of the DNI. I went back to what was the Weapons Intelligence, Nonproliferation, and Arms Control Center at the time. I remember once the DNI was created and things like the National Counterproliferation Center became an organization. There was a recoil from the weapons and proliferation people because of the reason you just cited. A lot

In Their Own Words

of them felt like, “Wait a second. The expertise is here. We have a vibrant partnership with the Counterproliferation Division at the time. So, what is this other thing. What’s it going to do? And how is it going to interfere with what we’re trying to do?”

Whenever you perturb the status quo, you get that sort of rejection kind of thing. On the NCPC side, we were fortunate to have some good leaders who weren’t acquisitive. They didn’t want to own stuff. They were happy allowing things to more or less reside where they were and just provide overarching guidance. It’s probably a little understated, but essentially that. The initial rejection gave way to, “We sort of understand what they’re doing” and they were a source—to be honest—they were a source of funds. We would compete for NCTC money. So, from that perspective, it was just as Michael said. There was this initial reaction that I think was ameliorated later, but broadly at the DNI.

There’s only one bureaucratic imperative in Washington, and that’s to grow. And so, the idea early on that ODNI was going to stay small was received skeptically—I think a lot of us looked at it and said, “There’s no way.” And it grew into an enormous enterprise. Today there are five centers in the ODNI. And so, I get the idea behind it. As early as the mid-1950s, Congress was already starting to talk about how the

DCI should relegate the authority of running CIA to one of his deputies, and that he should step back and manage the IC. Now there is no director of CIA who’s going to say, “I’m going to turn this over to my deputy, and I want to be the administrative head of the Intelligence Community.” But I think it was questioned even then whether a DCI could do both jobs. And that’s tricky.

And to Michael’s point, I think it becomes personality dependent. George Tenet is a great example. Some people could pull that off easily. Others we’ve had in that chair, there’s just no way. People wouldn’t follow. You get the point that it’s not a really great organizational structure when it’s dependent on a personality to work. I don’t have a big objection to the DNI. I just think implementation has changed the scope of the DNI—two large buildings, thousands of people at this point—that muddies the water as to what exactly the DNI is.

I had some discussions with a couple of members of Congress when the DNI was created who said, “This isn’t exactly what we had envisioned.” They envisioned a small oversight body, essentially to help coordinate, play traffic cop, do that kind of thing; it has become something much larger than that. Do we need it today? I think it is more of a question of whether DNI is an intelligence organization or a policy organization.

Sometimes this is framed as should the DNI be leading or doing?

AM: It’s interesting to think about that. Should the ODNI centers be under the DNI or should the DNI say, “Some of these belong back out in the IC. We will ensure that they play right, but we don’t need to own them.” You could ask whether the National Counterproliferation and Biosecurity Center needs to be a separate organization or could it be folded back into CIA? The DNI could say, CIA, you’re the executive manager for the community. We will make sure you fulfill that role.

I think an argument that you could hear on the other side is, “Yes, but for how long before it begins to revert? And if you don’t have another body, another organization, like the DNI over time, once the crisis subsides and people start thinking back like they used to organizationally, will we find ourselves in the same place we were pre-IRTPA?”

MM: I would just add that Andy’s point about DCIs is right. Former DCIs and how well they led the IC really is person dependent. Agree one hundred percent. I can think of those who did and those who did not. But the same is true of the DNI. Let’s also remember that DOD, in the crafting of the legislation that created the DNI, worked its magic to make sure the DNI’s authority over the

Interview with Michael J. Morell and Andrew Makridis

military intelligence agencies was limited.

Could we shift gears and think about the issue of joint duty, that is, having intelligence officers work outside of their own agencies? I think I benefited from this, running the PDB staff and working on the National Intelligence Council, as lots of my colleagues did, too. To your point, Andy, about growth, one of the challenges for joint duty was that when you create a program, you have to have somebody implement it and somebody to keep track and somebody to grant credit or deny credit. It creates its own sort of bureaucracy. All that said, is joint duty something that has helped improve the Intelligence Community?

MM: I was a fan of joint duty. I had all these concerns about the DNI, but I was a fan of joint duty. I pushed it inside CIA when I was the associate deputy director, despite a lot of people not being happy about it. And I did that because my boss, Mike Hayden, supported it. But I also did it because I saw the logic in it, too. I should also mention Ron Sanders, the chief of human capital for ODNI at the time. Ron has the kind of personality that it's hard to say no to. He's tenacious. And we had a great relationship, so I didn't want to let him down either.

But, implementation was hard, and it wasn't just because of the bureaucracy. Implementation was hard because if you say to people, "You have to have a joint duty

assignment before you can be promoted to SIS," (Senior Intelligence Service) you have to make sure you have enough joint-duty assignments to actually get the numbers right. And when we implemented it at CIA, we were able to convince Ron and the DNI of some things that were a bit of a stretch, like all chiefs of station and all PDB briefers are joint-duty assignments.

But to your question, Joe, I don't know; I haven't been in the IC for 10 years. But to judge that, I think it's really important to think about how we judge the DNI. How do we judge whether the DNI has been a plus for the Intelligence Community or not? And I think the concept is simple, but the measurement of it is extraordinarily hard. You have to ask has the DNI improved the capabilities of the different agencies to collect and analyze intelligence and, in CIA's case, to conduct covert action? That's the ultimate measure. Nothing else really matters. It doesn't matter how many IC Directives are put out or how many centers are created. All that matters is performance.

So, how did I think about the DNI in the context of this measure when I left government in 2013? I could not judge the non-CIA entities in the IC, but for CIA, I did not believe that the DNI had made CIA better. I believed that the DNI had little to no impact on CIA's ability to collect intelligence, to do all-source analysis, and

to conduct covert action. And to answer your question, I don't think joint duty had much of an impact either. But that's what I felt when I left in 2013. Now I'm open to the idea that things have changed for the better in the last 11 years.

AM: Joint duty: I was at a much lower level than Michael at the time. I disliked it because it quickly became a box-checking exercise. "I'm now a GS-13. I need to check the box for joint duty." And there were too many people, not enough substantial jobs. And so, you ended up having people going to jobs that were not career enhancing, other than to say, "Yes, I did a joint duty assignment," so that became an issue. And there's an internal problem. We know that only a small fraction of people are going to make it to the senior ranks. But with GS-13s thinking, "I'll eventually be in the Senior Intelligence Service," we are creating a flood of people wanting these jobs. I understand the initial impetus, including criticism of CIA as being too insular. Got it. Saw it. We all saw it every day. Implementation, though, I think just didn't work well.

I think one of the challenges that I saw at the time was really the throughput issue. In addition, I think there are substantial differences in the way IC organizations looked at assignment policies. At CIA for the most part, individuals are their own career counselors, and it's harder, I think, to make

In Their Own Words

a plan that says, “Well, I’m going to do this job for two years and after I’m done. I already have an assignment for its follow-on, and after that I will probably do X, Y, and Z.” As a result, I always felt that the implementation challenge was particularly hard for CIA in comparison to DOD agencies.

For both of you, looking back on your varying backgrounds and approaches and experiences and at past DNIs, I wonder if it’s possible to create a composite of the qualities of an ideal DNI—at least from a CIA perspective.

MM: Let me not give you the CIA perspective. I’m going to give you the “what’s best for the nation” perspective. So, I think the DNI has to be, number one, close to the president, has to have such a relationship with the president that the DNI can pick up the phone and say, “I need to come see you;” or call the national security advisor and say, “I need to see the president;” and that happens. Where the DNI feels comfortable saying whatever the IC believes the truth to be and where the president feels comfortable in saying what George Bush said to us occasionally, “This is not very good.” So, that relationship is really important. The person needs to have a pre-existing relationship or the ability to build one quickly. So, that’s number one: a good relationship with the president.

Two, they have to be substantive. The DNI’s power or influence over the rest of the community comes from being the president’s intelligence adviser. You can’t do that if you’re not substantive. If that role goes to the DCIA because he or she is personally better positioned to do that, then the DNI is not going to have the influence a DNI needs to have.

Three, DNIs have to be really good at managing. They have to be very good at leading the IC through consensus and personal relationships as opposed to the law. If DNIs come in like one once did and say, “I’m in charge and here’s what we’re going to do,” they will fail. However, if DNIs come in—and there’s been several of these—who say, “We’re going to make decisions in a consensus way, and we’re going to make decisions that are in the best interest of all of us, and there’s no power play here at all”—that’s going to be much more successful. So, that’s three.

Four is related to number three—that their interests are really focused on producing the best intelligence for the nation and not on building a large bureaucracy. Those are the four that I would put on the table.

Andy?

AM: One hundred percent. And I think that last one is an especially important one. I just don’t think the DNI can do the

first three with the big bureaucratic bulk that it has. It should be a much smaller, much more streamlined. I do think its work can be done with a much smaller footprint, and I think DNI can be much more nimble and more focused on some of the key things that we need to do without actually running them internally.

MM: To add to Andy’s point, you have to know the cultures of each organization because they’re all different, and you have to manage to that. At CIA, we believed that we were the first among equals. You can debate that, but that’s what we believed. And I remember when Jim Clapper was nominated that I ran into him at some event, and I congratulated him on being nominated. He said, “Michael, I want you to know that I understand how special CIA is. And I want you to know that every time I walk by those stars on the wall in the lobby that I am moved.” At that moment, I would have done anything for Jim Clapper, anything. So, DNIs have to know each organization and manage them and lead them just the way leaders would any organization and any group of people and any individual person.

That’s a great observation about Clapper. And just more broadly, we alluded a couple of times to the issue of oversight, and I want, starting with you, Andy, to get your impressions on the DNI as the focal point for Congressional oversight. One of the

Interview with Michael J. Morell and Andrew Makridis

arguments that I've had a few people make to me is that it's been a plus. The ODNI allows oversight to focus on IC issues with the DNI. For the individual agencies, it becomes less onerous. I'm curious if you have a perspective.

AM: I think that's right. It doesn't mean that congressional overseers are not going to call the director of CIA or NSA on specific issues. But at least you can get some alignment. If I'm in an oversight committee talking to the one person who provides an umbrella view of the Intelligence Community, I can then followup and delve into each of the individual pieces if I want. I think that's an important role for a DNI.

Last question then. Has the creation of ODNI made the country safer?

MM: I'll go back to my fundamental point about what should be measured. Is the IC more capable now than it would have been in the absence of a DNI? That's the way you have to think about it. As I said earlier, for CIA, I don't think so. But I would love to get on a stage and discuss that with people who disagree with me.

AM: It's really hard to tell. Had the DNI not been magically created because of 9/11, I think it'd be easier to measure. But a lot of what we've seen over the past 20 years is because of the way people began working after 9/11. And you can't just give credit to the DNI

for that. It was because people began to see that we needed to be talking across the Community and there was a better understanding of what we need to do to protect the country. And so, it's hard to separate that from, "Well, it was the creation of the DNI that has made things better." So, as I reflect back on my career, I can say that relationships within the Community are much better than they were when I started, when they were very friction-filled. By the time I left, it was way better. Should the DNI get some credit? Probably. But it's hard to not look at 9/11 and the new way of operating that event induced and concluded that it had a much bigger influence on us than just the creation of the DNI.

Are there changes to the legislation that are necessary to make it survive and be impactful for another 20 years? Maybe even more impactful?

MM: Let me answer a different question because I don't think there are going to be any changes. Congress's view is that they solved the 9/11 problem with the creation of the DNI, and barring another failure, they're not going to even think about any changes. So, getting to a DNI that is more effective at lifting up the collection and analytic capabilities of the community is really going to come down to the right person. This is why that question you asked earlier, Joe, about the ideal DNI was so important. And so, maybe it's a more interesting question to ask if you could advise

the next DNI, what would you say? I think that I would say, "You have to lead the mission and substance. You should absolutely manage collection in the following sense. You should have an understanding of where the intelligence gaps are. Do we have a access in all the right places? Do we have a human asset or technical access where we need it? And if we don't, how do we close those gaps? And the best way to do that is to get all the collectors in the room and say, "CIA, what can you do? NSA, what can you do? NGA, what do you know? DIA, what can you do?" Have a plan for closing that gap and hold people to those plans. That is an important function, I think, of the DNI.

On analysis, don't manage it at all. Let a thousand flowers bloom. The NIC is there to deal with the big questions and the questions that really need an IC view. But other than that, let a thousand flowers bloom. You want both CIA and DIA looking at the same question because analysis is cheap. So, why not? The president benefits from that. And then, shrink your bureaucracy. Give resources back to the community. To Andy's point about where should these centers be, really think about that. Maybe it's best to have an executive-agent approach.

AM: I don't think changing the law, even if that were to happen, is going to make any real difference. It's all about the people leading the organization and how they decide to implement their responsibilities.

In Their Own Words

So, it's 20 years. Take a hard look at what it is today. What was it envisioned as originally? And then what should it be going forward?

MM: I love Andy's idea of doing a serious review. What we're doing here today is just off the top of our heads. There should be a serious review, and it would be best if the DNI initiated it. It's 20 years. Let's take a look. Let's talk about

strengths, weaknesses, and how we move forward in a way that benefits the IC. It makes a ton of sense.

AM: And if you call on the leaders of each of the agencies to help do that, you instantly gain credibility. Let's all sit down and talk about it and have whoever becomes the DNI listen to their views and hear from each where they think they are.

Just one last thing about right-sizing the DNI. I want to stress that I'm not suggesting the ODNI should be smaller so it can be less important.

MM: In fact, it's the opposite. We want to make the DNI more effective. ■

