

Ian Williams:

(silence) Good afternoon, everybody. I am Ian Williams, President of the Foreign Press Association. And today it gives me a great deal of pleasure to welcome former CIA Director, John Brennan, to our webinar, and to explain his book, *Undaunted*, which shows that he's much more than just a former CIA Director. He has been suffered the alleged Confucian Cass and lived in very, very interesting times.

Ian Williams:

Many of the key nodes of our last decades, of the Iranian agreement, he was in the middle East at the time of the blow up. And I kept coming across names that I knew, Ames, the good spy, a friend of mine, Kai Bird wrote the biography of him. And he was, I want say intimate, but he knew MMB well. MMB you might remember is the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia with a proclivity for putting journalists through meat grinders.

Ian Williams:

He's not our favorite character, we don't actually have an icon of him here, but I think John you'll have an equally acidic assessment of him in the light of those events. And of course, more recently he was involved, not so much involved, but a dispassionate observer who noticed strange traffic through the agencies between Russia, and the United States during the elections. Noticed some friends of the president were involved in this, and has been the old phrase was belt booked and candle going exercises spirit.

Ian Williams:

He's unique amongst public servants and the CIA, because he has allegedly had his security clearance revoked. But somehow apparently, I've just finished reading this afternoon, Donald Trump did not tell the truth, your security clearance wasn't revoked. You still have it, and you can still wander into the CA, and flash your badge.

Ian Williams:

However. he has order that no intelligence person should speak to him at all. He was not allowed access to notes for his book, which is attributed to his memory, because it's filled with the revealing details of the last few years, But I'd like to get to the beginning and come into the questions from the others. But one of the ...

Ian Williams:

You obviously have a great deal of pride from working for the CIA. You're obviously very proud of its accomplishments, and yet what I got for most foreigners, the CIA isn't a bunch of people in shining white armor defending the world. It's a bunch of undercover hoodlums who go around toppling governments and causing chaos. Do you find it easy to reconcile these binary revisions of the same organization?

John Brennan:

Oh, yeah. First of all, thank you so much for the invitation to talk to you in the Foreign Press Association today. I greatly appreciate that. And I did spend a total of 29 years in CIA over the course of two tours. The first 25 years in the CIA, and then as director for four years, before joining as well as in the White House for four years.

John Brennan:

But CIA, like a lot of institutions is not a perfect organization. It has been involved in things over the years that I regret to say were things that I don't agree with. It was involved in some activities around the world that I think now are considered to be beyond the pale in terms of what a US Intelligence agencies should be doing.

John Brennan:

But at the same time, the CIA has been involved in a lot of, I think, very important work that has tried to not just enhance US National Security, but also to help the security and safety of our allies, and partners around the world, as well as to confront the forces of communism during the height of the Cold War.

John Brennan:

A lot of that reputation and image of the United States, unfortunately, I think is based on a lot of misunderstanding, as well as a lot of stories that have circulated and that now are held as truth. But it's really a mixed record, but thinking back on my career, I do believe strongly that the CIA did more harm than good in terms of its activities, both again, in terms of protecting US National Security, but also trying to confront leaders and dictators.

Ian Williams:

Did you say that the wrong way around? I thought you said did more harm than good.

John Brennan:

No did more ... Sorry. I just said really, did more good than harm.

Ian Williams:

Okay, I just wanted that, I didn't want to inadvertently trap you, would have made a great quote, but you're cool, but we're not like that.

John Brennan:

No, it was always good. I knew when I entered the CIA in 1980, that it had this mixed reputation, and when I was CIA director for four years, what I tried to do was to minimize the greatest, impossible, any wrongdoing on the part of CIA. And I talk in my memoir about the things that I insisted upon when I was CIA director, such as forbidding the CIA to engage in the distribution of any false information around the globe, whether or not we had the covert action authorities to do that or not.

John Brennan:

I just believe that that is antithetical to our principles as a democracy and what the United States stands for. I usually spend a lot of time talking to people about the CIA's history and the record, again, trying to correct some misimpressions, but also trying to ensure that they understand that the CIA has done a lot in advance of a US National Security interests in global stability.

Ian Williams:

You were obviously agonized about what you scrupulously referred to as enhanced interrogation techniques. Those of us who are less legalistic will say of it, "Squeaks like an inquisitor's wheel it's

torture, regardless of what the justice department said." And this obviously deeply concerned you, and it's going to be a blot on the discussion of the CIA for a long time I suspect.

John Brennan:

Absolutely. When I was director, I vowed publicly and privately to Congress that I would never allow that program to be reconstituted within CIA. But one of the misconceptions about CIA is that, it's acts as a rogue organization within the US government, but it doesn't, all of its covert action programs have to be authorized by the president, in a written document called a Finding, which describes exactly what CIA is authorized to do and not do.

John Brennan:

All those programs also have to be reviewed very rigorously by the highest legal advisory body in the executive branch, which is the office of legal counsel in the department of justice. That program was duly authorized by the President United States, deemed lawful by the executive branch's highest legal advisory body. It was briefed to Congress and it was also allocated funds. It had all the features and attributes of a legitimate program.

John Brennan:

Now, torture by US Law is unlawful. And I have avoided using that term torture, because it carries a lot of legal liability with it, both domestically, as well as internationally. And some CIA officers have been charged with torture with crimes in foreign courts. And so if it was deemed lawful, and duly authorized by the president, to me, it was consistent with US Law.

John Brennan:

Now, for those who operated within the confines of that program, I think they were carrying out their duties and responsibilities as CIA officers. Those who operated outside of those boundaries, they needed to be held to account and many of them were, for some of the excesses. But again, what I wanted to impress upon people is that, it was a program that the CIA based on its authorities had a mission to carry out in the aftermath of 9/11, and CIA tried to do its best to salute to the president.

Ian Williams:

Well, it moves some of the questions that we're asking come together. One of the things that is sometimes perplexing for foreign correspondent is to look at the indignation in the US that other people would interfere in American elections. Whether from Chile, to Italy, to lots of others, there's been a lot of direct US intervention in their elections. People will look a bit pious and say, "Excuse me, why should you shout foul now when you've been doing it to everybody else?" And we're accepting that the Russians were involved in that. What do you say to people who say, "Well, if you can, we can?"

John Brennan:

Well, I'm certainly not going to say that the CIA did not interfere in elections historically, and during the Cold War, when there was the perception and the reality of an existential threat, and confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, that there was a real struggle for which was it East or West that was going to prevail. And a lot of these countries that were weakened by war, and were very vulnerable to the type of communist encroachment that was taking place.

John Brennan:

And CIA didn't interfere, it didn't topple governments, it didn't displace prime ministers and other things, and engage in election nearing. Now, I am proud to say that during my time in the government, at least in the 20th century, I'm not going to talk about the Trump administration, because who knows what they're doing. But during the George W. Bush administration and the Obama administration, we never tried to interfere in the outcome of an election.

John Brennan:

We tried to enhance a country's ability to conduct a free and fair election, providing resources and other types of capabilities. But I am proud to say that at least in my memory, recent memory, that the United States has not continued to do that type of manipulation, which again, is antithetical to a democracy such as the United States, to try to shape the outcome of a democratic election overseas. But again, I don't know what's happening today.

Ian Williams:

Who does, who does. Marcos [inaudible 00:11:06], in fact from Writers is interested in finding that out. He wants to know what called indirect evidence of you yourself seen in election-related hacking or blocked propaganda by foreign governments and which governments?

John Brennan:

Well, I haven't seen any evidence since I left government, because even though as you pointed out, I still have my security clearances. I am not privy to any intelligence. I just know that the Russians interfered significantly in the 2016 election, they have interfered in other elections. It's something that they've done for decades. With the expansion and the advent of the digital era and the digital domain, there are just so many more opportunities for Russian Intelligence Services to become involved, particularly on the influence operation side.

John Brennan:

When I was in government, when I was at CIA, but even before that, when I was at the White House I saw ample evidence of the Russian services, using their sophisticated cyber capabilities to navigate into systems, electrical systems, and other systems, to try to understand exactly what was going on, try to collect intelligence.

John Brennan:

And as we know in the case of the 2016, go in and steal emails from the Democratic National Committee Server and the DCCC, and release those emails as a way to try to discredit Hillary Clinton, and advance the prospects of Donald Trump. Based on what I know about the Russians, and what their druthers would be, as far as the outcome of this election, I think that Vladimir Putin, very much wants Donald Trump to be reelected.

John Brennan:

I can say with confidence that, I believe the Russians are continuing to engage in those influence operations. They may be doing some technical intrusions as a way to collect intelligence, find out what they can. They may also be looking for compromising information they can put out, but I think the

emphasis of their effort is going to be on the influence operations, utilizing social media platforms and other means.

Ian Williams:

You're quite clear that Putin, was very much in favor of Donald Trump winning the election for his own reasons, whatever they were, and was very much against Hillary Clinton. Can you apart from sort of personal prejudice, it's difficult to consider the geo strategic balance. I mean, did they want the US to be run by an incompetent, who was a divisive incompetent, or did they want somebody who was, well, at least technically competent, whatever else do you think about that?

John Brennan:

Well, I think Vladimir Putin, views the US Russia relationship pretty much in a zero-sum game. And so the more that the United States is dysfunctional, and is internally focused, and divided, the less able to the United States is to conduct its, I think, global leadership role on some very important issues around the globe.

John Brennan:

I do think that Vladimir Putin has a clear preference for individuals who are willing to engage in a transactional relationship. As I say in the memoir, Putin has shown a proclivity to favor businessmen who go into politics because businessmen will engage in those types of deals, a Berlusconi in Italy, Helmut Kohl in Germany and others. And those leaders who aren't pursuing policies based on principles, and sort of ethics, and advocacy of the expansion and strengthening of the liberal democratic order around the globe, which I think is what Hillary Clinton was very much interested in.

John Brennan:

Donald Trump who is more interested in advancing a personal political agenda, including financial, would be more likely to engage in this transactional relationship with Russia. I think there were a combination of reasons, but as you point out the fact that Donald Trump wasn't experienced in governance, didn't have the background, or really an appreciation of the US role in global events. I think it made Putin much more likely to support someone like that who was basically an amateur on the world stage, as opposed to a Hillary Clinton who is tough and principled. And I think is somebody who has obviously a lot of experience on that global stage.

Ian Williams:

You mentioned for example, that one of the reasons for the animus of Putin, against the Clintons, was that Bill Clinton had exited the stage from Putin's debut at the UN General Assembly, and took off the audience with him, and Putin sort of harbored this grudge. And it struck me, this is very Trumpian attitude. I thought Putin was above this type of a personal grudge, but you're saying no, that this would be something that wounded them and he would nurse grudges about it.

John Brennan:

Well, I think Putin like a lot of other authoritarian leaders, often very sensitive to image, and also believes in getting his rivals and opponents. Now, remember this was Putin's inaugural appearance at the General Assembly, and here is Bill Clinton, the statesman who was just leaving office that year. And I think he really felt upstate.

John Brennan:

I do think he felt abused in some respects by the Clintons. But then I also point out that he very much objected to Hillary Clinton, challenging the integrity and the fairness of some of the elections in Russia when she was Secretary of State. I just used that example of Clinton at the UN, as a way to show that people like Putin, despite their strength and political power, there's still a pettiness to them. But I think Trump has shown over and over again.

Ian Williams:

Well, Sandra Miller asks a similar question to Marcos [inaudible 00:17:27]. Do you think there'd be an intrusion of a foreign country in this election? Basically this is the question. Do you think there'll be a scandal like WikiLeaks a couple of days before November the third? And Sandra says that this happened in France and in the USA. Do you think that someone somewhere has an envelope about to rush out to Fox to hit the headlines, or have we already seen it with the Giuliani revelations about Biden emails?

John Brennan:

Yes. And there's some revelations today about Giuliani being on tape or a video with the Borat, the active director who's caught him in some compromising sort of situations. But I believe that Donald Trump probably still has a few tricks up his sleeve. The challenge though, for him and Republicans at this point is that so many Americans have already voted. And so the window is closing rather quickly, as far as those whose votes are yet to be cast.

John Brennan:

But I would expect that in the remaining 13 days or so before the election, you're going to see more things come out, allegations, Trump was making more allegations today and Twitter. I wouldn't be surprised if a William Barr, the Attorney General who seems that he is willing to do some of Trump's bidding might also do something. Trump is pushing Bar to take action against Biden and others.

John Brennan:

The [inaudible 00:18:55] surprises, I think is still to come. I don't know how dramatic they will be. I wouldn't be surprised if maybe the Russians or others who want to see Trump reelected, might opt to do something. But I think that again, the opportunity to influence votes is diminishing.

Ian Williams:

The opportunity to surprise people is diminishing, the idea a few years ago that we'd see a presidential candidate, or even a president continually calling for locking up his opponents is it's always beyond surprise. And yet we're accepting this as a normality now.

John Brennan:

Please don't remind me Ian, just how surreal the current environment is, because it really is quite abnormal. And I shake my head. I'm just hoping we'll be able to get through this chapter as quickly as possible because it is an aberration.

Ian Williams:

It is almost like living through a movie by barrettes, isn't it? As far as the location. Robert Popper, who is from the area he wants to know. I'm not sure whether you can answer, did the CIA collaborate with the

Albanian Intelligence regarding Bin Laden, and does the CIA any Russian danger to the Balkans in Albania?

John Brennan:

I visited Albania in fact in, I think it was early December of 2016. It was one of my last foreign visits, because that little country with a little intelligence service was doing some very important things, not just on the tourism front, but also trying to stand up to the Russians. And I wanted to go and pay a visit and thank them for what they were doing.

John Brennan:

And the CIA works very closely with a lot of services around the world, as good as CIA is, we have to rely on the capabilities, the access of other services that have people in certain places, and given the rise of extremism and terrorism in the Balkans, and the Albanians were able to, I think, provide some important help, not just for us, but also to the surrounding countries. Albania was a partner.

Ian Williams:

That's the [inaudible 00:21:02], isn't it there? Your equivalents. I remembered that. [inaudible 00:21:08], wants to know whether you ... What you think about the Sahel region and what could be done better there. The Sahel might have been ... Was it? it was on your patch, wasn't it? It was beginning.

John Brennan:

Well, yes, it was. And I look and I think about the Sahel in that part of the World in Africa, there are so many issues, not just in terms of terrorism, and how a lot of these extremists violent groups have taken advantage of the impoverishment in that area, and have been able to attract people into their groups and organizations.

John Brennan:

But also one of the things that I continue to hope on, that I see as one of the most urgent national security issues for the United States, and for the global community is climate change. And how the continued change in global climate, and rising temperatures, and justification, as well as the impact on weather patterns also leads to those migrations across countries, across regions, having tremendous dislocations on employment, on politics, on societies and cultures.

John Brennan:

I do think that Africa is one of the ... I don't want to say it's a neglected area, because there is a lot of attention on it, but I do think that as we look out over the next decade or so, I believe the United States in particular has the responsibility to be working with some of our partners, and allies around the world to address some of these issues that continue to fester in this the Sahel region, and try to arrest the growth, whether it be terrorism, or whether it be climate change, because the window is quickly closing and the ability to really try to reverse some of these trends.

Ian Williams:

An area that you talked of, because one of the things that intrigued me was that you rose that far, and you were ... I remember in the Old State Department presumably not in the CIA, to be an Arabist, to be

able to speak Arabic was a blot on your career. It was assumed you'd automatically be pro Arab and anti Israeli.

Ian Williams:

I personally know people in the state department whose career suffered, because they studied Arabic. Yet you studied Arabic, you were there in Saudi Arabia, you were there in Lebanon, and what you knew MMB, but I got the impression that you were afflicted, even though you've made a good reasoning for what happened in Syria under ... Wasn't there something that Obama could have actually done to stop the Russians and Damascus crushing the opposition under foot?

John Brennan:

I am proud of my Arabist credentials, having studied in Cairo first, in amidst '70s, and then working and living in the Middle East, and being very sympathetic to the plight of a lot of Arab peoples, whether they had some impoverishment in places like Yemen, or failure to realize their rights in Palestine. But as you point out Syria, it was one of the real tragedies of the Obama administration that we weren't able to really stop the spread of ISOL, Islamic extremism there.

John Brennan:

And it was a combination of factors that led to that snowballing effect, the Arab spring started, and then we saw that US Forces were removed from Iraq, which then contributed to the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces that allowed Al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria to grow. And at the time when the United States was trying to support some of these rebel movements that were pushing against authoritarian leaders like Assad.

John Brennan:

Then we also had to contend with increasing extremists, and terrorists coloration to some of these movements and which allowed, I think, the Syrians and the Russians then to take advantage of those splits. And it made it, I think, more difficult for the United States to really support these rebel groups that span the spectrum from secular free Syrian army types all the way to those extremist elements.

John Brennan:

I tried working with counterparts. I talk about in the book how I tried to work with the Russians, tried to reach some ceasefire agreements there with them, only to have the Russians just renege on a lot of those agreements. But when I look at the Middle East, whether it be Syria, or places in Iraq, Yemen as well as Somalia, or the areas, there are still a lot of challenge ahead the United States, as well as for those governments.

John Brennan:

And in fact, in the book, I talk about how I believe maybe Yemen should be given over to some type of international receivership, because there's just no way that a government there has the resource capability to get that country on a better track anytime soon.

Ian Williams:

Now, I've been to Yemen several times, it's a beautiful place, fascinating place. But going on from Syria, what did you think, having done all of this, the CIA was deeply involved. As I understand it and you



correct me if I've got the details wrong, but some of the rendition at the time of the Guantanamo, we were contracting the torture, sorry, the enhanced interrogation out to Bashar al-Assad.

Ian Williams:

Even though of course, Moscow and the leftist of the world claimed that the plots against him was a CIA plot later, and that he was staunch anti imperialist. This is a pretty complex situation where everybody has a knife and everybody else's back, but can you simplify this in any way?

John Brennan:

Yeah, I don't think the CIA of United States ever outsourced in Syria, any of that type of activity, never. CIA had worked with a number of countries around the world. Some of it has come out and then some of it still remains classified, but we never worked with the Syrians or the Iraqis in terms of any of those detention facilities, or the application of enhanced interrogation techniques.

John Brennan:

There were facilities located in different places around the world, and it was CIA officers alone who actually detained, and then conducted those interrogation sessions. But you're absolutely right, Bashar al-Assad, is one of the most brutal and ruthless dictators, and what he did to some of those Syrian nationals who were rising up against them was just horrific.

John Brennan:

And yes, CIA worked with the State Department. We tried to gain to give support of different types to the rebel groups, but Syria was a Sovereign State. It asked for additional support from Russia, and Russia provided that support in terms of personnel, military equipment, as well as Russian aircraft, and missiles that were striking against the rebel group.

John Brennan:

At the time during the Obama administration, it was decided that we weren't going to engage in a war with Russia, which ultimately I think would have happened in Syria. And so unfortunately the rebel movement petered out.

Ian Williams:

Well, we've got moved on to the question from Roy Zola, from Rudaw TV, a Kurdish station. What do you think of President Trump's decision to abandon the Kurds? I know this caused a lot of heartache in the military, and the defense, and intelligence establishment.

John Brennan:

It was an unconscionable application of leadership, and also it sent a clear signal to our friends and partners and allies around the world that you really can't rely on the United States. And so reneging basically on a lot of the commitments that we gave to our Syrian Kurdish brothers and sisters who spilled a lot of blood, and were really responsible for turning back ISIS at some critical junctures.

John Brennan:

They were the fighting that did it for us. And then to feel as though, Trump came in and ... Then I don't need to work with you anymore. It just really undermined any type of credibility the United States might

have in terms of our word. In addition, when we were reneged on the Paris Climate Accords, and we reneged on our commitment to the joint comprehensive plan of action, the Iranian Nuclear Weapons Deal, that also sends a signal, not just to allies and partners, that you can't count us anymore.

John Brennan:

But why should Kim Jong Un, in North Korea enter in any type of agreement with the United States, if he believes that it's going to be torn up once administrations change, or when Trump has a change of heart or mind.

Ian Williams:

It's that expedient part of it which is sort of quite frightening. Oh, that was yesterday's deal, I mean, it really is like the behavior of [inaudible 00:30:31]. Yes, he was our friend, but this time we'll take him out.

John Brennan:

[inaudible 00:30:34] finding more principals quite frankly, than Donald Trump.

Ian Williams:

That's certainly comes over your character assessment of the president, which I'm certainly not going to disagree with.

John Brennan:

He has no character, as far as I'm concerned, and I have been quite outspoken about it. So it's not as though I'm revealing any secrets here.

Ian Williams:

Yes. Well, I've got some record on this, he was one of the first subjects that I wrote about when I came to New York 30 years ago, and I wrote the team was a crooked, a failure at business. And each passing year has vindicated my assessments.

John Brennan:

He's been on your point ever since, absolutely.

Ian Williams:

Yes. Simon [inaudible 00:31:16], wants to know, has China basically filled the vacuum that's created by Trump's policy, and adversarial relations. I mean, this is a key issue, because one of the points you're making is that like size sovereignty doesn't matter. And you were talking about the sovereignty of Syria, and even of Yemen, and Somalia as being sort of obstacles for having a free range there.

Ian Williams:

What about the question of, how do we approach Taiwan? Taiwan, we are half recognized Taiwan to be part of China, but then recognize that it's independent jurisdiction. And we have the whole South China sea. This is obviously a flashpoint with China at some point, is Donald Trump going to decide that this is not flashpoint, he wants to bother having let's throw it away.

John Brennan:

Yeah, who knows what Donald Trump is thinking? And I'm just hoping he's not going to have another four more years to implement his thinking as erratic as it is? I think the United States is having a hard time reckoning that China is a world power on the economic front. And it's good that the United States is confronting China in terms of trying to get its trade and commercial relations on a more even keel, when China, ascended in the WTO 20 years ago, or so.

John Brennan:

It was a developing nation, now it's no longer, There needs to be some reckoning and resolving of some of those inequities right now. But there are areas where we can cooperate with China. There are areas where we're going to be in confrontation with China, but I do think it's the question posed that China and Russia and other States are looking for opportunities in the global stage as the United States has receded from a lot of its traditional role and responsibilities.

John Brennan:

And it's not just on the bilateral front, although China with its belt and road initiative is really looking for ways that it can offset some of that previous US influence, as well as assistance with its own influence and its money. It's also augmenting that belt and road now are stretch with military facilities, Naval facilities, and support to intelligence, and security services.

John Brennan:

And United States is also receding from a lot of its responsibilities in the multilateral institutions, whether it's the UN or WHO, and as the US takes a step back, China and Russia now are trying to in fact, assume a lot of those responsibilities. I do think that the global stage is very dynamic, in terms of this dance of the superpowers. Russia, the United States, China.

John Brennan:

And there are a lot of moving parts, as well as with the EU. And given that the United Kingdom is moving out of the EU now. That's it's fertile ground for additional sort of moves. Now, I do believe that the next several years are going to be challenging ones with China, or you pointed out Taiwan, we already have the issue of Hong Kong, and how that is ... The tensions there.

John Brennan:

But I am increasingly concerned that Taiwan is going to rear its head as an issue. And as I think you were inferring, the United States position on Taiwan is sort of unclear. At what point are we going to tangibly come to the defense of Taiwan, if China does decide to put additional military pressure on it. And we see things happening inside of Taiwan right now with the KMT, and others that are really asserting themselves more aggressively, and China's reacting now with military posturing.

John Brennan:

So whether or not it's a Trump second term, or a Biden first term, I think this is one of the things that Moscow, the United States, and China will have to have continued discussions of as well as with Taiwan. And I think that three-way relationship or lack thereof in some respects, will need to evolve in the coming years to avoid what could be a very, very messy and bloody show down.

Ian Williams:

Well, there is this, it's always a judgment call, isn't it? Yeah. To what extent do you accommodate China to show goodwill? And to what extent do you kowtow. And unfortunately the Chinese historically have tended to prefer the kowtow. [crosstalk 00:35:45] and they get results when they stand up to them, but then it's rare.

John Brennan:

The Chinese have expanded their military and Naval presence, certainly in the South China, East China seas, they are now saying that why should the United States have that dominant Naval power in the Western Pacific for so long? This is their sort of area of Germany. And so their capabilities have increased significantly.

John Brennan:

And the US freedom of navigation in these areas of our Naval forces, is not what it was a few years ago, because of these outcroppings and atolls that they have put airfields, and artillery batteries, and other things on. They're better positioned to make a serious play if they want to increase pressure on Taiwan or other countries. That's why I traveled to Asia a number of times in the last year or two when I was director.

John Brennan:

And a lot of those States in the area were really pleading with the United States to go forward with the Trans Pacific Partnership, the TPP, to provide a counterweight to that very heavy Chinese breath, economic breath, as well as military breath on their necks. And the fact that the United States moved away from the TPP, really has left a lot of these smaller States, very vulnerable to increasing Chinese pressure.

Ian Williams:

As you pointed out the instability is that everybody wants the US to go nose-to-nose to keep China away. But you don't want to actually punch them in the nose, because the collateral damage is World War III, which most of us don't want, the [inaudible 00:37:18] people might, but the rest of us don't.

John Brennan:

Right.

Ian Williams:

What about the issues of the politicization, Andrew Fianno, wants to know what's your opinion on the politicization of the CIA and the Secret Service? Is it unavoidable? Is this part of his history, or is another way to handle the relationship with the White House and Congress?

John Brennan:

Well, I think there are two issues that for me are very worrisome. The first one, when you talk about politicization, I see that mainly happening at the Director of National Intelligence Level. This is John Ratcliffe, who is the Director of National Intelligence, and appointee from Donald Trump. And he's a very strong hyper-partisan, who have recently selectively released and declassified information, including my

handwritten notes to make it appear as though Hillary Clinton was plotting against Donald Trump, and put together this Russian interference hoax.

John Brennan:

And it's very unfortunate that John Ratcliffe, and his predecessor, the acting director, Richard Grinnell have politicized that role, because one of the things that the intelligence community has always prided itself on, was that it was going to stay out of that political frame. It was going to remain nonpartisan, apolitical and be the objective conveyors of the truth.

John Brennan:

John Ratcliffe, has totally demolished that reputation as well as the reality. That's one area I'm worried about that politicization. I wouldn't say CIA has been politicized like that, although I'm concerned that at least from what I can gather from press reports, as well as from some people I've talked to, is that the CIA has now become much more reluctant to bring forward intelligence, and analysis that might be at odds with what Trump's preferences, and druthers are.

John Brennan:

And so that the CIA's central role, and Intelligence Community central role in the policy formulation process is no longer there. It's clear that Donald Trump continues to be dismissive of that intelligence, he denigrates the profession and the professionals, he speaks ill of the law enforcement and other folks. And so it really I think has pretty much demoralize the ranks, because if your first customer is not paying attention to what you do, then what contribution are you making? And why are you making all these sacrifices?

John Brennan:

It's politicization by some quarters, and then also it's the receding of that role. And I am concerned that the CIA, and the Intelligence Community are not playing that very important role in that policy formulation process. Because when I was CIA Director, at every meeting at the White House that I attended along with Jim Clapper, who was the director of national intelligence, every policy discussion would start off with an intelligence briefing.

John Brennan:

That intelligence briefing would set the stage for the policy discussion, and looking at the various options. If that process is not going that way, and if Donald Trump is more ... If his decisions are triggered by his gut and his instinct, or what he believes is in his best political interests, US National Security interests, and global stability are being very ill served.

Ian Williams:

I think it was the old Persian Kings who used to have somebody, must've been the least sought after job in the empire was to stand next to the King and whisper in his ear, "Remember that all but mortal," I mean, I understand you're in a safe location in Northern Virginia, because you have hinted to him that he is not omniscient several times.

Ian Williams:

And that leads in Jeff Gold, has pointed out that in lots of domestic departments, right away through the government civil service, people who actually know things, the scientists, the technical institute people have been sidelined, have been reviled, have been driven out. We just have to see the Dr. Fuaci, almost bent at the stake outside the White House to see the type of things that's going on.

Ian Williams:

Has this has been happening in the CIA and the Intelligence Services, or that the people who should be producing rational estimates say about climate change, as you mentioned, it's obviously a subject you're aware of the importance of. Are people still prepared to put their head above the parapet and say, "Sea level rise is going to do this to New York, do this to Washington, we'll have this consequence," or are they going to get their heads below the parapet, in case they end up at the stake?

John Brennan:

Well, that's where it really is up to the leadership of these organizations, because a lot of folks were working in the trenches of CIA or other organizations. They don't have the opportunity to go to the White House, or see Donald Trump. And if Donald Trump is not even getting briefings, or even reading the things, such as the President's Daily Brief, the PDB that has served presidents for the last 70 years, or 60 years.

John Brennan:

The daily intelligence that presidents need in order to understand what's going on in the world. But if he's not even reading that, it takes away the enthusiasm with a drive for individuals who put that together, or who collect those secrets abroad at great risk and danger to push it forward. I am hoping that the senior leaders are going to carry on the CIA tradition, which is delivering truth to power.

John Brennan:

And the lobby of the CIA headquarters is, you should know the truth and truth shall set you free. That's sort of the mantra of CIA, is to try to bring the truth as best we can discern it to the policymakers. But if the number one customer is ignoring that, that really, I think, sends a very, very bad signal. And I do know that a number of people have decided to leave, because they don't see the merit any longer in doing this.

John Brennan:

And I'm hoping that's going to reverse, I do believe that the intelligence law enforcement communities are resilient, and that they will rebound, but I must tell you that it has been a very demoralizing what they've gone through the last several years.

Ian Williams:

I have this question for Michaels [inaudible 00:43:46], which I like to broaden out a bit, what can the CIA do to quell some of the tremors in the Middle East? And can the CIA act to mediate some of the issues between governments? And I'd like to rephrase it more and please pick that one up and run with it.

Ian Williams:

But at one time, the United States had more credibility in the sense it's word was it's bond, that if it came in and said it would do something, it had a reasonable chance of happening. It wasn't always pure

or a tartan hunt, but at the moment, what would you say the prospects of the US being an honest broker, or accept as an honest broker, a referee, an umpire in these internecine conflicts? I mean, we haven't even got to Turkey, and Iraq, and the others yet the ones that are spinning round, and people are knifing each other in the back at [inaudible 00:44:41].

John Brennan:

Well, I think our perceived role as honest broker has been virtually demolished in the eyes of many in the Middle East. When the United States decided to move its embassy to Jerusalem, contrary to our position, or diplomatic positions over the last 70 years or more. The fact that we have ended assistance to the Palestinians.

John Brennan:

There's just so many things now that I think have really undermined any ability for United States to be that honest broker, for example, between the Israelis and the Palestinians. I do believe that the United States is seen now more as this independent actor, that's going to decide to do what it wants when it wants, despite all the approval that was given by a lot of folks, to the decision to kill Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds Force in Iran.

John Brennan:

I think that was the wrong decision. Qasem Soleimani, certainly had a lot of blood on his hands, but he was a Sovereign Official or a Senior Official of a Sovereign Country. And a country that the United States is not at war with. It's different than a terrorist, like a Bin Laden or somebody else who are illegitimate combatant.

Ian Williams:

It's like a drone strike on the Director of the CIA outside his headquarters.

John Brennan:

Well, that's right. What's the stop another country from is deciding, well, I don't like that government official in that country, so I'm going to take them out. And so the United States seem to just totally flouted international law, norms and standards, because it could, and that I think sets a very bad precedent, and sends a very bad signal about the United States.

John Brennan:

Again, what the United States used to stand for, which was to uphold some International Laws and Standards. Now again, the United States was criticized for the vacation of Iraq and other things. But I think the perception was the United States sometimes lost track of where it was going, but overall was really trying to be a force for good. But I just I'm concerned that it's decision to be much more arbitrary in some of its actions and decisions, really have taken away prospects for it to serve as that honest broker in that peacemaking role.

Ian Williams:

Well, Churchill who made quite a lot of mistakes himself said that, famously that the US will eventually do the right thing after it's tried only. [crosstalk 00:47:19]. We could do that. Looking at the Middle East, from your assessment as an Arabist, the CIA Intelligence, is the squeeze on the UAE and Bahrain, these

obscure family businesses along the Gulf, because that's what they are. They're not nation States, most of their population are not even nationals. But they're like family businesses, is winning their support for the Trump peace initiative. Is this their own death warrant in the long run do you think? Or is it actually going to enhance the peace treaty?

John Brennan:

Well, I am in favor of certainly have improved relations, and the establishment of relations between Arab States and Israel. But I do believe it needs to be part of a movement toward addressing very legitimate Palestinian interests and goals. And unfortunately, Bibi Netanyahu who's sort of the authoritarian leader right now.

Ian Williams:

The Donald Trump of Israel.

John Brennan:

Yes, he really is. And the fact that he was going to just, again, arbitrarily annex territories in the West Bank, and then because Mohammed Zayed, of the UAE was willing to establish relations, Netanyahu decided to suspend that action. But not take it off the table completely, I think this is a way for the Emiratis, as well as the Bahrainis, to bring gifts to the Trump administration, because I think they have benefited just the way Mohammed Salmaan, MBS in Saudi Arabia has benefited from having a benefactor in the White House who allows this authoritarianism to thrive in many countries.

John Brennan:

I do believe that we may see some other authoritarian leaders bringing gifts. Trump just was able to get Sudan to agree to certain conditions so that Sudan would be taken off the terrorist watch list, State Sponsored Tourism list. I liked the idea of movement to bring the Middle East together, and to stop some of these age old tensions and animosities. But the loser in this really seems to be the Palestinian people.

John Brennan:

Bibi Netanyahu has never had any intention of pursuing a two state solution, but the Palestinian people really deserve to be able to have a state called their own. They don't present any threat to the future of the Israeli State.

Ian Williams:

As promised by the world in the United States for the last 50 years-

John Brennan:

Right. And one of the questions also is, can of CIA play this broker role? I used to when I would travel out to the Middle East, and I go to Israel, and I go to the Palestine to Ramallah. I would meet with my Palestinian counterparts, I meet with my Israeli counterparts, I would encourage them to ignore the political winds that might be blowing, that they need to cooperate, they need to ensure that terrorism extremism is not going to take further route in these areas.

John Brennan:



And I think CIA can play that role with different services and intelligence agencies in the area, because CIA is supposed to be seen as a political. And there have been cases over the years where CIA has been a substitute for diplomatic channels, and when after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in the early 1990s, and King Hussein of Jordan sided with the Iraqis, it really caused a breach in the US Jordanian relationship.

John Brennan:

It was the intelligence relationship between the CIA and Jordanian Intelligence, that was used to maintain a relationship, and to pass messages, and to keep that relationship, that bilat relationship from completely falling apart. So yes, intelligence services can play a very important role during times of crisis or during times of particular tension.

Ian Williams:

All right. You've got a busy schedule. You've got assassins waiting outside for you probably.

John Brennan:

[inaudible 00:51:27] not.

Ian Williams:

We don't want to disrupt your a timetable. I'd like to thank you, this has been a very candid, obviously a principled discussion as well, which will come as a shock. You're not everybody's spymaster, it would appear and-

John Brennan:

Including some people within the CIA, I think there are a lot of people who advocate for much more aggressive CIA role, including on the COVID action front. And as I say in my book, there are things that I just would not countenance at all. And I tried to ensure that there's going to be sort of ethical spying, ethical intelligence, and that we were going to live up to the values of what America stands for in the 21st century. I can't correct the history of CIA's actions in the past, but while I was there, I could help to shape it's future course.

Ian Williams:

You might remember my old friend Robin Cook, who was the foreign secretary in Britain, and he was reported as saying that foreign policy should be ethical. And he said, "No, I didn't. I said there should be an ethical dimension," which is a hell of a lot of caveats at the time you were talking about it.

Ian Williams:

I'd really like to thank you, I like to urge people to buy the book, to read it, to look further and to use it for their commentary on everything from Russia to the Middle East. And the book is, Undaunted, and the undaunted author is in front of us. And they need to there ... They need to sell books, it's a terrible life being an author, not just pile them in warehouses and wait until they go fissionable.

John Brennan:

I'm a first time author too, I have no background or reputation to rely on.

This transcript was exported on Oct 22, 2020 - view latest version [here](#).

Ian Williams:

I'd like to thank you very much, I'd like to welcome you back again at some point. And just one quick reminder for everybody, as part of the Trump administration, well, maybe it is maybe it isn't, but the IVS is which bring foreign journalists to this country are under threat. There's a threat to revise them so that they will only be for 240 days.

Ian Williams:

Foreign journalists here will have to apply every 240 days for renewal. We're all fighting this, and we're holding a Zoom meeting next Monday at which to discuss it. We have a very short window of opportunity to raise our questions with the Department of Homeland Security about this. It is quite concerning, it changes the whole basis on which information workers, media workers have come the US for many years.

Ian Williams:

Please check on our site for the Zoom meeting next Monday, which we will be collating your responses. And you're welcome to come to that Director, Brennan and lend us your expertise on how to get to Homeland Security, and to persuade them by federal foul means. But once again-

John Brennan:

[inaudible 00:54:13].

Ian Williams:

Thank you very much. Thank you Director, Brennan. Thank you everybody. See you again soon, I hope.

John Brennan:

Take care.