owens: Thanks for being here to join us today. I wanted to start with something that you and I talked about offline, the institutional ethical culture of the Agency from your perspective both as a senior administrator and as an officer in the clandestine. What is the framework by which ethics is understood in the agency?

carle: Well, one of the paradoxes, and challenges, and draws, I would say, of the career and the profession is the intrinsic tension between the need to find officers or staffers who have the highest, most rigorous ethical standards as part of their natures, and the requirements of a job whose essence is to subvert other people’s ethical obligations.

It’s very stimulating. One doesn’t feel the stress most of the time, day to day. Those who do—and many do because, if you’re a thinking person, it is an immediate, present challenge—will resign, because they’re not comfortable in such a perverse way of life. So those who can get past that obstacle either are morally flexible or stronger of character, and both things might be true simultaneously. That’s not a facetious comment, really.

This is slightly tangential, but in my first assignment, which lasted nearly five years, at one point or another I worked with five other first-tour officers. We were junior officers; so there were six of us, counting myself. At the end of those five years, the five other officers had resigned. I was the only one who didn’t. And for 25 years I’ve always made the joke that I was the only one good enough to make it through. You could also say that I was the only one not strong enough to be decisive and get out and do something better. I think maybe both things are true.

owens: I’m interested in the particular virtues that are fostered within tight organizational cultures, and it seems there is a clear distinction between the operational staff and the analytic staff in the Agency.

carle: It’s due to personality types. But I would not say there are different virtues expected from analysts or from operations officers, if by virtues we mean a moral compass. There is a clear distinction, though, I would agree, if by virtues you mean attributes, facility with engaging in morally contradictory behavior—one has to tell oneself, behavior in the pursuit of national interest is a more compelling imperative than personal morality. That is a tough equilibrium.
to sustain, and that is a difference in function, and of personality type and expectation, between the analytical side, which has a simpler moral posture, and the operations side, which must inhabit forever this super-charged, hypocritical, and yet simultaneously higher and more base moral universe.

**Owens:** And now that you’ve left the Agency, what stays with you from that ethical culture, that capability that you have developed to hold this paradox together?

**Carle:** What carries—what have I taken away with me? I don’t know that I—

**Owens:** Are you lying to me right now?

**Carle:** Everyone always says that. There’s some Schrodinger’s cat kind of dilemma, where if you say you’re a liar, or you’re known to be a liar, then you can never really be believed by anybody, and there’s nothing you can do about it. I don’t know that I have taken anything away with me. By that I mean that I am the person who went into the agency. I don’t know that I have taken anything away with respect to how to lie, or how to be a man of integrity, or something like that? The effects on me have been numerous—I’m aware of many, and probably unaware of others.

Have I taken anything away with respect to how to lie, or how to be a man of integrity, or something like that? The effects on me have been numerous—I’m aware of many, and probably unaware of others. Those are changes, but not to my moral sense. The cumulative cost emotionally, I think, is real. I’m the same person. I don’t think I’m more cynical. But it is a very nasty, amoral world. I knew that before starting my career, but when you live it directly, day to day, and that’s your job, I think that wears over time. That’s what I took away. It was twenty-five years of bearing a ceaseless moral challenge and impossible moral burden. Endless conundrum can exhilarate, exalt, and wear simultaneously. I think for a reflective, thinking man, the career has to make you, over time, a bit world-weary.”

We have succeeded as societies in creating, and to a large extent, living by, moral codes. But in the absence of an authority and sanction, moral codes are honored in the breach, and only when it serves your purpose. The agency is quite open about that, and that’s a fact. It’s cruel, but that’s how it is.

**Owens:** To what extent is it possible to have a foreign policy that reflects ethical principles? If you’re suggesting that it’s an amoral world out there without a policeman or without a priest who’s globally seeking to regulate these norms, to what extent is it possible to have a foreign policy that reflects American values that one might consider to be morally grounded?

**Carle:** You can do it if a couple of conditions are met. One, if you are strong enough that you can act morally without being a victim of your own principles. If you are weak, but principled, and someone else is strong, you will be like the island of Melos in the Peloponnesian War, and you will—

**Owens:** Suffer what you will.

**Carle:** You’ll suffer the will of the stronger party. That is the case. So if you’re strong enough, then you can act according to your principles. We’ve seen that with the pax Americana where, largely speaking, the US has abided by and created the international norms—Western norms, but American ones—because it is in our self-interest as well as general interest to do so. And, we’re strong enough to impose our will, for the most part. If you don’t have such strength, then you can’t necessarily abide by your principles.

Or, what happens is—not to put too crude a point on it—the state of nature. In the absence of some authority, there will be people acting in their own interests. And at best, you will then have the tragedy of the commons, where everyone acts in their self-interest without attempting to harm someone else, leading to collective disaster. Or, you have people maneuvering to pursue their own ends
at the expense of others, and it then will almost inevitably devolve to a zero-sum game. It needn’t, but in the absence of some authority, it will.

**OWENS:** Shifting just a little bit, last night your talk was on the so-called global war on terror. And I wonder if you might continue that reflection on the merits or demerits of the metaphor, and the value of the metaphor in terms of our understanding the world around us, past and present?

**CARLE:** It’s a reflexive thing for a senior American politician to speak of the War on X or Y. We’ve been fighting the war on drugs since President Nixon. I’ll note what most every other person, except for the proponents of it, will note. This is literally true: Every effort by every federal, state and local authority, since 1972 in the war on drugs has had no measurable effect on the availability or the cost of drugs on the streets in the United States. So one could argue, I think convincingly, that every penny we have spent has been wasted.

**OWENS:** You could argue that it could have been worse.

**CARLE:** Costs could have been lower, I suppose. Have we been so clever to fine-tune our efforts to maintain a steady price? No, I think it’s still largely market-driven. The FBI and customs authorities estimate that 90% of the drugs sent from outside the United States succeed in reaching the United States. So, as far as its usefulness as a metaphor? I think it’s a simple expression that captures an effort, but is probably not particularly subtle, or nuanced, or relevant to specific problems.

**OWENS:** In your talk last night, you reminded folks that we’ve moved away from that metaphor, and that is a positive thing, in your view, right?

**CARLE:** Absolutely. The problem with a crisis is that nuance is always viewed as weakness. And even if it isn’t viewed as weakness, the famous center can never hold, and polarization is almost inevitable in a mortal conflict. The Obama administration, in rejecting the global war on terror concept, has reintroduced nuance to the consideration of specific challenges. That is a good thing. Nuance is subtler, and at least offers the possibility of a better response to specific challenges than a reflexive, polarized, one-size-fits-all strategy of “I will crush my opponents.”

**OWENS:** I wonder if the abandonment of this language by the administration signals a different understanding of justification. A claim to war brings with it a certain set of moral and legal standards by which we engage other peoples who are on the other side of that war. And shifting to a different metaphor disenages that language in some sense.

**CARLE:** I think that’s too hopeful a characterization of what the Obama administration has done. They are wielding national power to serve national interest as they understand it, and I think they’re doing it well. But I don’t think they’re doing it with a greater scope for moral foundation in their actions. It’s a more nuanced approach to pursuing national interest, period. I think the administration has been quite aggressive and ruthless when officials feel that it is useful to do so, and that’s as far as their reasoning goes. I don’t think that they’re seeking a greater ethical terrain or foundation. But I would affirm that dealing firmly with challenges through a nuanced understanding of facts, rather than of *a priori* convictions, which bear only passing relation to the facts around us, itself constitutes a significant moral progression in fulfilling one’s obligations as a public servant from the destructive moral hypocrisy and factual delusions that preceded the Obama administration.
Owens: I’m certainly not claiming that the Obama administration is making its counterterrorism decisions first on ethical principle, rather than on national security. But the change in tone changes the argument that they make about the use of force, I think.

Carle: Does it change the argument for the use of force? The Obama administration is more modest and less grandiose in its pretensions. By not identifying all actions as a Manichean struggle for good but as more tactically focused, more directly related to national interest, I think the policy becomes more honest. And, because it is narrower in scope, and probably more consistent, it also becomes less hypocritical.

So the consequences might be, in an ethical sense, more defensible, because they are less grandiose. Modesty becomes ambition, in a paradoxical way. I think that’s a consequence, maybe; and the intent is no longer simply, “Let’s find the bad guys and stop them.”

Owens: Ethicists and just war thinkers are really wrestling with the use of unmanned vehicles and targeted killings. How should we think about all this as other countries develop their own drones and will start to deploy them against our own troops, and potentially our homeland?

Carle: My reaction to the use of drones has been, for me, a natural follow-on to the “enhanced interrogation techniques” crisis. One would imagine from reading my book [The Interrogator] that I have a visceral identification with natural law. That’s not how anyone in the government reasons, really. People try to act honorably. There are very few pure, consciously devious people. Evil is almost always sincere, and therefore an almost totally relative concept. But people are simply trying to accomplish a task, achieve an end, and that’s it. What is the challenge? How can I solve it? There are bad guys we cannot reach, beyond the law, they will harm us. We do nothing, and they’ll kill my sister, or we do something. That’s it.

And then the lawyers come in and say, “Oh my goodness, there are principles involved,” and everyone will get irritated by it and try to conform in some way. The principles aren’t quite applied ex post facto, but they don’t drive the train. I am not, however, troubled by the drone program as I am by torture. I consider it legitimate to use lethal force against

The drone program should not be viewed as the ‘follow on’ to the torture issue. I know how carefully the program was designed, and how significant the efforts to avoid error.

Owens: We heard you say last night that we could have done a better job separating Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from his patrons in Tehran, and that this was, perhaps, a missed opportunity. Or, perhaps events collapsed down upon that opportunity. But give the current situation, what would you do today if you were in charge of US policy?

Carle: I don’t think my perspective has changed, even though the facts on the ground have evolved. For years and years, I argued that we should make it a priority to break Syria away from Iran. It might have failed, but the failure would have cost us nothing, really. A few dollars and some negotiating efforts, or whatever inducements we could have offered to Assad.

I still think that’s true. I think the dangers of a breakup of the society—the fall of the Alawites, the rise of extremists—all of those things are real. Syria is a patchwork country created by the French Foreign Office. That’s a real problem. And, ruthless people, extremists, are more likely to act aggressively and have disproportionate influence compared to moderates. Moderates always are attacked from both sides and tend to be less willing to blow themselves up in town squares, so they often lose the fights.
All of those things are real risks, but I think they are worth running. Frankly, even chaos in Syria, from a strategic perspective—cynical as it might sound—is preferable to having Syria serve as the home base and surrogate staging point for Hezbollah and for Iran. If we create problems for Tehran, that is a good thing for us. So I think that we should have tried to win over Assad long ago, and I’m certain that we have aided and armed the rebels, the Syrian Free Army, against him now.

There will be the well-intentioned professors who leave their tenured positions at schools like Boston College and go back to Syria for the goodness of democracy who will have to struggle against some ruthless, true believing jihadist who has weapons and will cut your throat. That’s one of the almost inevitable challenges, and maybe the moderates will lose, as they so often do. But it’s worth doing. And if we aren’t in the game, we don’t have any say at all. So we should aggressively seek to shape the outcome.

It’s in our interest to get rid of Assad. It is in our interest to seriously diminish Hezbollah. It’s in our interest to take Tehran’s strongest international lever away, or to harm it. So I see great potential benefits, and passivity guarantees that we won’t harm it. So I see great potential benefits, or to the opposition. I think that the Russians will be the big losers long-term. They’re having to fight uphill on this, given resources and the ethnic tensions, and with whom they have identified. So I would tend to think it likely that whatever happens, they will end up probably a loser long-term, if not medium and short.

Who comes out on top, or if anyone does? I don’t know. Joe Biden and many others, including myself, I think, basically got Iraq right, predicting that we’d have three mini-states papered over with a formal name of a unified state, which would guarantee the rise of the Shia.

In Syria, I don’t know. I don’t think anyone can predict that. The Russians will be the big losers long-term. They’re having to fight uphill on this, given resources and the ethnic tensions, and with whom they have identified. So I would tend to think it likely that whatever happens, they will end up probably a loser long-term, if not medium and short.

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In Syria, I don’t know. I don’t think anyone’s an expert can say with confidence how all of these ethnic, political, lethal struggles will play out. I think the Alawites can only be losers in the end because they’re a minority and it would seem likely that the Sunni would be ascendant in some way. However, I couldn’t tell you whether this would be the Sunni of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Sunni of some kind of Salafist or Wahabbist, or the Sunni who likes to read Descartes, of whom there are probably a few.

In chaos, a强man almost is required and unavoidable. That’s been the case historically since colonization has ended, not just in the Arab or Muslim world, but everywhere. Democracy’s a fragile thing that requires a lot of social practices and beliefs that one cannot simply decree.
foreign intelligence officers active in the United States every day, robbing us blind of our economic secrets, our trade secrets, our political secrets, our technological secrets. More than anything, that’s what they care about. They don’t care what a politician says. They care about how Apple has a new code that is a breakthrough. And we can say, well, that’s cheating, and we won’t do it. And then we will end up with no underwear. That’s guaranteed.

OWENS: One last question. What keeps you up at night?

CARLE: Global warming. I argued—I was the acting national intelligence officer, and then the deputy, for transnational threats, strategic challenges to the United States’ national interests and security, and I said we should look at it—it just seemed clear.

There is no question about the danger of global warming, and there hasn’t been for 30 years. It is an existential challenge to the globe. Not to the United States; to the globe. The Defense Department is aware of this, and urges action for our national security. It’s only a few nutcases who are paid—they aren’t nutcases, they are charlatans—who are paid by a few politicians, or parties, or corporations, who argue against the facts.

And the prospect—even in my lifetime, and certainly in the next 80 years—of the sea level rising by three meters is catastrophic. That alone, the rise in temperatures of three degrees Centigrade, so roughly six degrees Fahrenheit, is catastrophic for the globe. It’s an existential challenge. Arguing and devoting all our resources to 300 people who use Semtex, I think, is a pretty crazy focus of our attention when we see that global warming is occurring.

To me, it is clear that that’s our strategic challenge. Because it affects our energy policy, which affects our macro- and microeconomic policy and our fiscal and monetary policy, all of which relates to our standard our living, our strength as a nation. It is the challenge of our era.

[END]