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Update on the ‘War on Terror’: Facts and Fears

Glenn Carle

*Author and Former Deputy National Intelligence Officer for Transnational Threats,
National Intelligence Council*

IN CONVERSATION WITH ERIK OWENS

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

AND SARAH SLATER

RESEARCH ASSISTANT, BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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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. 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.

How does the agency approach it? Quite explicitly and consciously, as an institution it seeks to identify, filter in the hiring process, and then select prospective officers with the highest moral and ethical standards. It's viewed as an absolute requirement and qualification of the job. You don't want to hire the slap-on-the-back used-car salesman who is a liar and a sneak.

And so then the paradox is that they hire someone like me, who was raised to be a good boy and a goody two shoes. I am the Walt Disney kid. Everyone has always teased me about this, and it is fundamentally true. I don't jaywalk. I don't stick gum underneath tables in restaurants. I am a goody two shoes. Lying makes me really ill at ease. It's wrong. But that's the job. So we are actually trained for a long time, how to lie. And then we practice it. So there is always this tension.

Owens: I'm interest 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 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 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.

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. 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. I don't like to say that, and I do not wish to portray operations officers as troubled; but I think reflective officers in this career must pay an emotional price, after years and years.

Owens: By "amoral world", do you mean the world of clandestine services?

Carle: No, everywhere. In a sense, the world of clandestine services is more honest than the rest of the world, because there's no pretense and it deals directly in the exercise of power ruthlessly. National interest is what we serve, and that's supposed to be a higher calling than personal interest. The clandestine world is a world where you hide from authorities and from sanction and there is no authority (except your own masters), that's the only difference from the day-to-day world. The "state of nature" is what characterized human relations and national relations absent a power that can regulate behavior through coercion – through use of the police power. Clandestine services inhabit a state closer to the state of nature than the day-to-day world; but the "amorality" is only greater because there is less acceptance of the external "police" power.

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.

I guess the metaphor of war has an emotional power, and it implies we will marshal all our resources for a good cause. Americans say they only fight wars for good causes, implying some moral reason rather than national interest. We're more hypocritical in that sense, because we act, of course, in our national interest, as we should. But we garb our objectives with moral definitions in a somewhat more sanctimonious way than some other states. We are not worse than other states, and I subscribe—heck, I devoted my life—to American ideals, which have raised up and protected the individual better than any society or government in human history; does that make our actions more moral? No. We just convince ourselves that we are.

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 disengages 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. 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 the 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 carefully defined objectives, with rules of engagement and attention to limiting damage as much as possible, in time of war. I have no problem with using lethal force—killing, if necessary—those who have killed, or seek to kill, us. To me, the drone program raises difficult questions of *habeas corpus* and due process, when it is applied to US citizens; but if they have taken up arms against the United States, then the case becomes much simpler and justifiable. Torture is clearly un-American and illegal and immoral. The drone program is difficult, and calls for sometimes challengeable decisions. But it is the use of lethal force in the protection of American lives and treasure in time of war—even if not so designated by the Congress—and is therefore, to me, legitimate. And it works. The long-term, unintended consequences may be great, and should be assessed very carefully. But 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. Error there will be. The program itself is not Obama’s equivalent to Bush’s torture program. It is a legitimate use of national power.

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 have any influence in the direction of events, so we should have done it a long time ago and still should seek to influence the outcome.

Owens: Indirectly?

Carle: No, well, I will bet you dollars to doughnuts that we're doing that. Turkey is apparently doing it, France is apparently doing it, England is apparently doing it, and the United States probably is as well. "It" being providing technical assistance, if not lethal aid, to the opposition. I think this is a good thing. I'd be willing to go further and just openly support the opponents.

There are any number of significant practical political obstacles to that. How do we get weapons to them, what happens, and so on. But that's all right. I think that I would be fine with doing that. We should come down firmly on the side of getting rid of Assad.

Owens: One last question on Syria. I know you have some extensive knowledge of the region. Do you think there's any likelihood that the country will remain intact in the event that Assad goes, that there won't be a redoubt for Russia, there won't be a redoubt for an Alawite state of some sort there?

Carle: 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.

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 who'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 strongman 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.

Slater: How do you see cyber warfare developing? Was using Stuxnet against Iran a wise decision?

Carle: It's hardly my area of expertise. But for many years, it has been not just a rising concern and focus of the intelligence and national security establishments, but arguably the top one. I used to know some of the statistics on vulnerable points of entry into our domestic software, Internet systems, and it is quite daunting.

The Defense Department and the intelligence community are really active. The executive branch has had any number of initiatives trying to coordinate and divert from terrorism, say, or other things to counter-cyber measures, increasing resources.

We are vulnerable. The government has long been aware and active to try to make sense of our balkanized approach to things.

As far as the wisdom of using a program like Stuxnet, well, you know, warfare is warfare, foreign policy is foreign policy. And whatever capability a human being can develop will be used in some way. Chemical weapons are not used, but they exist and they are debated. They are, nonetheless, a real part of the debate and the considerations of any major foreign policy player. So their absence is a presence, even. Similarly with cyber warfare and space warfare, despite whatever treaties exist. Any capability enters the domain of the possible, and therefore one must consider it in one's strategic and tactical decisions. It's just a fact.

So I have no problem engaging in cyber attacks. I think there is a place for covert action. It's always very dangerous, and the consequences, both foreseen and unforeseen, can often be huge. One should weigh any action very, very carefully. But it's a fact of life.

I know there are many thousands—*many* thousands, that's literally the case—of 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 of living, our strength as a nation. It is the challenge of our era.

Owens: Thank you very much for your time and your insights.