Vigilance is Key
An Interview with Philip Mudd,
CIA/FBI Terrorism Expert

YJIA: You had a long and distinguished career in public service, both with the CIA and later with the FBI. You also served on the National Intelligence Council and the National Security Council and were nominated to serve as the Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis in the Department of Homeland Security. What led you to a career in government?

Mudd: I think the answer to that is the answer no one wants to hear—I needed a job! It was 1984, I was working in a small newsletter publishing company, I had a graduate degree in English Literature, and I couldn’t find work. I wanted to teach high school students how to read and appreciate literature, and I applied to something like thirty-five high schools, and was rejected by every one of them. And my father called me one day and said, “I hear the CIA is hiring people.” So I got my resume together, got in my Chevy Chevette, and drove up to the front gate. The security officer looked at me and said, “What are you doing here?” And I answered, “I need a job!” And that was about it. I didn’t know really what the CIA was, I didn’t know anything about foreign affairs, but I knew that it was an interesting place, I knew that I could stay a couple of years and then leave; and then twenty-five years later, I finally did.

YJIA: That’s quite an unconventional story!

Mudd: Yeah, I have a memoir coming out soon, and that is the lead story: how I came to join the CIA.

YJIA: What is your upcoming book called?

Mudd: Takedown: Inside the Hunt for Al Qaeda.

YJIA: [jokingly] Do you have any good controversy in your book to help drive sales?

Mudd: [laughing] No, and that’s why it’s probably not going to get above 580,000 on the best-sellers list on Amazon. I’m not telling any stories, and I’m not throwing anyone under the bus.

Philip Mudd joined the CIA in 1985 and went on to serve as the Deputy Director of the CIA’s Counter-terrorism Center (CTC) before a subsequent appointment as the first Deputy Director of the FBI’s National Security Service (NSS). He is now the Director of Global Risk for SouthernSun Asset Management.
YJIA: Over the course of your career you have spent much of your time dealing with terrorism. What policies do you feel were the most effective in preventing, or at least mitigating, terrorist attacks? What policies do you think were ineffective or could have been improved?

Mudd: There are a couple of things, I think, that you need to focus on at a strategic level when you’re looking at terrorist groups: (1) leadership; terrorist groups metastasize when they have visionary leadership that allows them to go beyond acting locally and start looking internationally. This is the impact of the al Qaeda-ist ideology. But this extends to groups like Hezbollah. Their leadership has been excellent over time in terms of being visionary and that has helped them expand from where they were twenty-five years ago. (2) safe haven; that is, groups that have the space to plan, train, and raise money. And to eliminate safe haven, you’re talking about things like major military operations in Afghanistan and aiding people like the Yemeni security forces to eliminate the al Qaeda safe haven in Yemen.

YJIA: You have extensive experience in both the CIA and the FBI, two organizations that are often cited in the press as not “getting along” or collaborating effectively. How would you characterize the relationship with regard to counter-terrorism collaboration?

Mudd: I think the cooperation is pretty good; I think it has changed over time. There is one thing to remember, though. In the age of globalization, I suspect that friction between a foreign and domestic security service is not only inevitable, it’s not a bad thing. Remember, over the last thirty years every aspect of crime, terrorism, counter-intelligence, whatever you look at, has become global. That is, if you look at . . . cyber porn, that’s out of Eastern Europe. If you look at human trafficking, that might be Southeast Asia or Latin America. If you look at gangs, that might be Central America. If you look at organized crime, some of that might be originating in Russia or even Albania. So in contrast to two services, foreign and domestic, being able to separate themselves thirty years ago—one had a foreign remit that didn’t really ripple over into the United States that much, one had a domestic mandate that was often purely domestic—today all of that stuff is mixed together.

So I think for the most part they operate pretty well together. They have different ethos, which I think leads to some friction, but my experience at the upper levels was that there were occasional setbacks but they are pretty much tactical. I believe that most of the problems are at the colonel, or GS-15 level, with people who have kind of absorbed long-standing perceptions of their organizations with regard to other organizations, and those long-standing perceptions can persist. Stuff like, “The CIA guy won’t tell me what his name is,” or, “The FBI guy doesn’t know how to run true intelligence operations.” But once you get to the flag officer level you’ve got to get over that kind of stuff, and if you don’t, people will sit around the table and tell you, “Whether you like it or not, you’re going to learn how to deal with that other agency.” That’s pretty much what I saw.
YJIA: You are often cited as being an expert on al Qaeda. How would you describe the continued threat posed by al Qaeda, in terms of capabilities and intent?

Mudd: If you look at the threat from al Qaeda, I think it is greatly diminished from 9/11. That is, their leadership is almost all eliminated. The people who organized that attack are dead or captured; they’re off the battlefield. The affiliated groups that were so prominent from, say, 2001 to 2005, such as Jamat Islamiya in Indonesia, the al Qaeda organization in Saudi Arabia, and even some of the later affiliates like al Shabaab in Somalia, have been gutted.

So we’re doing well, but vigilance is key.

The problem is, we’re not dealing with al Qaeda, we’re dealing with al Qaeda-ism. We’re dealing with a revolutionary movement. It’s kind of like a wildfire; you’ve got to retain focus on it because little sparks can lead to the conflagration growing again. I would look, for example, at Mali and the French engagement there and the support for French engagement. Look at the recent spike in hostage-taking out there. We’ve done a great job against al Qaeda, but you never know whether one of these organizations is going to rise again, because there are still bits of wildfire out there, because of the rise of foreign engagement, and because of the rise of visionary leadership in a local al Qaeda-ish organization. And I think we’re going to have to keep our eye on that ball for some time to come, maybe a decade or more. So we’re doing well, but vigilance is key.

YJIA: That leads very neatly into our next question, which is about Mali. Al Qaeda-affiliated militants operating in northern Mali have seized large swathes of territory and are fighting both the government of Mali and international troops led by the French. What kinds of policy advice might you offer to the leaders of Mali, France, or the United States with regard to how to deal with the burgeoning threat in Mali?

Mudd: I think my perspective would be largely what I see happening on the ground; that is, the footprint of the West should be in support. The French have been in there pretty extensively, but that looks to me like a pretty short-term situation to provide backbone to some of the African forces and make some quick tactical gains in rooting out militants. Militants aren’t really good at holding territory, especially cities. They’re better at running insurgencies out of the bush, which is what I think will happen there. So I think that the longer-term question, after these short-term operations, is how do we provide support—that is logistics, training, intelligence support—to African forces? Can they use that information, technology, advice to root out militants, especially leadership?

To be blunt, we should be worried more about leadership than we are line fighters. Leaders are the ones who tell line fighters, “we need to focus on Western targets” and not just on a place, like the capitol of Mali. Long term, I’d be looking at whether we can sustain operations that target terrorist leadership and slowly take back territory at the same time. The last thing I would say is we must be careful how we use language in situations like this. This should not be an “us versus them.” It should be more like, “we are all one in this fight,” we support the interests of sub-groups in places like Mali.
or Nigeria, to have at least a local government. We are not here to eliminate entire swaths of population; we are just here to eliminate people who believe that murder, and the imposition of their social views, are acceptable.

YJIA: In a Washington Times article you explained that negotiations with the Taliban were both possible and necessary. What would “success” look like in negotiations between the major players involved in the conflict in Afghanistan?

Mudd: I think that “success” depends on whether you’re a realist or an idealist, and I’m a realist here. My realist perspective is quite simple: we’re here, as security professionals, to protect the United States from threats. Al Qaeda was a threat on 9/11. We thought the Taliban was because they were guarding al Qaeda and provided them the safe haven that they used to organize, train, plan for, and execute the attacks, but I think over time as we have eliminated al Qaeda members, a couple of things have become clear. The first is, the Taliban is an inward-looking organization, especially the Afghan Taliban, which I view as different from the Pakistani Taliban—and it is an important distinction. I don’t think that the Afghan Taliban poses a significant threat to the United States, to Western Europe, or our allies around the world. They are navel-staring, inward-looking people who want to impose their will on a specific geographic location, and that is Afghanistan.

And the second thing is, as a realist, I don’t think there is much chance we can completely root out the Taliban in places like their stronghold in Kandahar and elsewhere in Southeast Afghanistan. If they’re not a threat, if they represent some aspect of Afghan society, if there’s no realistic chance we can root them out, my view would be—and I expect there would be some objection to this from national security professionals—“better deal with them” because I don’t see a realistic alternative, especially as we draw down forces. If I judged that they posed a threat to the United States, my view would be different. This isn’t just saying, “hey, they are entrenched, we better find a way to work with them,” this is saying “yes, they’re entrenched, but they’re also not a threat to U.S. national security, so get over it and figure out how to deal with them.”

YJIA: Although the al Qaeda “brand” is alive and well, several analysts see the organization in decline and other terrorist organizations as a greater threat in certain areas of the world. The Haqqani Network, for example, has been cited as “the greatest threat to stability” in Afghanistan, and was recently branded a terrorist organization by the State Department. Do you think that threats from terrorist organizations other than al Qaeda are being adequately addressed?

Mudd: I think you have to define “threat” in two terms: capability and intent. A lot of groups have intent; for example the Pakistani Taliban have talked openly about attacking the United States, but they don’t necessarily have the capability like the kind of extended network that al Qaeda had on 9/11. Take, for example, the Haqqani network. It certainly
has the intent to strike. But, given how much the United States has decimated that organization in recent years, I’m not sure how much capability they have. I think we should continue to focus on these organizations, especially enabling partners to take out leadership so we don’t have to, but I think there is a double-edged sword here. That is, the more you engage targets that have mainly local interests, and the Pakistani Taliban still has mainly local interests, the more they start to say, “hey, maybe you should be a legitimate target as well.” To solve that we should be working through the local security forces to accomplish the mission to eliminate the threat from these organizations. We shouldn’t be engaging often directly with troops on the ground ourselves in these operations, not only because I think its not always effective, but it also it raises our profile with these organizations, and maybe they start to say, “hey, maybe we should be attacking the Americans as well.”

YJIA: How effective have drone strikes been in countering the threat from al Qaeda? Have they done more harm than good in countries where they are being used?

Mudd: Heck no! They are not doing more harm than good, and I dispute anyone who says this. Our mission is to eliminate threats to the United States. Threats emanate from organizations that have leadership that provides the vision and the capability to reach out and attack the United States. So we have a choice to make: do we try to take this leadership off the battlefield with the range of options we have, and remember we are operating in areas in which one of the options we don’t have is unilateral military action, do we take the leadership that is looking at the United States as a potential target off the battlefield, or not? That’s a binary question: yes or no. When we have information that someone has threatened the United States and we have enough geolocational information to take that person off the battlefield, the choice is, take him off the battlefield or not.

Now, when I go outside kind of the persona I held in the profession I was once in, I hear the debate characterized as, “do you think that those strikes are creating more enemies than they are worth?” And my answer to that is, “give me a better choice.” If, as a security professional, that someone is targeting the United States, and you have the ability to take him off the battlefield, and you are telling me that you would choose not to execute that option? Well, that is a policy decision that a politician could make, but my answer in every one of these situations is not going to be whether we alienate people or not. The decision is whether we stop a plot or not, and if you don’t want us to stop plots by taking people off the battlefield with drones, then you better tell us not to do so.

YJIA: Many people we have spoken to in the past, including some of the professors here at Yale, do a lot of research on this subject and have a differing point of view on the subject of drone strikes.

Mudd: I know; I’ve debated some of them in the past. The debates are usually pretty friendly but we certainly disagree. Look, I think we’re getting to the point where these attacks are going to die down. We’re getting to where it’s becoming less effective and people are becoming harder to target, but overall I think drone strikes have been incredibly effective.
YJIA: Along those same lines, it seems that in many cases it is becoming easier to kill people than to try to capture them. How does that impact our counter-terrorism policy both now and in the future?

Mudd: There is a legitimate question there about drone strikes and capturing people. I think that one of the points I’d make is that there’s not much we could do with these folks if we captured them. We don’t have a unilateral U.S. government ability to confine them, and we don’t have the ability to capture them and turn them over to a security service that doesn’t necessarily have a legal case against them. In most cases you couldn’t capture them in the first place, but even if you could, what exactly would you do with them? I think there is a broader question that is even more interesting from a policy perspective, and that is, I believe that in some part this escalation, this expansion of the drone program in places like Yemen and Somalia, actually makes policy-making more difficult, because it provides more tools.

When you’re looking at a place like Mali, in the past you might have said, “OK, our options are to put in unilateral military capability, not going to do it, give the local training, maybe some helicopters . . . ” but now you have another option that is between just letting someone else front for you, and putting your own forces on the ground. And that option is intervening from the sky. And I think when you look at things, not only terrorism but things like cartel activity, which I view as a much greater threat to U.S. security than terrorism. This tool over time is going to raise questions both at the White House and elsewhere whether we should now intervene in places where we could not have intervened earlier. It’s a good tool to have, but I think if I were at the NSC still, I’d be scratching my head saying, “man, in some ways, life is harder!”

YJIA: Al Qaeda and allied organizations have long sought to recruit citizens of Western nations to carry out attacks in the West. How serious is the “home grown” threat to the U.S. and other Western nations?

Mudd: The homegrown threat is only serious if your threshold for pain is relatively low, and our threshold for pain is pretty low. I’m not saying that’s right or wrong; I’m a practitioner not a policy maker. I’m saying that we tolerate thousands of violent murders in this country every year, many of whom are children, but if there was a case in which someone shot up a mall, and that person was subsequently found to have had al Qaeda literature in his apartment, this country would go up in arms. So if you look at strategic threat, terrorism does not have the capability, unlike things like drugs and violent gangs, to change American culture. Terrorism, to be more specific, cannot change American high schools; drugs can, and have.

But we have set a threshold that says we will not accept even a modest level of terrorist activity in this country. So I think homegrowns will continue to pose a modest to moderate threat in this country; they do not pose a significant threat. But if our threshold is that modest or moderate threat is not acceptable, we’re still going to have to spend a lot of money thwarting these guys, because there is a lot of one-offs in places like Chicago, New York, Portland, LA, Miami, Atlanta, Washington . . . there’s a lot of one-offs who are going to take some kind of action, and we’re going to say, “this is the
The next big threat.” It’s not! But we’re forced to deal with it as if it were, because that’s where the American psyche is.

**YJIA:** One last thing, could we talk a little bit more about your book? It’s a memoir, you said?

**Mudd:** [jokingly] Yes; I’m only 51 and I have a memoir. I know it’s a bit ridiculous.

**YJIA:** Can you give us a bit of a preview of the kinds of things that are going to be in it?

**Mudd:** I thought I should write a book that had a couple of characteristics. One is, I saw a lot of interesting stuff, and that interesting stuff helps people understand how government works. You have to remember, and I mention this in the preface, I’m one of a million pieces. There are military pieces, diplomatic pieces, policy pieces, White House/FBI pieces, I thought of myself as one of a million pieces. But because of my experience on the National Security Council, the CIA, and the FBI, I had a constellation of experiences that I thought was somewhat unique. I also thought, that for historians, those of us who have a tiny little lens might offer those lenses to history to say, it’s going to be tough to write this in fifty years. Maybe if you have a hundred of us who write all of our different angles, you can slowly put that collage into a story. And the last thing, which is kind of selfish and personal as an English major, I always wanted my name on a book—one that I didn’t pay to have published.

Again, though, what my book is not: it doesn’t tell any secret stories, and it doesn’t throw anyone under the bus. I’ll take some heat for that, and I already have in some of my initial reviews. But I don’t care; I’m not going to do a “Washington” book. It wasn’t hard to get cleared because you won’t find any fun secrets in there, and even people who are denigrated elsewhere come off nice because I’m just not going to do it. So the reviewers will take a shot at that, and that’s fine. But as kind of a second-tier player . . . I mean, who am I to say what Condi Rice or Colin Powell or whoever should have done? It’s a bit ridiculous. So it’s an interesting book, and a fun book, but it’s not a tell-all.

**YJIA:** Well, we’re looking forward to reading it for its insight into many of the problems inherent in international affairs.

**Mudd:** [jokingly] Well, I’m looking forward to you buying it! It’s available on Amazon, but I’d prefer you go down to the Yale bookstore and pay an additional thirty percent for it . . . thanks for talking with me today.

---

*Interview conducted by Charles Faint.*

*Transcribed and edited by Charles Faint.*