YJIA: Dr. Pillar, thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. We’d like to go over a number of topics with you, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the situations in Syria and Iran, to the intelligence community, as well as your thoughts on what it takes to make effective policy and effective policy recommendations. We’d like to start at the beginning, with your choice to enter government service. You started your career in government service as an Army officer in Vietnam, and you went on to a career in the CIA. What prompted you to choose a career in government service?

Pillar: Two things: the first is the conventional-sounding desire to perform duties on behalf of something larger than myself, something on behalf of the nation and not just to advance my own cause or make a bunch of money. The second thing that induced me to go to work at the CIA was the prospect, and this indeed turned out to be the case, of using political analytical skills in service of very interesting problems and puzzles with real consequences. I wanted to be on the inside looking out, and not just on the outside looking in, which would have been the case if I would have had a whole career as an analyst who never worked inside government. So it’s a combination of basic public service reasons and an attraction to an interesting line of work.

YJIA: It seems like over the course of your career you were very much on the inside for a very long period of time, was it twenty-eight years, in the CIA?

Pillar: That’s right.

YJIA: The 10th anniversary of the U.S. war in Iraq, recently passed. Is it true that, even in the important positions you held at the CIA, you did not receive a single intelligence request from a policy maker on Iraq until about a year into the war? Can you explain to us how that happened?

Pillar: The makers of the Iraq war were pursuing a project that dated back at least to the 1990s when some of the principal neoconservative champions of the war were...
One of the great myths about the Iraq war is that intelligence guided or drove the policy; it did no such thing. The things that the intelligence community was saying about the infamous reported WMD programs in Iraq as of the early Bush administration in early 2001 did not come anywhere close to constituting the ringing of an alarm bell, much less a reason to go to war. In fact, the message of the intelligence community, as then Secretary of State Powell was saying publicly, was that Saddam Hussein was well-contained, and whatever he might be doing with his unconventional weapons program, he wasn’t making much progress. Then along came the 9/11 attack, which because of the enormous effect it suddenly had on the mood of the American public, making Americans far more militant than they were before and making them willing to accept great costs and risks on behalf of national security, meant the neoconservative proponents of the war finally had the opportunity to realize their long-held ambition.

They also understood though, that this extraordinary step, the launching of a major offensive war, which is something that the United States had not done for over a century, needed a tremendous selling job. And it needed to be sold with themes that would have the greatest impact on Americans. And so themes of WMD and terrorists were the ones that were presented. Especially if one looks at the other aspects of what the intelligence community was writing and saying about Iraq, going beyond unconventional weapons programs, if there were any policy implications of that work, it was not to go to war, as opposed to launching the war. The intelligence judgments, for example, about the supposed alliance between the Iraqi regime and al Qaeda were directly contradictory to what the administration was saying on that subject. The community also had, in work that I initiated and supervised, offered judgments on the challenges that would arise inside Iraq after Saddam was overthrown that were far different from, and far more pessimistic, than the much-rosier scenarios that helped along the decision to go to war. Far from being guided by intelligence, we saw substantial effort by some of the principal policy makers to discredit intelligence judgments, for example the effort in the Office of the Vice President that led to the Scooter Libby case.

YJIA: That leads into a point you made in a 2006 Foreign Affairs article, in which you wrote about the role of intelligence in affecting national policy and recommended a “clear delineation between intelli-
And in a separate article in *Foreign Policy* in 2012, you said that intelligence “is not the deciding factor” in major decisions made by policy makers. If that is the case, what are some of the other factors that go into decision-making, not just in the United States but for policy makers all over the world?

**Pillar:** There are two separate elements here. One are things that shape the policy maker’s perception or image of the situation overseas that he is dealing with. Intelligence is one of the inputs to that, and sometimes we think of it as the most important input. But when it comes to the biggest decisions that our policy makers have had to make, like going to war, or major reorientations of grand strategy, the history has been that those images or perceptions come more from other sources than [from] intelligence. They include the policy maker’s own “gut sense” of how the world works or his or her own strategic sense of how relationships between major powers work. They also are based in larger American cultural experiences that lead all of us, including our political leaders, to see the outside world in certain peculiar ways. And typically, these outside influences have shaped decisions more than intelligence has.

The other major set of inputs to making policy are the “other things” beside those images that policy makers quite appropriately and quite legitimately have to take into account in making their decisions. This includes issues of resources, it includes issues of conflicting policy objectives, in which neither intelligence nor anyone else can tell them what relative priority to place on one objective over another, and it includes domestic political support. We often talk about domestic political influence as just a negative influence as far as foreign policy is concerned, but our leaders do quite appropriately have to consider how much support they have here at home before undertaking major initiatives overseas. So there’s a lot that, very appropriately and very legitimately, policy makers have to consider going beyond anything intelligence can provide.

**YJIA:** What kinds of traits or attributes make intelligence personnel most useful to policy makers?

**Pillar:** There is an enormous variety of traits and skills represented in the intelligence agencies, so there is no one set that would provide a good answer to that. For example, even within just an agency like the CIA, the sorts of skills and personality that make for a very successful case officer, who is engaged in the practice of espionage and trying to recruit foreign agents, are considerably different from the types of traits that would go into a successful analyst who writes finished intelligence for policy maker consumption. So I would just leave it at that; there is no one model of the perfect intelligence officer because there is such enormous variety in the missions they have to do and the tasks they have to perform.

**YJIA:** Fair enough! There has been a bit of a quick turnover in CIA directors recently. What factors should the President consider when looking for a CIA director in the future?

**Pillar:** Any president, quite naturally, is going to look for someone with whom he feels comfortable. And we have seen, with the most recent appointment of John Brennan, our current president choosing someone who has quite clearly forged a close working
relationship based on these last four years that John has been working in the White House. My own advice to a future president would be to resist the temptation to rely heavily on this personal comfort factor and to look more for someone who has a more independent basis for speaking truth to power when it has to be spoken, even when that truth might be inconvenient or unwelcome to the president himself. Where that type of person might come from, we can’t answer in advance. It may be someone who has risen from the inside, through the bureaucracy, it might be someone coming out of academia or elsewhere in the private sector, but I would consider that independence of judgment to be the primary consideration.

YJIA: Let’s shift gears and talk about international relations a bit. You wrote an article that recently appeared in The National Interest, describing the “strange friendship” between the United States and Israel. What is it about this friendship that is so unusual? What impact does this relationship have with relations between other countries?

Pillar: What is unusual, of course, is that there is an enormously powerful domestic political lobby that is dedicated to maintaining extremely strong U.S. support for the government of the day in Israel. We do have, in much weaker form, whether it’s with India or other countries, similar sorts of lobbies but none of them hold a candle to the one we’re talking about with Israel. And that does have a much broader impact on U.S. policy and its success and failure in that it shapes not only the relationship with Israel itself but the perceptions of many, many others. And here we’re talking in particular about the Arab world and to a lesser degree the larger Muslim world which sees, rightly or wrongly, the U.S. serving as Israel’s lawyer, and not being an honest broker in issues in which those populations also have a strong interest and a strong stake.

YJIA: How has terrorism changed from the time you were at the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center (CTC) to now? Do you think the international community is now more effective in dealing with terrorism, and more importantly, its root causes?

Pillar: I worked on counterterrorism through most of the 1990s. There are a couple of major trends I could identify, which go back really even before that. One is a lessening of state sponsorship of terrorism. We could recall back in the 1980s that we had a larger number of regimes that were doing a lot of nasty stuff in the realm of international terrorism. This included, among others, the North Koreans, the Libyans, the Syrians and others as well. What we’ve had in the years since then is globalization, which has, among other things, raised the cost to regimes of being an international pariah when they’re subject to isolation and sanctions, as for example Gaddafi was. So in the big picture of international terrorism, state-fomented terrorism, although it certainly has not gone away entirely, is much less than it was, say, twenty-five years ago.

The other major trend I would point to, and this one as well goes back far before 9/11, is the trend away from terrorism which was used mainly in an instrumental sort of way; hostages were taken, planes were hijacked, demands were made for release of comrades from prison, and drama is played out before our eyes of the sort we saw a lot of in the 1960s and 1970s and into the 1980s. Now, of course, we’re worried more
about the kind of terrorism as exemplified by the granddaddy of all such attacks, the 9/11 attack of not hostage taking and demands being made, but terrorists going out to kill a bunch of people right off the bat.

As my friend Brian Jenkins, one of the handful of longstanding American experts on terrorism, said back when he was first studying the topic back in the 1970s, terrorists “want a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead.” Brian would agree, that’s changed now. Now we have a lot of terrorists who want a lot of people dead. The main thing I would emphasize here is that even though most Americans think in terms of pre-9/11 and post-9/11, and there is a strong tendency from the American public to think that the whole world of terrorism and counterterrorism as we know it today began on that one day in September of 2001, the most important trends are ones that began well before that.

YJIA: With the lessons learned from the U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, what do you think the United States’ policy should be toward other foreign policy challenges like Syria and Iran?

**Pillar:** First, let’s talk about a couple of specific lessons from the wars we actually have fought. There are many lessons, of course, that can be drawn from the Iraq war, which in my opinion was one of the greatest blunders the U.S. has ever made, in terms of its foreign policy. But the lesson I would put at the top of the list is, “have a careful, thorough, policy process before undertaking any effort like this.” In fact, I could phrase it much more simply: “have a policy process.” We did not have any policy process at all leading up to the decision to go to war in Iraq. There were no meetings, no policy option papers, nothing that addressed whether or not the war was a good idea. There were plenty of meetings to figure out how to sell the war, or to implement the decision once it was made, but nothing leading up to that. I think this failure is the one that historians fifty or a hundred years from now might look back at as one of the most extraordinary things about that particular episode in our history. With regard to the war in Afghanistan, I believe and I think most Americans still believe that the initial intervention was a just and proper response to the 9/11 attacks; it was an effort to strike back at the people who did perpetrate that attack and the regime that was at that time an ally of that group. The problem was, we did not find the exit ramp from Afghanistan and so we have what that war has since become, a more-than-a-decade-long counterinsurgency effort, which goes far beyond our initial objectives. The lesson here is that we should have found that exit ramp fairly early on, actually, after we succeeded in the opening months of the war to roust al Qaeda from its then-safe haven in Afghanistan and oust the Taliban from power over most of the country.

Now, as we look ahead to problem situations that are debated today, [to] those as well as [to] other lessons that ought to be applied, I listen to debates and discourse about Iran and feel alarm over how similar much of this sounds to what was heard prior to the launching of the war in Iraq—with all the talk about WMD and a supposed
nuclear program. Of course the big difference here is we do not have policy makers in power who are itching to launch a war. Instead, we have an administration that wants to seek a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, and I think that is still very achievable. Looking at a situation like Syria, here I think the main lesson is not to let our heartstrings drag us into commitments that we may later be sorry about. We all feel repugnance about all of the violence that is taking place there and wish we could do something about [it], but the main thing we need to realize is that, grievous as it may be, there are things going on in the world that the United States simply cannot solve. The first thing we need to remember is the Hippocratic Principle of “do no harm.” And I would add to that, first of all, of doing no harm to ourselves.

YJIA: When you retired from the CIA, you were covering the region we’ve been discussing as the National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia. What did that job entail?

Pillar: The national intelligence officers, or NIOs, are primarily responsible for coordinating the analytic work of all of the agencies in the intelligence community on topics in their particular area of concern. There usually have been a dozen or so of these NIOs whose portfolios are regional as mine was and those people mainly deal with political and economic problems. Or some NIOs deal with functional issues, such as conventional military forces or weapons proliferation. Those people deal with more technical matters.

The principal stock in trade that NIOs deal with is the National Intelligence Estimate and other formal papers that are products of all of the agencies in the community. Even though there may be a particular analyst from an agency who wrote the initial draft, the NIO is the one who supervises the whole process not just of drafting but of coordinating and guiding the product through the long and laborious process before you have a final and approved document coming out at the other end. There are other duties that the NIOs perform that have to do with analysis or analytic support in their area such as chairing processes that determine the relative priorities that collectors of information ought to place on specific subject areas.

In other words, the NIOs are kind of a transmission belt between the needs of the consumers of intelligence, and the producers, both collectors and analysts, in determining what topics ought to get more attention than others. And finally, I might add that especially in these last few years since the intelligence community was reorganized and the National Intelligence Council, which the NIOs constitute, was placed under a new Director of National Intelligence, they have now assumed additional duties with regard to preparing the DNI for his participation in meetings among senior policy makers at the White House.

YJIA: What policy advice might you offer to President Obama as his second term gets underway?

Pillar: The single piece of advice I would give him is to remember that he is in his second term, and will never have to run for anything for re-election ever again, not for president, not for dog catcher. And I think that has some important, liberating
implications, chief among those being that he can do what is in the best, long-term interests of the Republic without worrying perhaps as much as he did his first term about what something might do for the prospects of re-election. I think that advice has some pretty obvious implications when you get to things like the Middle East peace process.

**YJIA:** What would you offer someone who is considering following in your footsteps as either a member of the military, part of the intelligence community, or into academia?

**Pillar:** That’s a broad question! It really comes down to an individual’s proclivities and talents and ambitions . . . it’s different strokes for different folks. But having said that, it is my hope that we would have a lot of talented people who are interested in some kind of public service. I have been heartened by the interest of my students at Georgetown in entering some aspect of public service, including the intelligence community. I am discouraged by some of the larger political atmosphere in this country that has come to take an un-nurturing view toward government service. I am discouraged at the adoption of widespread beliefs that there is something inherently inferior to the public sector, in comparison with the private sector. I hope that does not discourage talented young people from realizing the importance — and the rewards in an intellectual and patriotic sense — of government service.

**YJIA:** Before we close, is there anything else that you’d like our readers to know about? Any books you’re working on or projects you’re considering?

**Pillar:** I’m working on a book, which has a long way to go, that is related to a couple of the questions you asked me. It’s about the cultural, historical, and political roots of how most Americans see the outside world. Unfortunately, what makes us uniquely American, although there are many good things about it, has some downsides in terms of inclining us to misperceive and misunderstand what is going on in the outside world.

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*Interview conducted by Charles Faint.*

*Transcribed and edited by Charles Faint.*