Counterterrorism has become both a hidden and explicit part of our daily lives, forming one of the most characteristic US defense strategies of the twenty-first century. Civilians understand terrorism to be one of the primary security threats to the population, but we know quite little about the real attacks until they happen. YJIA discussed counter-terrorism strategy with one of the Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Price, the Director of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Rebecca TeKolste and Major Will Wright conducted the interview.

**YJIA**: What are the greatest threats to the domestic population of the United States today in terms of terrorism?

**Bryan Price**: I think one of the things about terrorism that makes it unique is its symbolic political violence. Even though the chances of it happening are extremely minute, when it does happen, it has a disproportionate effect on the population than other threats that are out there. I think one of the nice things about the threat from terrorism since 2001 is that we have successfully, knock on wood, have prevented another catastrophic attack on the homeland. With that said, it is interesting to see how that threat has morphed since 2001, and obviously today with organizations like the Islamic State and then the remnants of al-Qaeda and other organizations that are of the jihadist bent, you can see that the threat from both inspired attacks but also homegrown attacks is making the country very concerned at this time.

**YJIA**: Could you talk a little bit more about the scope of some of the operations that the U.S. government is carrying out now in the homeland?

**BP**: As a DoD [Department of Defense] active-duty officer, the investigations about what is going on, what is taking place inside the United States with American citizens, that is not our purview.

What I can tell you is that there is a lot of resources that are being dedicated to this, and we are trying to evolve along with how the terrorists operate. For example, I think one of the areas where counterterrorism has come in a long way is in terms of its use of open source information and particularly, information that comes from the social media side of the house. That social media and the technology is both a blessing and a curse.
In today’s world, I think most civilians, to include even the cadets, would argue that the military is the most important aspect of our counterterrorism and that these other elements are maybe important, but the military is first among equals in this regard.

The blessing aspect of it comes from the fact that oftentimes, our enemies, in order to communicate with their individuals, are putting a lot of their playbook online, both in social media and other forms. The downside is, as we well know, the ability to communicate; you can export ideas much faster and does that pose more of a radicalization risk than if you were to shut everything down?

YJIA: How do you feel like the U.S. government and particularly the U.S. military approaches counterterrorism?

BP: With the cadets, we teach them about the U.S. counterterrorism policy in the decades prior to 2001 because most of the kids that we are teaching now were so young that they cannot tell you where they were on 9/11, which is a little odd for our generation because that was such a paradigm shift in not just our military but our country and how we view the threat. We do a case study to take a look at the U.S. response in the 1983 Beirut bombing.

In today’s world, I think most civilians, to include even the cadets, would argue that the military is the most important aspect of our counterterrorism and that these other elements are maybe important, but the military is first among equals in this regard. Actually, the State Department back in the ’83 case study, they were the ones that were pining for a military response and a military strike. It was the U.S. military, to include a commandant in the Marine Corps as well as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, which were saying, “No, doing a retaliatory response in this instance would look bad upon us, and we are above that.” I think what we are starting to realize now though is that, and you hear this clichéd term from a number of potentially general officers and folks at the tip of the spear, “We cannot kill our way out of this, so we have to find some other ways to go about this threat.”

YJIA: Speaking of which, where have we found any sort of success in combating our counterterrorism, particularly from the military? If it should not be or should it be the military is first among equals, what do you think a balanced, speaking of other clichés, whole of government approach should look like?
BP: It is a term that everybody loves, but in practice, we do not do a very good job of it. The other aspect – and I would not call it a success, but I think that we are moving more toward this – is the understanding that much like other major threats that face the United States these days, where you are talking about pandemics or climate change, it requires a multilateral solution. Not just interagency solution or interagency cooperation in the United States, but also, if we want to solve terrorism in other countries, we cannot do it unilaterally.

YJIA: Could you talk about some of those multilateral tools and strategies?

BP: What is interesting is when you take a look at how we viewed the threat in 2003, but I think this is natural for the times, remember it was a “you were either with us or against us” approach. It was very black and white, and I think that the United States was on its heels, obviously understandably at that time.

Then, after the Iraq invasion and the war in Afghanistan, and as the threat itself geographically diffused across the globe, I think we quickly learned that this is not going to be a fight that we can win unilaterally, even if we devoted all political will and resources into it.

YJIA: Once you think about attacks not just in a particular country but also in cyberspace, how do you seek the authorization to act in a military fashion? This debate is coming up right now with the authorization of the use of military force, and this is a pretty contested debate.

BP: That is what makes it such a difficult challenge, because if we cannot figure out in our own executive branch what the proper authorizations are and how we should deal with things, it is fool’s gold to think that we can get that type of consensus at the national level.

AUMF [Authorization for Use of Military Force] was signed within a week of the September 11th attacks. It provided a lot of power to go after the folks that were responsible for and were affiliated with the 9/11 attacks. Now that we are sixteen, coming on seventeen years after that incident, the ties to the specific 9/11 perpetrators is starting to weaken a little bit. There are calls, rightfully so, for a new authorization for attacks.

I just recently published a paper that took a look at comparing counterterrorism to oncology. I compared the threat of terrorism not as an infectious disease, but as a...
chronic disease. One of the things that I think that we could take a playbook from oncologists is the staging system that doctors use to assess different types of cancers. First off, I think the most important thing is we are all susceptible to cancer. We are all at stage zero. The risk is not zero, and I think that is an important talking point to the American people. The other thing that the staging system allows doctors to do is they know when it is time to change up protocols, whether it is time to get more aggressive or, in cases of remission, take a step down in terms of what stage of cancer you are at.

That would be helpful in a counterterrorism context because I think the American people do not understand the variations in the threat between an organization like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula that still has the world’s greatest bomb maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, that can threaten the homeland on a spectacular attack, versus Boko Haram, whom you may hear a lot about in the news, but they are unlikely to strike the homeland anytime soon.

YJIA: Tease that analogy here between counterterrorism and oncology that is there anything to the kind of comparison for a human body that is suffering from cancer, how damaging the treatment is in some ways?

BP: There was a great book that got me thinking about this. It was called *The Emperor of All Maladies*. If you take a look at the early days of cancer treatment, when we just found out about radiation treatments, chemotherapy, or even before surgery. If a woman had breast cancer, the fix for that in the early days of oncology was to cut it out. They operated under a “more is better” mentality to which a lot of patients were left completely deformed and the treatment was worse than the disease in some of these cases.

Over time though, we have learned how to dial in the proper surgery, treatments, medications in order to get better at it. That has been a painful journey over time. When you look at counterterrorism on the flip side, I see the same types of things happening. When General [David] Petraeus was the commander of the 101st Division in Iraq, he had a sign that was outside of his tactical operations center. When soldiers were going to go out on mission, they would see a sign that said, and I am paraphrasing now, “Does the way in which we conduct this operation increase the number of folks that we are going to be fighting against?”

In the manner in which we conduct this operation, does it now increase our number of enemies as opposed to decrease them?

YJIA: Could you lay out the parameters of when it might be more appropriate to use an elimination strategy versus a containment strategy for fighting terrorism?

BP: I get frustrated when politicians, and this happens on both sides of the aisle, or policymakers throw the word ‘defeat’ out: “We are going to defeat terrorism,” or “We are going to defeat the Islamic State.” I think that when we say as a nation
I think the general population would be amazed at the amount of resources the U.S. military dedicates to preventing collateral damages.

that we are going to defeat something, that means something very specific in doctoral terms to military members.

I think it gives the public a false sense that this is a national threat that can be vanquished like fascism or communism during the Cold War. This is such a different ideological threat that I do not like utilizing those terms. When we say that we are going to defeat something and then we do not do it, I think it only ends up emboldening our enemies. It also gives the people pause as to their trust and confidence in what we are doing.

I like the containment aspect of it. I think there need to be realistic expectations as to what we are able to do in the counterterrorism context in order to keep us safe and to not freak out when there is a specific attack to include on the homeland. I think there are things that we can do in order to mitigate the threat as much as possible, but I hate when an attack occurs and it automatically becomes an attack on a politician of failure. No, this is a fact of living in a free society, and our enemies are smart. Our challenge is to be smarter.

YJIA: Because you spoke about this aspect of collateral damage, what could the U.S. government do better in preventing these kinds of accidents against civilians?

BP: I think the general population would be amazed at the amount of resources the U.S. military dedicates to preventing collateral damages. I am talking about lawyers, which are now more involved in go, no-go decisions on specific operations, more so than they have ever been before, probably in the history of warfare; as well as an appreciation from the military’s side of the house of what collateral damages means because it hurts you in the long run.

I think that it is important to understand that this is in counterterrorism when you are doing operations in other countries, and we do not own the ground, and we are forced to conduct some of these operations from the air to include with drones or some other strikes, as opposed to putting boots on the ground and doing stuff in these places, which is a political decision made by political leaders.

I think we too often forget that at the end of the day, military operations sometimes involve the tragic loss of lives of the civilians. You asked what types of things we can do to mitigate it. Never lose sight of that and to inject that type of decision making into all of our operations, as well as building partner capacity. It would be nice if we got to a point where some of these places where we are conducting those attacks in
that the militaries that we are training and assisting in those places can do it on their own. Going back to all things being local, the best people to do it in those situations are the indigenous folks.

In my seat as the Director of the Combating Terrorism Center, we have had a tremendous privilege to listen to the top general officers and the top counterterrorism officials fighting terrorism, at least from my foxhole, for the past five-plus years. The one common refrain that I can say of all these individuals, and these folks are folks like General [Stanley] McChrystal, folks that have operated at the tip of the spear, eat fish heads, are harder than woodpecker lips, all these individuals will tell you that exact same thing.

We cannot kill our way of out of this, and that the long-term solution has to be other elements, whether it is diplomacy, local governance, those sorts of things.

**YJIA**: What is our role in trying to lift up those other instruments of national power besides military force?

**BP**: This is interesting. I think if you talk to most of officers that are around the same age as Will [Wright] and I, when they were thrust into these environments in Iraq and Afghanistan, you will learn that we had been trained our whole life to be a military and to use the hammer against the enemy. Then we found ourselves in situations where you had to put the hammer down, and had to find these other tools, like development. That was something that we are not trained in. I cannot tell you how many of my friends that were in Iraq were essentially the mayors of their town that were responsible for providing social goods and services, everything from the trash to irrigation to lands to settling local disputes. That is something that we were not trained to do in the military. Other elements of our government, including the State Department, USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and others, do that best. Comparatively and proportionately, when you take a look at the resources that DoD has compared to the State Department in this aspect, it would surprise a lot of civilians about terrorism and counterterrorism.

Easier said than done, but it would be nice to invest in places where you prevent that problem from ever occurring before you have to then go dump all these resources into it.

**YJIA**: What is the single change or the single thing that the U.S. government should do going forward to help implement these solutions that we are talking about?

**BP**: The military is going to have a role in counterterrorism moving forward without a doubt. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq we toppled one of the nation's largest militaries in relatively record time, and then there were some decisions that led to a local insurgency and a civil war, which required a lot more U.S. resources to go into it.

The ding on, I think, a lot of critics would say about that operation was that we did
not sufficiently plan for what happens after we achieve military success. I think that we may not have necessarily learned that lesson in some of the other conflicts that we are fighting right now. Until we fix that, unfortunately, we are going to be in situations where our military is going to be required to be conducting operations, similar to what we are doing now for the foreseeable future. That is a buzzkill ending.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. The views presented here are exclusively those of the individuals and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Government, the DoD, or any of its component organizations.
ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE

Lieutenant Colonel Bryan Price is the Director of the Combating Terrorism Center and an Academy Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He is a former aviator and FA59 strategist who has served in a variety of command and staff positions in operational assignments to include deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in History from the United States Military Academy, a Master of Arts in International Relations from St. Mary’s University, and a Master of Arts and Ph.D. in Political Science from Stanford University.