



Peter Bergen - Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists (11/15/16)

00:00:25 Alice M. Greenwald: Good evening, and welcome. My name is Alice Greenwald. I'm the director of the 9/11 Memorial Museum. And it is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to tonight's program. I particularly want to recognize, as I always do, our museum members who are with us tonight.

Thank you, as always, for your much valued support, which helps us to deliver programs like the one we are about to experience. I would also like to extend a special welcome to those who are tuning in to our live Web broadcast.

00:00:57 The 9/11 Memorial Museum is committed not only to telling the story of the 9/11 attacks but equally to exploring their continued impact on our world today. And certainly, current events in the Middle East and security issues top the list of the many ongoing reverberations of 9/11.

00:01:19 Our guest speaker this evening, Peter Bergen, has spent the majority of his prolific and multifaceted career examining terrorism both before and after 9/11. In 1994, he coproduced the CNN documentary "Terror Nation," which traced the links between Afghanistan and the bombers who attacked the World Trade Center in 1993.

00:01:44 Just three years later, in 1997, as a producer for CNN and as referenced in our own historical exhibition downstairs, Peter produced Osama bin Laden's first television interview broadcast to Western audiences.

It was during that interview that bin Laden declared for the first time to the West his intention to wage war against the United States. In 2001, Peter Bergen published "Holy War Inc.: Inside the Secret World of bin Laden," in 2006, "The Osama bin Laden I Know," and in 2013, "Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad."

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All three books were New York Times best sellers and were named among the nonfiction books of the year by the Washington Post. Peter is a contributing editor at The New Republic. And he has worked as a correspondent for National Geographic Television, Discovery and, of course, CNN.

His writings have appeared widely in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal. I could go on and on, but you get the idea.

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He is also CNN's national security analyst, vice president and director of National Security Studies program at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., and he's a fellow at Fordham University Center on National Security, among numerous other teaching, consultative and editorial positions.

Tonight's conversation, moderated by our senior VP for education and public programs, Clifford Chanin, will touch on all aspects of Mr. Bergen's extensive experience.

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However, it will focus especially on the real and present danger of homegrown terrorists, as detailed in his most recent book, "United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists."

We invite you to join us for a book sale and signing that will take place just outside the auditorium following tonight's program. And with that, please join me in welcoming Peter Bergen. [applause]

00:03:56 Clifford Chanin: Let me add my welcome to Alice's. It's a pleasure to have you here. And thank you for taking the time to join us.

Peter Bergen: Thank you for the invitation. Thanks, everybody, for coming.

Clifford Chanin: As Alice was talking about the shape of your career and this early, now more than 20-year engagement with the question of where this threat was coming from, what it was, I wonder -- maybe this is a question that's more summary than anything else. But let's start with it -- how you follow the track of what's happened.

00:04:25 Did you imagine in the early stage of the '93 bombing, the story you did, then the interview with bin Laden that things would take the turn ultimately that they did, that this has become so much bigger, so much more an investment by this country and Western countries and many countries around the world in protecting themselves against this threat?

Did you have a sense of how it would grow and how it would metastasize? Or has that surprised you?

00:04:53 Peter Bergen: The short answer is no. I mean, I -- Yogi Berra said it's hard to make predictions especially about the future. [laughter] So you know, we don't have the ability to see into the future. I think, you know, I wasn't smart enough at the time to think this. But the Cold War was over. And in 1993, as everybody knows, the Trade Center was attacked for the first time.

00:05:19 And journalists are interested in what's the story. What's new? What's news? And this was new. After all, the Trade Center attack in '93 was the first time that a group of jihadist terrorists attacked the United States -- you know, successfully carried out an attack.

You can say that they killed Meir Kahane, you may recall, in 1990 who was an ultra-orthodox rabbi. The beginning of that plot actually began in 1990 where they killed him at a Manhattan hotel. They assassinated him.

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But this group of people was interesting because they'd all been to Afghanistan, or they were on the fringes of supporting the Afghan war effort. You know, that was interesting. And that's why I went to, as Alice mentioned, went to Afghanistan to document this phenomenon.

But we didn't really complete -- we had very little understanding of it. Even the name Al-Qaeda, which everybody knows now, was -- it was a secret. It wasn't well known. It wasn't even known by people within this organization unless they'd sort of been inducted into it.

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So you know, this was all -- all of it was not entirely predictable including, by the way -- Osama bin Laden didn't know how 9/11 was going to turn out. I mean, he could make a presumption about it. He didn't --

Clifford Chanin: Do you mean the impact -- the damage that --

Peter Bergen: The damage --

Clifford Chanin:-- [or the follow up to it]?

00:06:46

Peter Bergen: Well, bin Laden comes out -- his family is the largest construction kind of concern in Saudi Arabia, maybe in the Middle East. So he knows about construction. But even he didn't understand -- he presumed that the impact of the plane would destroy all the floors above the impact.

00:07:07 But he had no idea the towers were going to collapse. And how could -- I mean, nothing like this had ever happened before. So he didn't know how 9/11 was going to turn out.

Clifford Chanin: He's been criticized by some of his -- Abu Musab al Suri is someone you mentioned. We'll come to that later -- but other thinkers or proponents of this global jihad actually thought, by bringing the United States military force to bear on this base that Al-Qaeda had established in Afghanistan, that that was a strategic mistake.

00:07:38 Peter Bergen: Well, one of the -- then-Captain Mark Nutsch, who was commander of one of the special forces operation -- ODAs that went in and was instrumental in overthrowing bin Laden and the Taliban -- and he's here tonight.

So yeah, bin Laden completely misunderstood what the American response was going to be. I'll come back to Abu Musab al Suri in a minute because he's actually kind of an important figure. He was the person who took us to see bin Laden. He's a Syrian who was living in London.

00:08:13 So bin Laden bases his whole analysis of what was going to happen on 9/11 on a very flawed assessment of what the United States had done in the past. So when we talked to him in 1997, he said, "Look, essentially America is a paper tiger. You pulled out of Vietnam. You pulled out of Somalia after the Black Hawk Down incident. You know, just exert a little pressure, and the United State is as weak as the former Soviet Union was." That was his view.

00:08:44 Now, we had no strategic interest in Somalia. We pulled out of Lebanon in 1983 after the Marine barracks attacks. We had no real strategic interest in Lebanon. And we really, in the end, didn't really have big strategic interest in Vietnam. We have major strategic interest in Washington and New York. And you know, so the idea that

when we -- his analysis was, if we attack them in Washington and New York, they will pull out of the Middle East.

00:09:11 And the regimes in the Middle East that he objected to, particularly the Saudis, would fall. Well, we did exactly the opposite. We're more involved in the Middle East than we've ever been in American history. And we have major facilities in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain. We're fighting three wars in -- we're fighting wars in seven [Muslim] countries right now of various kinds, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya and Pakistan.

00:09:41 So it was a spectacular failure. So Abu Musab al Suri, who is the guy who took us to see bin Laden, is an extremely bright guy. He was very critical of -- he's a Syrian living in London -- very, very critical of bin Laden. By the way, there was dissent within the ranks within Al-Qaeda about was this a good idea to attack the United States. And some people -- not just him -- said, you know, maybe this is not a smart idea to attack the United States.

00:10:14 And maybe it's against Islam. Even with Al-Qaeda, there was a debate about it. So it turned out to be a spectacular failure. It was reminiscent of Pearl Harbor in lots of ways, which is of course it was a tactical, surprising attack. But Pearl Harbor, four years later, Imperial Japan was over. And we have imposed huge costs on Al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda is basically now a local jihadi group in Pakistan.

00:10:43 Now, obviously, there are new iterations of this. And bin Laden [as a Muslim idea] has proven to have quite a lot of resilience.

Clifford Chanin: Yes. We will come to that because -- skipping ahead, the focus of the book is what you have found about 330 people in this country, most of them American citizens though not all of them, who in one way or another were implicated in, arrested for, charged with crimes related to support of this global jihad whether in the United States or going overseas to fight the battle.

00:11:23 Let's talk about that group overall of 300. How do you characterize them? Give us a profile of who these people are.

Peter Bergen: Well, they're ordinary Americans. Let's start with that. That's kind of surprising because, if you think signing up for a jihadi group like ISIS or Al-Qaeda -- it's not a secret about what their goals are. And one of them is violence against Americans.

00:11:45 So it's a form of treason. But it's not -- treason is very hard to -- only one of the people in this 330 was ever charged with treason, Adam Gadahn, who was a Californian who was a spokesman for Al-Qaeda. Treason, of course, carries the death penalty. So it's hard to --

00:12:02 Now, these 330 cases, they range from the relatively trivial sending small amounts of money to some foreign terrorist organization, to the very serious murder or attempted murder. But four out of five of these individuals are American citizens or American legal residents. So they're not refugees. They're not recent immigrants. Very few of them are refugees actually. So all this rhetoric we've heard on this issue is kind of misleading. I mean, the reason that it's a problem is these are American citizens.

00:12:33 I mean, Major Nidal Hasan who killed 13 at Fort Hood was born in Arlington, Virginia. He was an Army major. It doesn't get much more American than that. The Tsarnaev brothers -- one was an American citizen. One was an American legal permanent resident --who carried out the Boston attacks. And in fact, every lethal terrorist attack in the United States has been carried out by a jihadi -- every lethal jihadi terrorist attack has been carried out by an American citizen or American legal permanent resident. And that's -- just interrupt me whenever I'm sort of --

Clifford Chanin: No. [crosstalk] [laughter]

00:13:09 Peter Bergen: Because the reason I wrote the book -- it's a sign of our success. I mean, here we are sitting in -- you know, where 9/11 happened. 9/11 was 19 Arab-born, Arab hijackers. They were all foreigners who inflicted this devastating attack on the United States.

00:13:30 We have put up huge defenses against that. So on 9/11, there were 16 people on the no-fly list. Today, there are 81,000. On 9/11, the FBI and the CIA barely talked to each other. As you know, the FBI knew that there were two people associated with Al-Qaeda living in San Diego. And they didn't tell -- the CIA didn't tell the FBI this until middle August of 2001.

00:13:53 There was no National Counterterrorism Center. There was no TSA. There was no Department of Homeland Security. We've tripled the amount of money we spend on our intelligence. So we've created this very, very big defensive barrier. Then, add that to our offensive barrier -- go back to Captain Mark Nutsch. We inflicted -- you know, the Taliban was overthrown in three months.

00:14:17 The Al-Qaeda used to have the entire country of Afghanistan as sort of a training camp. That's all gone. Then, the drone program basically -- don't take my word for it. The drone program, if you look at the bin Laden documents that came out of Abbottabad, he wrote dozens of pages about his concerns about the drone program and the amount of --

Clifford Chanin: It was decimating [the organization].

00:14:40 Peter Bergen: It was dec -- you know, decimating technically is one in 10. It was -- I think it just destroyed the top leadership. And then, we killed bin Laden. And so our defensive measures have been very good. And then, our offensive measures have been very good. You know, ISIS -- we've killed 45,000 fighters in ISIS according to Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, who ran the ISIS campaign until recently.

00:15:03 So they have a serious math problem. The reason there are so many child soldiers showing up in ISIS videos is they're running out of men. And then, you add to that the final point, which is public knowledge. So on the morning of 9/11 at 8:00, most Americans didn't consider jihadi terrorism to be a serious issue. Obviously, the New York field office of the FBI, elements of the CIA did think it was a serious issue. It was a very small group of people.

00:15:32 Now, if you -- you know, it was the passengers on Northwest flight 253 who disabled the underwear bomber on the flight. It was the passengers who disabled the shoe bomber on Richard Reid on the flight between Paris and Miami a few months after 9/11. It was the street vendor in Times Square on May 1st, 2010 at 6:00 at night who noticed SUV, smoke -- this is not -- something is wrong with this picture.

00:15:55 Clifford Chanin: The Times Square bomber [and warning those] -- yeah.

Peter Bergen: Yeah. So defensive measures, offensive measures and public knowledge is a huge force multiplier to all that. So then you're left with -- well, you can't get people in the country. So if you're going to carry out an attack, they have to be people who are already here.

00:16:11 Clifford Chanin: So this goes to the point of these are overwhelmingly young men --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin:-- with educations.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: They are married -- more than a third of them are married, you say.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: They have children in many cases.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So these are not -- one of the arguments in the early days of all of this was that Al-Qaeda was a product of poor environments, that poverty was a guiding factor in this.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: But that, in a number of studies including what you've undertaken, turns out not to be the case.

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Peter Bergen: Yeah. I mean, anybody involved in revolutionary violence, particularly terrorism, is often not themselves this empowered. They are sort of acting on the behalf of people that they think are disempowered. And that was true with the Baader-Meinhof Gang in the '70s in Germany. They were basically middle class kids, white ki -- you know, middle class German kids. That was true of the Russian anarchists in the late 19th century.

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It's true of a lot of these terrorist organizations. So when we looked at this, we found the average age was 28, a third married, a third kids, have same average education as most Americans, i.e. 50 percent attended high school, 10 percent graduate study -- attended and graduated high school.

00:17:26 We found the rate of mental illness was below the rate of the general population. We found they were not career criminals. They were incarcerated at about the same rate as the average male American, which is about 9 percent. So you end up with this picture of ordinary Americans. And we came up with this profile, myself and my research team at New America. And then, the San Bernardino attack happened.

00:17:50 And it was like these were exactly the people that we were -- they were married. They had a kid. He was making \$70,000 a year. They both had college degrees. You know, they --

Clifford Chanin: So given all the measures that you mentioned before that have put up a barrier around the country effectively through all of these new agencies and security measures, that have sent the U.S. military out into the world and that have gained public awareness for this fight. Yet, nonetheless, the movement still regenerates itself. There are more people --

00:18:24 Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- who are willing to do this, who are willing to join. Now, are the people who are doing this as internal volunteers in the United States -- do they, in your mind, have the same profile as the people who had gone to join the fight in the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq? Or is there a different profile between our domestic terrorists and people who are trying to do this fight overseas?

00:18:46 Peter Bergen: Meaning other Westerners who are --

Clifford Chanin: Yeah. Yeah.

Peter Bergen: The profile is not dissimilar. We also looked at 700 cases of Westerners joining ISIS. You know, we found that their

average age was a bit younger. There were more women. I mean, this is a new -- ISIS was recruiting women, which is historically very unusual.

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But you know, the people -- just to fly to Syria and participate in the jihad, I mean, it's not something that somebody who is desperately poor in some place in the U.K. can necessarily afford to do that. I mean, the data with the Americans is better. But you know, we're seeing a not dissimilar kind of attraction including for the Americans joining ISIS.

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Their average age is a bit younger. We're seeing more teenagers. We're seeing more females. But the interesting note here is the foreign fighter flow -- in what's [termed to] as the foreign fighter flow from the West into ISIS -- has gone from a flood to a trickle. There was at one point, you know, up to 2,000 Westerners were trying to join every month. Now, it's down to about 50.

Clifford Chanin: How do you explain that? Is that just the defeats that they've suffered recently?

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Peter Bergen: Yeah. I think it's two things. First of all, the shine is off. I mean, it's well known what these groups are. It's not -- when you get there, it's probably a little less exciting than it was meant to be. And then, they're just losing ground. And the Turks have really closed down the border. There was -- basically, it was sort of -- they actually built a wall. They also have shoot-to-kill orders. So it's a lot harder to get there.

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And I think part of it also -- I think that people -- there was a sort of view that ISIS was creating a perfect utopian Islamic state, which ISIS propagated. And I think a lot of people have come to realize that's really not the case. And they're losing. And no one wants to join a losing team. And you know, I was in Mosul -- or just outside Mosul 10 days ago with General Votel, who is the head of [CentComm] who therefore is in charge of the ISIS fight.

00:21:03 And you know, the Mosul campaign -- yes, ISIS is fighting pretty hard inside the city. But you know, [there are] 100,000 people outside the city fighting against ISIS and 5,000 to 6,000 inside the city fighting for ISIS. They've already killed 1,000 of them according to the figures I saw just in the last 24 hours. And they're going to lose Mosul. So Mosul is where they declared the caliphate.

00:21:27 That's going to be hard to explain, that they lost that. They've already -- and they probably will lose Raqqa, which is the Syrian city that they also -- is their other capital in the next year or so. But the big question is what happens next. I mean, ISIS is not the problem. It's a symptom of some deep problems. And we will see -- if these deep problems are not resolved, we'll see a son of ISIS and a grandson of ISIS.

Clifford Chanin: What are the deep problems?

00:21:52 Peter Bergen: I think there are five interrelated problems. The first one is the Sunni/Shia civil war across the region, which we're seeing in Yemen, we're seeing in Syria, we're seeing in Iraq funded by very deep pockets, the Iranians, the Gulf states in part but also, you know, has its own kind of internal logic. That's problem number one. Problem number two is the collapse of Arab [governors] from Libya to Yemen.

Clifford Chanin: So they are ungoverned states essentially in many of these places.

00:22:21 Peter Bergen: Yeah. Libya is not -- I mean, there are two governments. Yemen, there's -- it used to be a failing state. It's now a failed state as a result of the Saudi invasion, which has been a complete fiasco. And there's a political law, the weaker the Muslim state, the larger these groups are. So in relatively functional Muslim states like Indonesia, these groups are pretty small.

00:22:46 In places where there's total collapse of the state, these groups are pretty large. Then, problem number three is related to one and two, which is a massive wave of Muslim immigration from the Middle East into Europe.

And then, problem number four is the alienation of Muslims in Europe, which has been around for a while. The key data point here, unlike in this country, is, in France, 8 percent of the population is Muslim. 60 percent of their prison population is Muslim.

00:23:13 So that is an astonishingly marginalized, discriminated against group. And then, finally -- and this may be something that people disagree with when I say it -- I think adding to this issue is the rise of European proto-fascist parties and movements, which are going to kind of -- so these five factors -- they all kind of operate together.

00:23:39 And we're separated by geography and ideology from these problems as the United States. So you can drive from Paris to Damascus. You cannot drive from Manhattan to Damascus. And then, ideology -- the American Dream has worked very well for all sorts of immigrants including Muslim immigrants.

00:23:54 American Muslims don't live in ghettos. Their average income is the same as average Americans. Their average education is the same. Everything I've just said you can reverse in France or in Belgium. If you look at the people who carried out the Paris and Brussels attacks, they've all been through the French prison system, which have become essentially universities of jihad. They were not -- they were on the margins of society.

00:24:18 And if you have a French -- if you're in France and you have a Muslim name with the same qualifications, you're two-and-a-half times less likely to be brought -- asked to come to a job interview than somebody with the same qualifications with a Christian-sounding name. So these are not easily soluble problems. And go back to the problem number one, the Sunni/Shia regional civil war. So Mosul

falls. Will the largely Shia government in Iraq give the Sunnis of Iraq enough stake in their country so that they -- why did ISIS arrive?

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ISIS came about because ISIS was preferable to the Shia government in Baghdad for many Sunnis living in that region.

Clifford Chanin: It was a safety measure for them. Let me ask you --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- because I mean, you've outlined these five problems --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- and [noted them down]. Those are not problems that are susceptible to a short-term fix.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So the question becomes, okay, the military force, the 100,000 against 5,000 --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- recaptures Mosul. The Islamic State shrinks. Perhaps it even disappears --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- in that area. But the problems that you're mentioning are not resolved.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So what is the g -- the son and the grandson of ISIS look like? Is it these independent, leaderless jihadis? Or is there something else coming that you might think?

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Peter Bergen: I don't quite know. But I mean, look, obviously, ISIS is the son of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was essentially largely defeated in 2007 because of the surge, because of joint special operations command, Stan McChrystal and Admiral McRaven and others.

You know, they were largely put out of business. And then, you know, now almost a decade later, they have roared back to life. So this is -- I mean, I'm just simply agreeing with you, which is that, absent the political -- I mean, if you -- the engine of this is the Iraqi political dysfunction and the Syrian civil war.

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Now, the Syrian civil war, in my view -- and knowing very little about Syria itself but knowing something about the academic literature around civil wars -- the Syrian civil war is barely starting. And RAND did a very interesting study.

And none of the players -- and there are so many -- has any interest in dialing it back. I mean, the people who could dial it back are the Russians, the Iranians, the Saudis. None of them have any interest in dialing this back and for their interest or in some cases existential to make sure that their side wins.

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So the academic literature on civil wars -- RAND did a study. And they looked at 88 civil wars since World War II. And they found that, on

average, they lasted 10 to 15 years. Now, the FARC in Colombia has been going for half a century. So these kinds of conflicts are very, very hard to resolve. And they take a very long time to resolve. Another part of the academic literature on this is the way that you end these conflicts -- you have a mutual recognition of a hurting stalemate is the kind of --

00:27:32 And there is nothing -- Assad thinks he's winning. And the people who are opposed to him, you know -- I mean, they do not want Assad to stay in any shape or form. So if you accept that these are some of the basic engines, we're going to be looking -- now, we're going to be looking at other sort of iterations of this. Now, that's not to say that the fight against ISIS isn't -- I think it's important that they lose their caliphate. That's their main claim to fame, their main sort of advertising.

00:28:06 But it's not the end of the story. And you know, if we'd had this conversation in 2011, you know, with the death of bin Laden and the Arab Spring, I would have said, you know, sort of terrorism -- it's been around since the dawn of time. But it's not going to be a central national security question for the West.

Clifford Chanin: But sitting here five years later --

00:28:30 Peter Bergen: But five years later, it looks very different. I mean, I'm by nature not a pessimist. But those five drivers -- and then, you could maybe add to that, you know, social media in a sense sort of like -- when I interviewed General Votel on the record on this trip, you know, I said, you know, what are y -- we had the same sort of similar conversation.

00:28:50 I asked, you know, "What is your concern?" And he said, "Well, my big concern is, you know, the physical caliphate is sort of becoming a virtual caliphate. And you know, anybody can be an e-citizen within ISIS." [I'm quoting] him directly. And that's true. Now, there is a big difference between going to a --

Clifford Chanin: A place.

00:29:10 Peter Bergen: -- a place and actually being trained and rubbing shoulders with likeminded people and swapping business cards. You know, we don't train the U.S. military on the Internet. We train them in -- it doesn't work like that. So there's a natural ceiling to what somebody -- you know, you can radicalize somebody over the Internet. You can't necessarily train them to any big degree.

00:29:29 And if you look at the Paris attacks, the reason they killed 130 people is, you know, eight of the perpetrators were trained in Syria. They had military training. That said, you know, because of the proliferation of automatic weapons in this country, lone wolves can actually do quite a lot of damage.

Clifford Chanin: Do terrible damage. Now, let's switch to that question of the lone wolf --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- and the sources of the domestic threat because, if there's no place to go or if the possibility of getting from the United States is greatly reduced --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

00:30:05 Clifford Chanin: -- and yet, through your Internet affiliation, you are drawn to this. There are ways in which you can actually. So the question -- you go into some very interesting studies of the why someone goes into this direction.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: Let's talk about that because there are different interpretations. There are different motivations or, at least as they're understood by experts --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- as to what draws someone into this. So the first of these is the idea of this leaderless group that you associate with Marc Sageman, who is a psychiatrist, who was CIA, who was NYPD and studying this.

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And his argument was they don't need a leader. They just need a core group of friends getting together motivated by this friendship to do something.

Peter Bergen: Yeah. I mean, the big question when an attack happens is why. And I spent two-and-a-half years writing this book. And after I wrote it, I realized that the why is actually not fully answerable or even partially answerable because this gets to the nature of evil potentially, which is that you can explain certain things about why somebody did something.

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But at the end of the day, the murder of complete strangers is not that easy to answer. So let's look at the Boston Marathon case. Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his younger brother, you know, they killed an eight-year-old boy. They killed a 23-year-old Chinese graduate student. They killed a 29-year-old woman who was a restaurant manager. They maimed 17 people who will live with lost limbs for the rest of their lives.

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And what did it achieve? It achieved absolutely nothing. And if Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was here and you asked him why, which is at the

end of the day the question we all want a good answer to, he would not have a very good answer. He would have a very unsophisticated critique of American foreign policy and not much more because he was not an observant Muslim. He was smoking a lot of weed. He was drinking brandy. He was chasing girls. He was a very indifferent college student.

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So when I tried to answer the why question, I found that there was usually five elements. One was opposition to American foreign policy. The other one was the desire to belong to something bigger than yourself, which is why people join the Marines or why people -- you know, we all want to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

There's also a desire to be a hero in your own story. Everybody wants to be a hero in their own story in some shape or form. There's a desire to -- there's sometimes a cognitive opening, which is what NYPD called it in their report in 2007, to militant Islam, which can be the death of a parent, loss of a job, feelings that you are being discriminated against. But -- so these are some of the why things you can point to. But --

Clifford Chanin: But many people go through that and --

Peter Bergen: Exactly.

Clifford Chanin: -- don't take the jump.

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Peter Bergen: Exactly. So lots of people object to American foreign policy. Lots of people have things that go wrong in their lives. Lots of people join something other than a jihadi group. Lots of people find ways to be heroes in their own story without doing something like this.

But those were the commonalities in a lot of these cases. And a lot -- most of these -- you know, Omar Mateen, who carried out the Orlando attack -- you know, it came after the book was published.

00:33:36 I mean, he was working as a security guard at a Gulf community. It was not the heroic self-conception of himself. He had tried to become a cop a number of times. You may recall that he used to wear NYPD shirts in sort of selfies. So he was really kind of going nowhere. And I think -- and he abused his first and his second wife. As I think more about this, I think very few domestic abusers become terrorists. But often terrorists abuse people around them physically.

00:34:06 So there is this kind of like -- for some of these people -- this raises a question of, is Islam part of this, which after all [which is] -- I would say that, of course, Islam has some part of this. I mean, these are not Hindu terrorists. But it's a cherry-picked version of Islam just as the settler movement in Palestine has something to do with Jewish beliefs about the sanctity of Judea and Samaria, just as the Crusades had something to do with Christian beliefs about Jerusalem.

00:34:39 The Islam -- some cherry-picked version of Islam is part of this. But when I really drill down into these stories in the book, I found something I thought which is more interesting, which is that wasn't really a particularly full explanation. It didn't get you very far because, even when you looked at somebody like Major Nidal Hasan who -- on the surface, he was a very observant Muslim. He was at the mosque at 4:30 in the morning.

00:35:08 He carried out an attack against soldiers deploying to Afghanistan. On the surface, that looks like an Islamist militant solely motivated by Islam. But in a wonderful controlled experiment that I was able to use for the book, Major Nidal Hasan had a double first cousin called Nader Hasan who is a successful lawyer in Northern Virginia.

00:35:28 Two brothers in Palestine married two sisters and immigrated. And Nader and Nidal -- Nidal, mass murderer, Nader, successful lawyer in

Norther Virginia, voted for George W.. Bush after 9/11 because thought George W. Bush had said the right things about this isn't a war on Islam, etcetera.

So these -- basically, they're genetically like brothers. They have basically the same set of cards from birth. They're more or less the same age. Why did one become a mass murdered? Why did one become a successful lawyer in Northern Virginia?

00:35:56 And the answer is, as I talked to Nader who is the first cousin of Nidal, the army major who became the mass murderer, Nidal Hasan had a lot of problems going on in his life that this massacre sort of resolved. So he was unmarried at age 39. He was unmarriageable because, basically, no woman was good enough for him. He probably had never had a physical relationship with anybody. His parents had died when they were both very young.

00:36:24 He had no friends. He was very, very w -- very frightened about deploying to Afghanistan. And in his cousin's telling of it, he kind of went postal and dressed it up in the garb of Islam. And I thought that was a -- I think that was true based on what we know about Nidal.

And Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who was the older brother in the Boston attacks, you know, he had dreams of being an Olympic-level boxer. They faded. At the time of the attack, he was unemployed.

00:36:51 He was mooching off his wife, who was working 80 hours a week as a home -- as a nurse aid. So Tamerlan had this conception of himself as a hero. And suddenly, he's a zero. And this Boston Marathon attack allowed him again to be the heroic figure he believed himself to be.

Now, it's hard to -- I'm not a psychoanalyst. The people that we're talking about are often dead or in jail and hard to talk to. But I do think this element of wanting to do something heroic if your own life is not so heroic is part of this.

- 00:37:26 And certainly, Samir Khan, who I write about in the book who founded Inspire magazine, which just had a new issue in the last few days, which is Al-Qaeda [and Yemen's] English-language magazine. Samir Khan, when he was living in Charlotte, North Carolina, he was working in some very boring job at some call center. And suddenly, he's in Yemen. He's meeting members of Al-Qaeda. And by his own account, it was thrilling, exciting.
- 00:37:51 You know, suddenly, I'm a -- you know, he was a pudgy kid from Charlotte, North Carolina who grew up in New York City. And now, he's part of Al-Qaeda. And he's a big deal. So you can't dismiss that part of it as sort of a -- the why question. But at the end of the day, it only gets you so far because the murder of innocent strangers -- it's hard to answer why.
- 00:38:18 Clifford Chanin: You go into two different ways of analyzing this trajectory that people take. The first associated with the NYPD. And you write, it focuses largely on the outward manifestations of radicalization: extremist turn to Salafist beliefs; their wearing of traditional Islamic clothing; the politicization of their views about U.S. foreign policy; separation from society; and finally, jihadization, which could take the form of travel abroad for training or bonding activities at home with other militants.
- 00:38:46 So that point of view or that analysis is really focused on the content of their beliefs. Yes?
- Peter Bergen: Yeah. So the New York Police Department released a report in 2007, which you just summarized very well because I wrote it. [crosstalk] [laughter] But the report was controversial because it seemed to -- some of the things they described were, well, this is just somebody becoming a fundamentalist.
- 00:39:12 And so the FBI -- you know, but I think the report had some good points to make. But it was also seen by the Muslim community in

New York as sort of the blueprint for a surveillance program of Muslims in New York because this was -- this is the way they interpreted it when it came out. And they didn't know that there was a surveillance program of Muslims in New York, which of course ended at a certain point. Bill de Blasio, the mayor, has sort of officially ended that.

00:39:52

There's been lawsuits around this. The NYPD settled these lawsuits without admitting error but did pay substantial costs. So the NYPD report had certain -- you know, it was an attempt to look at a lot of different cases and find commonalities.

And some of the commonal -- you know, they found that often the people involved in these were converts or people who weren't necessarily observant Muslims, who had this cognitive opening and turned to militant Islam and then sort of withdrew from society and sort of only hung out with people like themselves.

00:40:23

And there's a lot of truth to that. But the problem can be that this could be just somebody who is becoming an ultra-fundamentalist. And there's nothing illegal about that.

Clifford Chanin: Without resorting to violence.

00:40:37

Peter Bergen: Without resorting to violence. So the FBI has taken a different approach and I think probably a more useful approach. And I found this whole -- it's interesting when you write a book. I found something I'd never known anything about when I was writing the book, which is the emerging discipline of threat management. Now, like a lot of American inventions, it began in California specifically in Hollywood.

00:40:57

And Hollywood stars get threatened all the time. And there's a guy called Gavin de Becker, who basically was the first guy who started really in a sort of systematic way protecting a lot of stars and also

thinking about what it -- if we're getting a lot of threats, who do we need to be concerned about? And obviously, you know, Hinckley almost killed Ronald Reagan. So these -- and he was obsessed with Jodie Foster. So these people can be dangerous.

00:41:21

The question is, are they just kooks? Who is going to be dangerous? So there's been more and more thinking about what you actually need to do to carry out an act of violence. And what would prevent it? And I think it's informed a lot -- you know, it's informing more and more -- in the last 20 years, it's become a very readily mature discipline.

00:41:45

So the pathway to violence has -- whether you're a neo-Nazi or a jihadist terrorist or just a predatory murderer, if you -- the pathway to violence has certain sort of weigh stations that everybody goes through, which is -- the first one is ideation. Well, the first one is grievance. I --

Clifford Chanin: So let me read your excellent -- your other excellent summary of this because it's a completely different methodology.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

00:42:12

Clifford Chanin: It says the first is grievance, the motive or rationale underlying the act.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: The second is ideation during which the grievance matures into the idea that violence is both justified and necessary. Then comes research and planning, the phase during which the plot is constructed.

Next, preparation, finding the right weapon or mode of assault. Then, [breach], enacting the plan to get inside whatever security perimeter surrounds the target. Finally, attack. So this is not focused on the content of the belief.

00:42:37

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: This is focused on a set of steps you take to really further a plan.

Peter Bergen: And it's very useful because it's agnostic about people's beliefs. From a First Amendment point of view, that's pretty helpful but also just from a -- you know, you don't wrap yourself around like what does this guy think.

It's what [have you got] -- what are the person's actions? So the grievance is I don't like my wife's cooking. Ideation -- wouldn't it be nice if my wife suddenly just wasn't around? [laughter] Research -- you know, what are the laws in my jurisdiction for people, you know, accidentally slipping, you know. And then, you know, planning and so -- we saw 9/11 there was breach, which was the --

Clifford Chanin: [Unintelligible] airplanes.

00:43:20

Peter Bergen: But they also looked at the kind of -- they practiced several times. And then, they did the attack. So I think it is a more useful way of getting -- then, there's the kind of -- the next step is, what are the things -- we're all potentially on this pathway to violence. We all have grievances of various kinds. We may even have ideation about certain people that we just wouldn't want to have in our lives.

Clifford Chanin: We should probably [stop here]. [laughter]

00:43:47 Peter Bergen: So the question is like, what is also keeping you back? And that's another. So I went down to Quantico, and I talked to this counterterrorism behavioral analyst. And it was an absolutely fascinating discussion and prompted me to kind of get interested in this question of threat management. And they said the other thing they look at is like, A, how far are you down the pathway to violence? But B, what are the inhibitors that might prevent you from carrying out an attack?

00:44:12 So are you married? Do you have kids? Do you have a job? Do you settle your disputes by sending people letters instead of trying to kill them? [laughter] What are the -- so -- because often people -- the field agents [from the] FBI will say, look, we found this guy who is posting -- he's got an ISIS flag on his Facebook page. And he's made some threats. And they will look at the case and say, you know, is this really somebody we need to be seriously concerned about?

00:44:39 But you know, the system of looking at things tends to be very, very helpful post-facto but not necessarily pre-facto. And you know, many of you have seen the film *Minority Report*. We don't have the ability to read people's souls and see what they're going to do tomorrow. And this raises interesting -- this is why this is a complicated subject because, in my book, I profile a schizophrenic paranoid 26-year-old who the FBI I think by almost any standard entrapped.

00:45:14 And they knew he was schizophrenic and a very damaged person. And they persuaded him to attack a bank in Oakland on behalf of the Taliban. Of course, it was a sting operation. So the FBI I think often can overreach. On the other hand, you know, the FBI is in a -- you know, when they know that Major Nidal Hasan is in contact with Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen 18 times, and they don't follow it up, when they know that -- when they're told that Tamerlan Tsarnaev may be flirting with Russian jihadi groups, when they interview Omar Mateen twice because he's talking about Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah to his --

00:45:58 I mean, in all these cases, almost invariably except in some very rare cases like San Bernardino, the F -- these people have come to the

FBI's attention. So it's a very difficult balance because these sting operations -- I mean, no one is -- from a legal point of view, it's impossible to argue entrapment in these cases because the FBI is very careful to say to you, you know, Clifford, are you really sure you want to go through with this?

00:46:26 And they'll ask you two or three times. And you know, you say you are. And then, from a legal point of view, it's hard to argue entrapment. But I think we all know that, when a schizophrenic, bipolar, very damaged 26-year-old who's got no friends is sort of, you know, persuaded to do something, that feels wrong.

00:46:45 Clifford Chanin: But the big plots don't really get -- I mean, the risk is, of course, that the big plots don't get picked up. There have been successful prosecutions that are not entrapment. There are some entrapment, arguably, cases that have been involved. But there are some cases that have been broken. But the big events that we come to learn about because they either succeed as the Boston Marathon bombing or they fail but not because they were prevented, just because they fail like the Times Square car bomb, those are things that come to the surface really when it's too late.

00:47:18 Peter Bergen: So what's the question?

Clifford Chanin: The question is -- [laughter] the net is so big. There are so many people out there that, you know, you expect something from the FBI that I wonder if it's really possible for them to deliver.

00:48:28 Peter Bergen: Well, I mean that's, I think, a very good point, which is - - I mean, there are two things that appear to be untrue but that are actually both true. And they're also politically hard to admit, which is we've managed and contained the problem very well. By the law of averages, we're going to see terrorist attacks get through. So politically, it's hard to say the first because, if you say we managed to contain the problem and something happens.

00:48:52 And then it's also hard to say w -- you know, because, by the law of averages, there will be terrorist attacks. I think it's hard to sort of -- you know, because American public has sort of, as a result of 9/11, has demanded zero terrorism. But that's just not feasible. You know, there will be people who are not on the FBI's radar or even were on the FBI's radar who, by the way, will legally go out and purchase semiautomatic weapons.

00:48:19 Major Nidal Hasan was on the FBI's radar legally purchased semiautomatic weapons, which is why he was able to kill quite a number of people at Fort Hood. Omar Mateen was on the FBI's radar, legally able to purchase semiautomatic weapons, which is why he was able to kill 49 people.

Carlos Bledsoe who killed an American soldier in Little Rock, Arkansas in 2009 -- to me, a symptom of the extreme dysfunction of our political system is Dianne Feinstein and Peter King of New York both put forward bills sort of bipartisan that, if you're on the no-fly list, you can't buy a gun, which just seems to me such basic common sense.

00:49:00 If you're too dangerous to fly, why are you allowed to buy a semiautomatic weapon. And the NRA has produced a completely misleading talking point on this. There are 81,000 people on the no-fly list.

Only 1,000 -- less than 1,000 are Americans. So it's not like -- you know, the Second Amend -- you have to be such an extreme Second Amendment right zealot to say, well, the Second Amendment rights of the less than 1,000 people on this list who are suspected to be terrorists somehow outweigh the right to live for the dozens of Americans who then were killed by suspected terrorists who were able to legally purchase semiautomatic weapons.

00:49:39 That doesn't make any sense. But the bills to pass such a measure failed in Congress. And to me, we can't -- that seems like such a sort

of basic way to kind of at least -- you're not going to solve this problem. But let's ameliorate it.

If somebody is suspected to be a terrorist, why should they be allowed to buy semiautomatic weapons that would be very, very useful to kill as many people as possible? There's no other reason that -- semiautomatic weapons are not useful for hunting.

00:50:09

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask you though --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- you know, we're coming now to a transition in government. This issue has been raised --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- to say the very least. What you're describing is a situation that is essentially management of the problem not eradicating --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- this problem. And that presumably applies to the situation outside the borders of the United States as well given the five problems that --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

00:50:36

Clifford Chanin: -- need resolution before ISIS or its descendants will disappear.

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: So at what point do you think the test of the new policies and the new approach will meet the road, if you will?

00:50:51 Peter Bergen: Well, I mean, it depends what the American public -- part of it is just a political -- collective political decision. I mean, if we'd had this conversation in 2002 and I predicted in the new decade and a half after 9/11, that 94 Americans would be killed by jihadi terrorists in the United States, on average six a year, that would have seemed -- go back to 2002.

00:51:13 We were concerned with another Al-Qaeda attack. We were concerned about -- I mean, there were great concerns about another large-scale attack. So we've succeeded because we've managed and contained the problem.

It's still a problem. So you know -- but I mean, the idea of -- you know, we're not going to eradicate terrorism. By the way, there's not an insignificant far right wing terrorism in this country which -- they kill people.

00:51:40 And political violence is very much a part of the American -- we're not sitting very far away from where the first attack -- terrorist attack in New York City that happened in 1920 on Wall Street. It was an Italian anarchist who killed I think something more than 20 people with a bomb that was in a wagon.

00:52:00 And you can still see the scars of the attack on what used to be J.P. Morgan bank and is now something else right opposite -- right just around the corner from Wall Street. So the point is political violence is just part of the American story. In the '70s, there were multiple attacks by Puerto Rican nationalists that we have completely

forgotten, the Weather Underground, Black Panthers. There was a lot of political violence in the '70s.

00:52:26 There are 100 hijackings in the '70s, some of them criminal but many of them terrorist in nature. So it's simply ahistorical to think that somehow we're going to eradicate the problem that isn't that susceptible to eradication.

We are going to be able to just do the best we can. We've done a pretty good job. And you know, the problem that we have in this country is orders of magnitude below what they have potentially in Europe where I think it's going to be a generational problem. And obviously, in the Middle East, the problem is off the charts.

00:52:57 Clifford Chanin: So our shelter is nonetheless intact to a considerable degree --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: -- compared to these other places. Let's see if there are a couple of questions from the audience. If you would raise your hand and -- gentleman here. Wait for the microphone, please.

Peter Bergen: And the lady here.

Clifford Chanin: Hang on one sec. We'll hop around. Here first, and then we'll go there.

00:53:23 Audience Member: Thank you for coming. I enjoyed your talk. I was just curious what you think about -- you didn't really talk about it [I didn't think]. The religious element to this, which I always thought was much more fundamental. You seem to put it more in the political realm.

00:53:40 Peter Bergen: Yeah. I mean, I quote the philosopher Immanuel Kant in the book who said something which I think is very wise, which is, "From the crooked timber of humanity, not a straight thing is made." So there is no sort of single explanation that could explain this. In some cases, maybe religion was important to some of these. Certainly, you look -- if Osama bin Laden was here and you were interviewing him and you asked him, "Why did you do this?" he would say, "It's about the defense of Islam."

00:54:08 Bin Laden was a very religious teenager. He was a religious zealot from an early age. I think religion was very important to him. But Dzhokhar Tsarnaev in Boston who was smoking and drinking and smoking weed and chasing girls and -- look at his Twitter feed, which is still out there. You know, it's like his concerns were the concerns of a very average, underperforming American college student, age 19. He was not -- I know more about Islam than this guy I think. And I don't know very much about it.

00:54:42 So was that really about Islam? It wasn't I don't think. It was more about his older brother. So I guess, when you look into each of these cases, it's just -- the single explanation isn't -- it gets more and more complex if you look at each case.

Clifford Chanin: So the balance shifts depending on what we're talking about and the individual cases involved. Let me see over here. There was one. Just wait for the mic, please, ma'am.

00:55:11 Audience Member: You touched on the relationship with bin Laden. What exactly was his grievance or -- well, maybe not exactly but --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Audience Member:-- what was his grievance that started the years-long process --

Peter Bergen: Yeah.

Audience Member: -- for finally attacking us?

00:55:26 Peter Bergen: Yeah. I mean, I think there are two or three parts of that. So this is a religious -- a teenager, age 13, who was singing religious songs about liberating Palestine when he was 13. He would invite friends around to sing, to chant these songs. I mean, he's not a typical teenager. So the issue of Israel and Palestine was very much part of this. And then, you know, the big event to him was the introduction of American troops into Saudi Arabia in 1990 as a result of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, which he saw as infidels trespassing on the Holy Land.

00:56:09 Interestingly, they included women soldiers, which to him was even worse -- made the insult even worse. So bin Laden's -- you know, why he did this was his objection to American foreign policy in the Middle East, which was based on a sort of religious view of, you know -- why did he object to American foreign policy?

00:56:30 He wasn't like Noam Chomsky. He objected because the prophet Muhammed had said let there be no two religions in Saudi Arabia. And he interpreted the American arrival and permanent -- arrival of American troops on Saudi soil as sort of trespassing on the Holy Land, American support for Israel.

00:56:50 So I mean, these were the motivating factors for him. Now, does that excuse anything that he did? Of course not. But these are -- that was his rationale.

Clifford Chanin: Let's see who else. Over there, please, if you'd get a mic.

- 00:57:12 Audience Member: Thank you. You know, being here in New York, we're sort of in the bullseye of, you know, activity, most recently the gentleman from Elizabeth, New Jersey [and the bombs] similar to the Boston Marathon. I know he's still -- they haven't prosecuted him or presented his case. I don't know if you know much about that. But -- and you say that these things are going to happen.
- 00:57:40 But if we're walking down the street, two bombs [were] in a garbage can -- I know it's impossible to stop that. But have you had any information to look into this individual? And are there others of that same ilk who are out there where we could encounter the same thing on a Friday night in Manhattan?
- 00:57:59 Peter Bergen: Yeah. So this is the Afghan-American Rahami who set off a bomb at the Marine Corps race in New Jersey. And luckily, it didn't injure anybody. And then, also in Chelsea, luckily it didn't injure.
- He put the bomb inside a -- in a big kind of container essentially that contained the blast. And we're lucky that it didn't kill people. But yeah. I mean, these things are going to happen.
- 00:58:24 I mean, it's like -- to pretend otherwise -- but you also have to have perspective. I mean, you are 3,000 times more likely to be killed by a fellow American with a gun than you are to be killed by a jihadi terrorist in this country, which says a lot about the relatively low rate of jihadi terrorism successful in this country and the very high rate of gun violence in this country.
- 00:58:45 And so I mean, what should we be seriously concerned about? We should be seriously concerned about -- if we're going to be concerned about stuff -- is the fact that there are 10,000 gun murders a year versus, you know, six jihadi terrorist murders in any given -- we don't process these things in the same way even though they both have the same outcome, which is people die.

00:59:10 And so you know, it goes back to managing and containing the problem. We've done a pretty good job. But unless we want to live in a police state, which I presume most of us don't, we're not going to stop everything because -- until we have a machine that can read people's souls which is unlikely to happen anytime soon, you know, really discerning who is a potentially serious threat and who is somebody just visiting ISIS websites who has really no plans -- that's often a hard thing to discern.

00:59:43 So Rahami, who carried out this attack in Chelsea, that was the first terrorist attack -- attempted terrorist attack of any seriousness in Manhattan since 9/11. But you know, luckily, it didn't work out.

Clifford Chanin: Let me ask a question. How does the rhetoric of our leaders affect the appeal of these groups to people who are disaffected in one way or another?

01:00:12 Peter Bergen: I think that's hard to judge because I don't think there's good data.

Clifford Chanin: One more. Right here. Just wait for the mic, please.

Audience Member: Were the Hanafi Muslims in Washington a precursor to any of this?

01:00:31 Peter Bergen: The Hanafi Muslims in --

Audience Member: Washington, D.C. It was pre-9/11.

Peter Bergen: I'm not familiar. The Hanafi is just one school of Islamic thought. There are four. So I don't [think it] --

Clifford Chanin: Well, we have come to the end. And I will really recommend to you that you take a look because the details -- the stories that we have heard are really outlined in really fascinating detail and well worth following. So please join me in thanking Peter Bergen. [applause]

01:01:03

Peter Bergen: Thank you. Thank you.