



Looming Tower (3/13/2018)

- 00:00:21 Alice Greenwald: Good evening. My name is Alice Greenwald. I'm president and C.E.O. of the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, and it is my great pleasure to welcome you to tonight's program, along with those who are tuning in live via our live web broadcast at 911memorial.org/live. As always, I'm delighted to see our museum members in the audience, and I believe one of our board members, Paula Grant Berry, is also here with us this evening, so welcome.
- 00:00:53 I am personally very excited about tonight's program. Years ago, when we were in the earliest stages of envisioning the museum, Lawrence Wright's book "The Looming Tower" was a narrative we turned to again and again. We were barely five years beyond the 9/11 attacks, and this book provided a cogent historical context we could not find anywhere else.
- 00:01:21 Wright's perceptive narrative and his insight surrounding al-Qaeda and the efforts to track the group both before and after 9/11 deeply informed our understanding of these topics. It is hardly an overstatement to say that "The Looming Tower" sits on many bookshelves in the museum offices. We recognize the significance of this story within the overall narrative of 9/11 and are tremendously thankful to producers Dan Futterman and Alex Gibney for sharing it in such a vivid and engaging format on Hulu.
- 00:01:55 We are also truly privileged to host tonight's conversation, and I'd like to take a moment to introduce our panelists. First, of course, is Lawrence Wright himself, acclaimed author, screenwriter, playwright and staff writer for "The New Yorker" magazine.

One of eight nonfiction books and one novel that he has written, "The Looming Tower" spent eight weeks on "The New York Times" best-seller list, and has been translated now into 25 different languages. It won multiple awards, and "Time" magazine pronounced "The Looming Tower," and I quote, "One of the best 100 nonfiction books ever written."

00:02:34 Wright's talents also extend into screenwriting and theater. Highlights include two one-man plays and cowriting the film "The Siege," starring Denzel Washington, Bruce Willis, and Annette Bening.

I'm also thrilled to introduce Ali Soufan, whom I've also had the pleasure of meeting previously. Ali is a former FBI supervisory special agent who investigated and supervised highly sensitive cases, including the East Africa embassy bombings, the attack on the U.S.S. Cole, and the events surrounding 9/11.

00:03:10 Like Lawrence Wright, Ali Soufan has been both an adviser and an inspiration for our work. Soufan had a distinguished career in the FBI, including serving on the Joint Terrorism Task Force, FBI New York office, where he coordinated both domestic and international counterterrorism operations.

00:03:31 He has received numerous awards and commendations for his counterterrorism work, including the Director of the FBI's Award for Excellence in Investigation, the Respect for Law Enforcement Award for "relentless pursuit of truth and bringing terrorist subjects before the bar of justice," and a commendation from the U.S. Department of Defense that labeled him "an important weapon in the ongoing war on terrorism."

00:03:59 He is a leading national security and counterterrorism expert, currently the chief executive officer of The Soufan Group, a consulting, training, and management group that seeks to leverage the expertise and real-world operational experience of a select cadre of intelligence, law enforcement, policy, and security professionals. He is also the author of

"The New York Times" top ten best-seller-- I don't know when you guys have time to write, I honestly don't—

(laughter)

00:04:29 Alice Greenwald: "The Black Banners: The Inside Story of 9/11 and the War Against al-Qaeda," and the newly released "Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State."

Finally, we are joined by actor Wrenn Schmidt, who lends her immense talent to the portrayal of the ambitious analyst and ruthless tactician Diane Marsh in Hulu's "The Looming Tower." Schmidt has worked in television, film, and theater, and is a well-respected and versatile actress.

00:04:59 She's appeared in such hit television shows as "Boardwalk Empire" and "The Americans," and in films including Christopher Denham's action-thriller "Preservation" and Michael Bay's "13 Hours: The Secret Soldiers of Benghazi."

We are extremely fortunate to have this distinguished panel with us tonight, and I'd like to thank them, along with Hulu and Legendary Television, for making this program possible. We are also deeply grateful to the David Berg Foundation for supporting the museum's 2017-2018 public program series.

00:05:34 Without further ado, please join me in welcoming Lawrence Wright, Ali Soufan, and Wrenn Schmidt in conversation with the museum's executive vice president and deputy director for museum programs, Clifford Chanin. Thank you.

(applause)

00:05:56 Clifford Chanin: Thank you so much. Welcome to the panel. Welcome to everybody here. You know, for us, as Alice said, who have lived with this material, particularly-- to a very large degree-- material that Lawrence Wright was one of the initial interpreters of, it's particularly exciting to see this story brought to the screen and shared as widely and-- judging from the energy of this audience-- as popularly as it has been shared.

00:06:24 Just to give you some ground rules for this, we are going to show some clips from the series, but no particular spoiler alerts here, but just so we all start on the same page, we'll start with the trailer for the series, and just give you an idea, if you don't already have it, of what "The Looming Tower"-- how it handles these materials.

00:06:47 (clip begins)

John O'Neill: This isn't a war about one man. His people actually believe.

Richard Clarke: I have to say that I agree with John on this one.

Martin Schmidt: You are making a mistake, sir.

Richard Clarke: There's simply too much risk.

Martin Schmidt: Someday, this administration will be remembered for the risks it didn't take.

Woman (singing): The tide is high It's sink or swim My only rival is within

(card reader beeps)

00:07:16 Reporter: Bin Laden has made these threats before, but this time, he put a time cap on it, saying that whatever violence awaits will occur within the next few weeks.

John O'Neill: What I need you for is to figure out what happens next, so we can stop it. How many Arabic speakers do we have in the Bureau? Eight Arabic speakers out of more than 10,000 agents. That's how seriously our government takes this threat.

Woman (singing): Kingdoms rise and kingdoms end My only rival is within

00:07:47 John O'Neill: You got a stash of intel that you refuse to share with my agents.

Martin Schmidt: You don't know how many people might be in danger by being privy to information that you are not cleared for.

George Tenet: Might I make a suggestion? Use the chain of command—it exists for a reason.

Richard Clarke: For them who are here in the room to those who are watching on television, your government failed you.

00:08:15 John O'Neill: I really wish people would stop telling me to calm down. There are bombs going off around the world. That doesn't make me feel calm!

Woman (singing): My only rival is within

00:08:48 (clip ends)

Clifford Chanin: That does a wonderful job as a teaser, but anyone who's seen the episodes knows that there's a lot more going on there, but, Larry, it seems to me, there are two simultaneous stories here that are being told. There's the story of the hunt for bin Laden, and there's the story of the hunt for information between the C.I.A. and the FBI. Now, you go into this at great length in your book, but how did you feel about bringing this to a dramatic setting, and was the essence of it as clear to you in a dramatic setting as it was in documenting this for historical purposes in your book?

00:09:23 Lawrence Wright: Well, Cliff, I was reluctant to bring it into a dramatic expression for many years. I... You know, there's something hallowed about 9/11, and you don't treat it casually. And I, I was distrustful of what might happen to it, and Ali and I talked about it. We realized something was gonna be done, whether we liked it or not, and so I decided I would try to get in front of this and, and produce it myself.

00:09:58 And what, what I'd learned in the interim, since I published the book, is that television changed. Now, you know, you got ten episodes shot in eight countries and, you know, the, the kind-- the quality of the actors and the writers and the directors was so much better, and I found, you know, we-- when we found Dan Futterman, we had a, a leader that I thought we could entrust this project to.

00:10:30 And I got to say, Hulu's also been a terrific partner. So I'm very pleased with how it came out, but it certainly overcame a lot of apprehension I had before this project.

Clifford Chanin: Ali, you lived it, and this is not the first place to take on this issue of the tensions between the FBI and the C.I.A. in the lead-up to 9/11, but how did it look to you as a dramatization of these issues? Did it ring true to your experience?

00:10:59 Ali Soufan: Well, drama is the name of the game here. However, I think Larry and Danny and Alex, the, you know, all the writers, they truly stayed true to the investigative part of the story.

So you see, for example, an operation in Albania. That actually happened. A plot was really, you know, stopped in Albania. And you see the East Africa embassy bombing, and how all these events led to the U.S.S. Cole, and how the U.S.S. Cole led to 9/11. So these elements are, you know, true, and a lot of, you know... We look into 9/11, and we think it just happened out of thin air. It did not happen out of thin air. And there were a lot of things that took place before, and we all messed up, you know?

00:11:48

As Richard Clarke said, actually in reality and in the scene, "Your government failed you, we messed up," regardless to whose fault it is. You know, this place became a holy place because of the way we messed up at 9/11. You know, I think now, and I just wanted to follow up with what Larry said, the reason that I agreed to participate in this-- and I was very hesitant to be part of anything that has to do with 9/11-- I lost a lot of friends on that day, it's very emotional in so many ways for me to even, you know, be in this place.

00:12:23

However, I think, uh, I think the reason I finally decided to do it, because you talk to so many people, especially young people, they have no idea what happened on 9/11. They just know 9/11. They know an event that changed their life. We live in a totally different world because of that event. Larry did a phenomenal job in being one of the very first people, if not the first person, to actually, you know... It took him five years to investigate what happened and put it in the, in that book, "The Looming Tower." That's why it's one of the best books, nonfiction books ever written.

00:12:56

But also, at the same time, you know, this history has, has been written. This history has been told, has been documented, but it hasn't been shown to the American people. And I think, you know, every American have the right to know what happened, what are the events that led into 9/11, because only then we can have a sense of understanding of what happened.

00:13:21 Only then we can have a sense of closure. Only then we can start challenging politicians who use fear in order to control our lives every day. And I think this, this program is extremely important in order to get to that sense of, of understanding of the events that led to 9/11 and what happened on 9/11.

00:13:43 Clifford Chanin: Wrenn, so they've-- Larry and Ali-- have framed this as perhaps not just another project, so, you know, how do you come into this from outside of this and take on these serious issues? How much of "The Looming Tower" do you feel behind you as compared to taking on an acting job and obviously, trying to do it as well as you can?

00:14:07 Wrenn Schmidt: It's enormous. I mean, it's just both a gift as an actor to be part of a story that you know is deeply important and relevant and should be something that's part of a national discussion. But at the same time, I think that it's fair to say every person on that set felt an enormous weight, as well, because we wanted to do what we could to do justice to this story.

00:14:37 At the same time, I mean, it's, I mean, how, how-- that's a momentous, incredible task. How do you even begin to approach what that event is? For every-- I mean, it was interesting. On the way up here, a couple of us were talking about where we were that day. And the phrase that I kept hearing over again was, "I'll never forget." And then they would talk about the memory.

00:15:01 And, I mean, it's, it's a DNA-changing experience for our country-- Maggie Haberman said that, and I thought that's the best, that's the best description I've ever heard of somebody talking about what happened that day. So I, I feel like our crew, the actors, the writers, our directors, we all brought a huge sense of responsibility to work every day.

Clifford Chanin: How did you prepare for playing a C.I.A. officer analyst? We talked a little bit before, and just, how do you get into that realm, not talking so much about the personality of the character, but the realm that the character operates in?

00:15:41 Wrenn Schmidt: Well, the C.I.A. is famously secretive.

(laughter)

Wrenn Schmidt: To say the least-- understandably. So my kind of starting point was Larry's book. But it was interesting, because I felt like the, the players within the FBI were so much more tangible to me than the people at the C.I.A. I felt like I got a sense of, you know, who Ali was, who John was, like, what their personalities were like.

00:16:06 And then as far as the C.I.A., it just felt like having a telescope looking out into the ocean. (laughs) Like, the horizon. And being, like, "I can't see anything. "I don't understand anything about who, who people are that work there." So the next, my next point of reference was a book called "Ghost Wars" by Steve Coll, which is about the war in Afghanistan and the C.I.A.'s presence there from, I think, the beginning of that war to 9/11.

00:16:36 And it's just about really the C.I.A. and their operations. And that, to me, fleshed out the ways in which personality might shape the C.I.A.'s mission or color how someone might look at a certain situation. It also felt like it gave me a huge context for how someone like bin Laden could become who he became in secrecy. Well, I don't know if "secrecy" is the right word. I, I feel like he was kind of doing it openly, because he's issuing all of these fatwas, but I think to an American, you know, he's...

00:17:13 Clifford Chanin: "Who's paying attention?" is the question.

Wrenn Schmidt: Well, exactly. So I just felt like I needed to have some kind of understanding. And then the next thing I did was, I spoke with a former field officer who had been in the C.I.A. for 25 years, and she was a phenomenal resource as far as trying to understand who wants to work at the C.I.A., why.

00:17:34 How does the C.I.A. function within our country's... It's not our government, but as far as, like, the different agencies that are in place to protect us, like, what do, what are they doing? How are they doing it? How do the different departments work with each other? So, that was kind of my next step. And then lastly, our scripts. You know, 'cause then, at that point, you just hope you know enough to speak these words and not feel like a total charlatan.

00:18:06 Clifford Chanin: Mm-hmm.

Wrenn Schmidt: Which is really... I wanted to be able to talk about what's going on in the show with some kind of knowledge that felt like it was in my body at that point. And then you go to the scripts.

Clifford Chanin: All right, and Ali mentioned this, in terms of the telling of history these years later, so we're now, you know, coming on 17 years afterwards and your book is within the immediacy of 9/11. Is it your experience of that book and its own life and transformation here, how have you seen the memory or the impact of 9/11 change over that period of time?

00:18:43 Is this a different way of getting the same message across? Or has the message changed and therefore the medium has to change?

Lawrence Wright: One of the things that motivated me was, I realized, you know, there were young people for whom, you know, 9/11 is not part of their lived experience. And, um, the... It's one of the reasons we wanted to work with Hulu, 'cause it's known as "the young people's channel."

00:19:07 And I wanted to find a way for them to make sense of what had happened on that day. And the book is there-- it'll always be there. But the, uh... So many years have passed, and yet there has been no sense of

accountability for the failure to stop the plot when it might have been stopped. Had the bureau and the agency cooperated, in particular, had they cooperated with Ali, but the... You know, there was a chance to keep this from happening. And I often reflect on how different our world would be had that plot been stopped.

00:19:47 It's just unimaginable to think about, not just how many more people would be alive, but, you know, we wouldn't be involved in these wars... (stammers) So many things, the security state that we've built up to protect ourselves, all of these things that are the, the result of that, no one has ever been held to account, and probably they never will be.

00:20:11 So, in some sense, we're trying to make a presentation to people so that in their own minds, they can look at what we think happened as clearly as we can imagine it and get a sense of what was the drift of events and why did this happen to us and why couldn't we have stopped it.

Clifford Chanin: There's a clip, and I will go to clip one, which sort of gets at this issue of the FBI and the C.I.A. cultural conflict, if that is the best way to describe it. And, Ali, I'm gonna ask you to comment on it from the point of view of having lived that conflict, not necessarily in the dramatic context, but in your own history, so, please.

00:20:53 (clip begins)

Richard Clarke: Thank you for making yourselves available once again. Thanks especially to those who travel in-- John.

Martin Schmidt: I come from all the way across the river.

Richard Clarke: You do, and the American people owe you a debt of gratitude.

Martin Schmidt: (chuckles)

Richard Clarke: Let's get status updates before moving ahead-- General?

General: The details of continuing ops are there for you to read. The headline is our readiness in Senegal to evacuate from Guinea-Bissau, if the military coup spills over.

00:21:21

Richard Clarke: Good. Thank you, General-- Martin?

Martin Schmidt: Nothing new this week.

John O'Neill: You have nothing new?

Martin Schmidt: That's what I said, John.

John O'Neill: Hmm. You think I'm a complete moron?

Martin Schmidt: You interested in an answer to that question?

John O'Neill: Can I remind you of NS Directive 30, signed by President Reagan, and PRD-44 signed by President Clinton?

Martin Schmidt: Thank you for the memories.

John O'Neill: Not your choice when you share intelligence. You're required to share it with the FBI and everybody else in this room.

00:21:49 Martin Schmidt: I have nothing new, Richard.

John O'Neill: What's going on in Albania, Marty? You got a hard drive from Ahmed Salama Mabruk that mentions Albania. Where's Mabruk? Why hasn't the FBI had a chance to question him? What's on his hard drive? You got a stash of intel that you refuse to share with my agents.

Martin Schmidt: If we were in possession of such a computer, and I'm not confirming that we are, it would be a foreign intelligence matter, not a law enforcement matter.

00:22:16 John O'Neill: So you do have the hard drive.

Martin Schmidt: I don't know how you reached that...

John O'Neill: How would you know if it was a law enforcement matter or a foreign intelligence matter if you haven't looked at the hard drive?

Martin Schmidt: If we did have any intelligence whatsoever, it would be for us to decide how best to use it before you do what you always do: go around the globe arresting people and putting them on trial. Before you blow a possible gold mine of information and render it utterly useless.

00:22:43 (clip ends)

Clifford Chanin: So that, in the dramatic sense, captures the conflict very well. How did you live that? What, what was that like?

Ali Soufan: Well, look, you know, the FBI and the C.I.A. are two different organizations, so definitely, you know, they have different missions and sometimes informations were not shared. But from my own experience,

when I joined the FBI, it was a totally different organization. You know, we, we were working very closely with the C.I.A. We have C.I.A. people assigned to the Joint Terrorism Task Force. My God, you know, my first partner was a C.I.A. officer, and I worked a lot and was detailed a lot to the C.I.A. to include the Albania operation that they are discussing here.

00:23:21 So, I look at the events before 9/11 very differently, and I was living it, than I look at the events after 9/11. Because after 9/11, it was a death of innocence for me. After 9/11, I knew that I was sitting with people, asking for information about individuals, I'm looking for them with my team in Yemen, and the people in our government knew that they were here in the United States, and they didn't tell me about it until they flew freakin' planes to these buildings.

00:23:53 So this happened—this happened. We had information that was not shared. And this is not Larry Wright's side of the story. This is not Ali Soufan's write of the story. If you look at the "9/11 Commission Report," you will see that. You will see that the best, you know... If information was shared to the FBI team investigating the U.S.S. Cole, you know, was shared on a timely basis, 9/11 could've been stopped at its early stages.

00:24:18 If you look at the C.I.A. I.G. Report, the very first finding that the information were not shared with the FBI or the State Department or the I.N.S., or with any other entity, frankly, in the U.S. government on timely basis, so this is accurate. We cannot just put our head in the sand and say that did not happen because kumbaya, let's all live together.

00:24:38 We need accountability. Guess what, folks. We didn't have an accountability for 9/11. Right? What happened? The people who were pointed at by all the investigations that they are to be held legally responsible for 9/11-- and if you want to know who they are, read the C.I.A. I.G. Report-- those people later gave the administration what they want, and they took us, took us to a war in Iraq.

And instead of being held accountable, they get a freakin' medal. They were the same people who did torture, and instead of getting

accountable, they get promoted. And they continue to get promoted. This is the reality.

00:25:14 Without accountability, we're gonna keep going from one national security disaster to another. What do you think Russians now-- even the Russians have people to work with them in D.C. Why? Because people know. They're not gonna be held accountable. They're not gonna be held - accountability is extremely important. So maybe, maybe we cannot have an accountability in a legal sense. No one is gonna be arrested for what happened on 9/11 or torture or the war in Iraq or lying to the American people or the deaths of 3,000 Americans or hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, 5,000 coalition troops. Nobody is gonna be held accountable for that. But maybe we can have an accountability from a cultural and public sense. And this is what show is about.

00:25:55 Clifford Chanin: You know, the, the drama here also comes down to a conflict between the two main characters in that scene, Marty Schmidt, based on a C.I.A. senior person, and John O'Neill, who you worked with very closely. Was that a part of this dynamic? Larry Wright, in the book, "The two men most responsible for putting a stop to bin Laden and al-Qaeda..." O'Neill and Scheuer, "...and yet they disliked each other intensely, an emotion that reflected the ingrained antagonism of the organizations that they represented."

00:26:30 Ali Soufan: Absolutely, that's true. What Larry said is, is very true, and actually, that person that you mentioned, if you go and Google what he said about John O'Neill in a hearing, in congressional hearing, and I quote, he said, "The only good thing that happened in America on 9/11 is, the building fell on John O'Neill." This is a real person, this is what he said. You don't believe me, Google it-- it's on YouTube, C-SPAN. So, this is real.

00:26:58 And again, you know, we, we need to look into these things. And I'm sorry I'm being emotional about this, but we need to look into these things. These, these events changed the world and we cannot just do this kumbaya. We cannot just bury our head in the sand and say, "Oh, everything okay, you know? Let's..." Look, I, I, as I said before, I, I have

nothing but total admiration to so many people in the C.I.A. and in the FBI and the other intelligence community.

00:27:24

They kept me alive, I worked with them in the field. You don't know the difference between who's an FBI and who's C.I.A. when we're working together in Afghanistan or Yemen or Iraq. You know, we're all fighting for the same thing. We're all... we all took the same oath to defend this country against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

We take these things seriously. I have nothing but great things to say about many of the people that I worked with. But when mistakes are done, we have to say that, you know, that's what happened. We cannot just sugarcoat it. And, and both the FBI, the C.I.A., the intelligence community, our government, they failed us. And that's why we have this museum today. It's in memory of that failure.

00:28:04

Clifford Chanin: All right-- sorry. Larry, this is a through-line through so much of the story, that there are moments, it seems, where a breakthrough is possible, and then this wall that is keep... It keeps being referred to, this wall pops up and keeps the two agencies apart. Now, there were legal reasons for that and historical reasons for that.

But talk a little bit about that historical relationship, and how it changed, and the conflict between the two agencies, and certainly the institutional part, but also the personal part that you write about in the book.

00:28:35

Lawrence Wright: Well, there are several tiers of this. One is, the institutional missions are different. The, the C.I.A.'s mission is to gather intelligence, and try to figure out what's gonna happen. And the FBI's mission is to arrest people and bring them to justice.

And, as in that clip, you know, where Peter Sarsgaard says, "You'll do what you always do, you'll blow our investigation and put people on trial," well, of course they would. That's exactly what the FBI's supposed

to do. But those two missions sometimes are at odds, and then there are people within those-- Ali has had good experiences working with a lot of the C.I.A. people-- but there are people whose... who take on that antagonism personally, as in the case of John O'Neill and Michael Scheuer, who represented perspectives inside their respective agencies, but made it personal.

00:29:36 And, and that created a greater rift. And then there were, let us say, phony legal reasons. The wall that is often referred to is not really-- it was, it was more of a myth of sorts inside the agencies that you couldn't pass information from the intelligence to the criminal and vice versa. And yet, it became well established that a criminal agent in the FBI, for instance, could not have access to the intelligence that the intelligence portion of the division was gathering, and, and vice versa.

00:30:12 Well, this was nuts, because the bureau itself didn't know what the bureau knew. And it made-- it was a terrible, terrible handicap, and so, these structures that were built up, the institutional animosity, the personal rivalry, and then this kind of "phony wall," made it really, really difficult for the people inside the bureau to do their job.

00:30:40 Clifford Chanin: So, Wrenn, you're playing... definitely one of the protagonists in this institutional conflict. Let's go to a clip of a moment where the, sort of, the intensity, that monomaniacal focus, becomes really the feature of the folks in Alec Station charged with finding or uncovering bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and I want to-- when we've seen the clip-- I want to talk about, you know, generating, or representing, that kind of monomaniacal focus. So we're talking about clip number five.

00:31:20 (clip begins)

Richard Clarke: No.

Martin Schmidt: Richard...

Richard Clarke: We do not have an unequivocal M.O.N. from the president. Until we do, the answer is no.

Martin Schmidt: In that case, we should revisit the Tarnak operation we were advocating last year.

Richard Clarke: Which is?

Diane Marsh: We incentivize Pashtun tribesman...

Martin Schmidt: Cash payments, essentially.

Diane Marsh: ...the ones who are in and out of al-Qaeda encampments all the time, to kidnap UBL from his main camp at Tarnak Farms. They stash him in a safehouse in one of their villages. After several days, when...

Martin Schmidt: When things calm down.

Diane Marsh: ...we rendition him anywhere we like.

Martin Schmidt: Egypt, perhaps.

00:31:50

Diane Marsh: Where they have, shall we say, more latitude in terms of interrogation techniques. If he dies in custody under Mubarak, the blood's not on our hands.

Martin Schmidt: And if he dies in Afghanistan resisting the kidnapping, we haven't violated the terms of the M.O.N.

Richard Clarke: You don't even know where bin Laden is, Martin. How can you kidnap him when you can't find him?

00:32:12

(clip ends)

Lawrence Wright: Good question, right?

Clifford Chanin: So... So, you know, you are totally focused on this idea that, to Richard Clarke and to the outside, seems crazy. But there it is, the most logical conclusion you could come up with at that moment in that time.

Wrenn Schmidt: Well, it's interesting, 'cause when you asked... When you asked the question before the clip played, I wasn't quite sure how to answer your question, because I oftentimes feel, especially in Q&As, that I don't tend to think of what I do in this particular format. But what's interesting watching that is, it reminded me that one of the big questions I asked about her and Martin Schmidt was, "Why are they doing what they're doing?"

00:32:55

And the thing that kept resonating for me is, they're patriots. I mean, people who work at the C.I.A. or work at the FBI, they are-- most of the time-- lifelong public servants who have committed their lives to protecting our country, and I think that these two people, as depicted in the series-- although they're composite characters-- represent that. I mean, they eat, live, sleep, dream hunting down bin Laden.

00:33:23

There is nothing more important to them, and I think that's part of what drives them, is that they're... At the end of the day, they know that this person is a real threat, and people don't seem to be paying attention, and that's crazy-making. And I think that when somebody's not listening, you just... You turn up the volume.

So, for me, I feel like it really came down to, these people are patriots and they have a job to do. I don't know how people will see Diane Marsh and Martin Schmidt after the show's conclusion, but I think ultimately, that's where their hearts are, even if, you know, choices that they made were obviously... devastating mistakes.

00:34:06 Clifford Chanin: Larry, how much of this is just the function of so few people in pre-9/11 times really focusing on this, becoming completely immersed in it, seeing this gathering storm, and not knowing what to do, bring attention to it, and becoming more and more driven by the sense that we know something that no one is paying attention to, and disaster is looming?

00:34:32 Lawrence Wright: Both John O'Neill and, and the Martin Schmidt figure were isolated in their own bureaus. You know, Alec Station was the virtual bin Laden station, and when it was fitted up, people seconded people from other departments-- the people they didn't want.

00:34:56 And, you know, it was known in the, in the C.I.A. as "The Island of Lost Toys." And Martin Schmidt, the, the figure that we talk about, they were mainly women that worked for him, and some people called them the Manson Family. You know, they were seen as being kind of weird fanatics, and they were totally devoted, but the more alarmed they grew, the more they were seen as being oddballs. And a similar dynamic was playing out in the bureau, not quite as dramatic perhaps, but O'Neill was a catalyzing figure. People loved him or hated him.

00:35:40 And what I'm... I'm saying that these were powerful emotions. They weren't-- people were not indifferent to John O'Neill. They were affected by him. And, you know, I met people, they kind of called themselves "Sons of John." They dressed like him, they talked like him, they, you know, they, they modeled themselves on him, and there were people that wanted to sabotage his career, and I think they did successfully sabotage his career.

00:36:10 His own coworkers. So, you know, these, uh... You can imagine, if you are facing that kind of internal dissent, your own people trying to prevent you from succeeding at your job, which is protecting America, just imagine how that would affect you.

Clifford Chanin: Ali, you were inside this I-49 bureau investigative group focused on bin Laden. Was it that problem of this intense conviction, that you know something is coming and yet you could not convince the larger bureau or the larger world that this was something that really needed to be dealt with?

00:36:53 Ali Soufan: I think it depends what stage are you talking about. I mean, at the very, you know, early stage, yes, we had this problem. I mean, my God, with the 1993 attack 25 years ago on the World Trade Center, a lot of people, even prosecutors, refused to believe it's Islamic extremists who possibly did that.

We had a source in the FBI who was providing information about this, and they had to let him go, because they thought, he's working with Egyptian intelligence and was trying to frame, you know, Islamists here-- Egyptian Islamists in New York. I think it changed a little bit after the 1993 East Africa... 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

00:37:30 But also, we had this same problem in trying to convince people that bin Laden was planning to do something. So, on August 7, 1998, with the twin bombings in East Africa, lots of people in Washington did not believe that bin Laden was behind it. They didn't want to believe bin Laden was behind it, because, after all, they claimed bin Laden never did anything against U.S. interests like this before.

You know, he was training people, helping people, involving Somalia a little bit, you know-- who are working against us-- but he did not do something like this. So they claimed at the time it was maybe Hezbollah or some other groups doing that. And I think after, after the 1998 East Africa embassy bombing, the situation changed.

00:38:11 However, if you remember, it had changed in a way that became political, too. You know, when the United States retaliated against the East Africa embassy bombing, it was viewed as a cover-up for the Monica Lewinsky affair that was going on. "Wag the Dog," if you remember these terms, you know, that came up, and for the longest time, terrorism became a partisan issue.

00:38:34 I remember when, you know, in the debate between Gore and Bush, the term "terrorism" didn't even come up once, even though we were there working the U.S.S. Cole. We were pulling the bodies of 17 sailors out of the U.S.S. Cole, because this was connected to this "Wag the Dog" thing.

When the Bush administration came over, too, there was a big, um, kind of effort to convince them that actually, terrorism is real. We shouldn't believe the press clippings about this. And I remember the attorney general, Ashcroft, wanted to cut down the terrorism budget of the FBI, because that thing doesn't really exist.

00:39:13 Terrorism doesn't really exist. So this is, this is a scary thing, when you take national security and you try to, kind of, package it in a partisan way. And that's why I think you... You find a lot of people in the FBI and the C.I.A. are independent. They are not, you know, because we lived through this, and we've seen how both political parties sometimes utilize these things for their own interests, so it became very difficult to convince people. It became very difficult to convince, for example, the Bush administration on the U.S.S. Cole, that bin Laden was behind it. I remember-- and it's part, I think, of the record of the 9/11 Commission-- um, you know it was said by the administration then, but... We didn't retaliate on the U.S.S. Cole, I think Wolfowitz said that. We didn't retaliate because it was a stale case.

00:40:02 Tell that to the families who lost people in the U.S.S. Cole. So it was always difficult to try to present terrorism as it is to political administrations-- both Democrats and Republicans-- because everyone wanted to put their own partisan spin on it.

Clifford Chanin: You know, there's a moment where the young Ali Soufan emerges in the film...

Ali Soufan: I'm still young.

(laughter)

Lawrence Wright: We're talking about the other young one, yeah.

Ali Soufan: Oh, the more handsome guy-- okay, I got you.

00:40:32 Clifford Chanin: I don't really want to make the comparisons, but we're-- as a young agent, let us put it that way, you sort of emerge as someone with a different perspective, and obviously your background, your language command is there, but also your knowledge of this, so I want to ask about clip two. Let's play that, and then talk about the reality of the scene as compared to your own sense of when you came into your own in this case.

00:41:10 (clip begins)

Ali Soufan (character, in clip): The claim also contains the demand for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Arabian Peninsula. If you recall the February fatwa? The retreat from the Arabian Peninsula is a particular obsession for bin Laden and al-Qaeda. It has never been remotely as important to Hezbollah-- which is Shia, not Sunni-- and which is far more focused on the ultimate elimination of the State of Israel. Those agendas seem to me disconnected from the bombings in East Africa.

00:41:46 John O'Neill: Ah, for fuck's sake-- come on, Dick. We're simply arguing for case control. We're not trying to get you to pronounce a guilty verdict.

Our office knows more about al-Qaeda than anybody. WFO will be playing catch-up, and they're a pawn of Alec Station. Schmidt just wants the case over there so he can direct it remotely.

Richard Clarke: John, calm down.

John O'Neill: I really wish people would stop telling me to calm down! There are bombs going off around the world. That doesn't make me feel calm!

00:42:10

Richard Clarke: I want you to calm down because you're right.

John O'Neill: I'm sorry?

Richard Clarke: You're right. You should have this case.

John O'Neill: Oh.

Richard Clarke: You're welcome. Where were you born?

Ali Soufan (character, in clip): Lebanon, sir.

Richard Clarke: Beverly, would you get me Louis Freeh on his cell phone?

Beverly (on speaker): Yes, sir.

Richard Clarke: He's good-- don't lose him.

00:42:34

(clip ends)

Clifford Chanin: Is that, uh, close to what happened?

Ali Soufan: Well, I didn't know what Richard Clarke told John O'Neill, but, um... Look, you know, I was born in Lebanon.

(laughter)

Ali Soufan: Uh, it's, um... The whole thing did not happen... In reality, it was all cables and, you know, teletypes going between offices, and John O'Neill on the phone. These documents, though, with the highlights and the statements, that is true. That, you know, I kept statements, almost every statement bin Laden ever did.

00:43:17

I think one of the reasons I end up with John O'Neill in the first place, when I came from grad school straight to the FBI, I wrote a memo saying that there is a dangerous guy, his name is Osama bin Laden, we better pay attention to. That was in 1997, not knowing at the time that there are some folks in... One person from the FBI and some folks from the C.I.A., you know, Alec Station, who were already focusing on Osama bin Laden.

00:43:42

So that document went all the way to John. He read it, and this is when I, you know, he start asking me about these kind of things, and I always kept a record of every statement bin Laden did. Sometimes I end up, you know, translate-- sitting, literally sitting down and translating them.

So this thing with highlights and with the comparing the statements to the claims of responsibility and to the fatwa of 1998 and to the declaration of jihad of August 23, 1996, all these kind of things, this is, you know, is real. This is very, very real, yeah, absolutely.

00:44:16 Clifford Chanin: All right. John O'Neill, I mean, the central character in this story, tell us about him.

Lawrence Wright: When I... After 9/11, I was in... I live in Austin, Texas, and so I... Some of you may remember the planes were grounded, and I couldn't get to New York and I was desperate to find a way to involve myself in this, what I saw as the biggest event in my lifetime.

00:44:45 And so I was looking at obituaries that were streaming online at the time, and on "The Washington Post's" site, there was this obituary of John O'Neill. And it said that he had been head of counterterrorism in New York, and that he had been washed out of the bureau because he had taken classified information out of the office, and then he'd gotten a job as the head of security at the World Trade Center, and I thought, "How ironic. He didn't get bin Laden—bin Laden got him."

00:45:19 And I thought this would be something that I would need to write about because he would be a character who could take the reader into the world of counterterrorism and show us why it failed. And later I realized it, it really wasn't an irony that John O'Neill was in these buildings. When he took that job, his friends, some of them, said, "John, you'll be safe now because they already hit the trade center in '93." And he said, "No, they'll come back to finish the job," so he placed himself at Ground Zero.

00:45:56 It was Greek. He was a driven figure, and he was... Had an incredibly messy personal life. I met three women who thought they were engaged to him...

(laughter)

Lawrence Wright: ...and he had a wife and two children in New Jersey, and they all met at his funeral. It was probably the worst funeral imaginable, but, um... So he was chaotic. He was colorful. He came from New Jersey, he had an accent. When he first joined the bureau, J. Edgar

Hoover thought he might be connected to the mob because he looked such, like such a mobster, and he dressed like one.

00:46:37 And if you've ever been in an FBI office, or almost any government office, you know, the furniture is made in prison, and, you know, they're drab, you know, and he had all that taken out. He had all these beautiful, you know, coffee table brought in and he had... He would always have fresh flowers. And he kept a... There was a book on his coffee table called "Iris Is the Flower That Drives Men Wild."

00:47:09 I mean, this is not your usual FBI agent, right? They brought in a carpet, you know? All of this was... to distinguish him from anybody else. And when he came to New York, he set out... He brought in all these Rolodexes, and he gave them to his secretary and he had a list of... I've forgotten how many hundred people that he had to meet in the next six months, and she, you know, set up appointments, and within six months, he had met them all, and he called himself the sheriff of New York, and I think that was probably an apt title.

00:47:46 Clifford Chanin: Wrenn, you know, this is immediate history. This is so close, as you said before. This is something that we feel still, every day, and yet, Larry describes this almost mythic figure, and his fate, in terms of Greek drama. Are you creating-- and you're a composite character, so you're not a particular person-- but are you creating a real person and a mythic figure at the same time, given the stakes involved in all of this?

00:48:14 Wrenn Schmidt: I don't know the answer to that question. Um... I feel like that might be true for John O'Neill. I don't know if that's true for Diane Marsh. Um... I don't know.

Clifford Chanin: Does it resonate to you that there are going to be people watching this in a way that they don't watch a standard drama?

Wrenn Schmidt: Yes, yes, for sure.

00:48:39 Clifford Chanin: They're gonna be investing something in your character, whether they love her or they hate her.

Wrenn Schmidt: Right.

Clifford Chanin: And they're gonna find power in, in what you're representing in, in this drama.

Wrenn Schmidt: Well, I certainly hope so, but I also feel like that, um... if that were to happen, that that would be because our writing is so extraordinary, and we have such an incredible group of people supporting all of us as actors trying to bring these people to life.

00:49:06 So I feel like I can't fully take credit for that, because, for me, when I read a script, I fully try and give myself over to what's happening on that page. And I feel like that sounds, it sounds... I don't know. I feel like it's hard, maybe, for somebody who's not an actor to understand that, but, for me, it's less about me and more about, like, "How do we tell this story? How do I put myself in that room with these other actors and fully try and believe that we're trying to figure out this problem or we're trying to, you know, figure out how to deal with the fact that the FBI is breathing down our neck and wants to know what information we have?"

00:49:49 So, I don't know. For me, it's very much about just giving up any sense of self and just going for what's on the page. So if, if something becomes mythic, or if people have a strong reaction to that, I mean, I hope that's because I gave myself over, but I really do believe that that's because of our work as a whole, like, a whole team.

00:50:10 Clifford Chanin: Ali, how does it feel to be a central figure in this representation of this extraordinary historic event? I mean, your courtship is part of it, your emergence in your profession, your leadership

in these different circumstances. Is that you, or how have you been turned into something else for the Hulu series?

00:50:31 Ali Soufan: It's, it's very awkward and very surreal to, to look at part of your life, see it staring you in the face, especially sometimes that, um... You look at it, and you see how other people are viewing it. Not necessarily how you viewed it yourself, but, uh... But I think, I think it's, it's very different. And one of the things that, you know, I trusted Danny and Larry and, and Alex to do is not to get involved with my character, because then it's gonna be very weird.

00:51:06 I wanted to just focus on, you know, kind of try to stay true to the investigative progress with all the stuff that led into, into 9/11. But, I think... I think it's, you know, one of the weirdest thing for, uh... me watching the show is watching it with... with my wife, Heather, who's, who's here, and then you see Heather being also portrayed on, on the show, and see some of the dates that we have, and then you have all these people calling you, "Did this really happen?"

(laughter)

00:51:40 Ali Soufan: What did we do? (laughs) But, uh... but it's, it's, um... It's-- I understand it's, it's part of the story, but it's always very surreal and very awkward, and, you know, when, when you join the FBI or, you know, any of these intelligence agencies, you just hope that nobody will hear your name ever, and that did not work well for me.

(laughter)

00:52:06 Clifford Chanin: And, you know, John O'Neill, of course, is someone you were very close to, and he brought you into this.

Ali Soufan: Yes.

Clifford Chanin: I mean, and it's a great performance by Jeff Daniels.

Lawrence Wright: Yeah.

Clifford Chanin: And he captures a powerful figure, but is it a recognizable figure to you?

Ali Soufan: I mean, Jeff Daniels did a great job, and when he was meeting all these people who knew John O'Neill, people who loved him or people who hated him, I gave him an advice, and I said, "Look, don't try to be John O'Neill. Create your own John O'Neill, because you're gonna hear so many people saying so many different things, who remember very different things about John."

00:52:43

And, and I think he did a phenomenal job in capturing the emotions that surrounds a great person like, like John. John was a very complicated figure, as, as Larry mentioned. But, however, he was, he was true patriot. And I think the only stability in his life was the FBI and was his work. Everything else did not matter. That's why, in his mind, it doesn't matter having all these girlfriends, because all the things is not reality. His only reality-- and it's, it's very difficult to, to explain it, but, you know, when you sit down with him, he's not a guy who ever bragged about any of these kind of things.

00:53:23

You know, people did not know. You think if, you know, he, he has only, you know, one person that, you know, he's, he's dating. It was, it was a totally different individual to meet John at work rather than the outside. But he was... You know, I, I personally feel that he was a great guy. He'd seen the threats before anyone else. He did command a presence, but also, at the same time, he basically wanted 100% commitment from anybody who works for him.

- 00:53:57 And if you don't give him the 100% commitment, you're not, you're gonna be on the out, and some people in the FBI and other places have problem with that. And, you know, fortunately or unfortunately for me, I was young.
- Clifford Chanin: Younger, younger.
- Wrenn Schmidt: Still young.
- 00:54:18 Ali Soufan: I, um... I didn't have a personal life, you know, as you probably see it on the show, and I was 100% committed to the cause, and I think I am the guy that he can call midnight or 1:00 in the morning or, you know, I'll be having lunch, and he says, "I want you to go to this place." And here I am, I'm on the plane going there. I think, you know, I think it was good and bad, but, but that's the reality.
- 00:54:47 Clifford Chanin: We'll get some questions, but, Larry, I wanted to ask you before we turn to the audience. You know, I'm watching the episodes, and as they unfurl, I'm thinking, "Gee, I know how this turns out, but there are moments of drama here where I don't know how it's going, or I'm hoping it can turn out differently."
- 00:55:06 And I think that's a tribute to what was done here. But, I mean, after all, we're sitting here and it... This is the place where is the end point of everything that you were exploring, but there is this sense, and I wonder if you lived it through the telling of this story, there is this sense of, "Could it be different?" This... Maybe it's just the yearning that what we all experienced here, what we represent here, would not have happened, and we just don't want to look at it in the moments of seeing this drama. But it's a very powerful impact of this, of this series, on me, at least.
- 00:55:39 Lawrence Wright: You know, there—as you were talking, I thought about how, in some ways, there, there are just two kinds of stories. One story is

where you're surprised. You know, events happen that, you know, you, you didn't expect, and you see it unfold.

And then there is this kind of story-- that this story unfortunately is-- where you know what's gonna happen, but it's like watching someone going down the Niagara River, who might not know what's at the end of the river, but you do. And that creates a, a given tension, because you care about the characters. You know where they're going, they don't.

00:56:20 And so, there's, there's inherent drama in that that you can't bring to that other kind of story, because the, the reader or the viewer is the one who is already feeling the loss and the mistakes that the characters... You know, the character doesn't know that he's made mistakes, but you do. And so, you see that, and it's, it's a... It's a different kind of story, but I think it's pregnant with the, the kind of dramatic possibilities that the other kind of story can't convey.

00:56:51 Clifford Chanin: Thank you. Let's see if we have a question or two from the audience, and please wait for the microphone. So hands, please. Let's start with this gentleman here down front.

Man: Thank you. My question's for Ali. First and foremost, I'd like to thank you for all the hard work on your part, trying to prevent the murder of 3,000 innocent civilians. One of those people was my father. In the promo for the event, it says, "The rivalry between the FBI and C.I.A. that may have undermined the coordination to prevent the 9/11 attacks." Do you think any lessons have been learned in the intelligence community since September 11? Thank you.

00:57:35 Ali Soufan: Well, um... Thank you, and sorry for, for your loss. Yeah, absolutely. I think the situation now is a lot better-- way better-- you know, than, than it used to be before. And again, as I mentioned earlier, that a lot of these things that were happening, we did not realize they were happening at that time. I personally didn't realize.

00:58:03 So when I-- the first time I wrote requesting information about a meeting that took place in Southeast Asia, and I was told, "We don't know anything about it," by other people in the government, I believed it. The second time, when we were able, with my team, to collect more intelligence and information about it, and we connected more people to the meeting and more countries to the meeting, and we sent the report... The first one was in November of 1990... No, sorry, November of 2000, and... 2000, after the U.S.S. Cole. The second one was in April. The third one, I believe, was in June, and every time when we, they say no, we took it for granted.

00:58:44 We're trying to work with people, and then, you know, that... Let's find out where these guys are, I... On 9/11, I was in Yemen. I was actually trying to follow up on these leads and see if we can find anything about it in Yemen. When, when 9/11 happened, on September 12, I was handed a folder that included all the information that I was asking for since November of, of 2000. And these things are, you know, documented in so many different, you know, places.

00:59:13 Um... I think, I think it wasn't institutional. I truly believe that. I think it was based on individuals, based on people who decided, "We don't want to share the information, because..." They have their own reason, and frankly, I don't know why. I still don't know why. I'm a person who was interviewed by every, you know, inquiry about 9/11. I researched it myself, I lived it myself, I investigated it myself. And I think I know a lot of the things of what happened on 9/11. There's, there's one question I cannot answer. I have my own assumptions, but I cannot publicly say what I feel, because I really don't know for 100%. And I think... I don't know why, why the information was not shared.

01:00:00 The "why" I don't know, but I know that the information were not shared. I think now the situation is, is a lot better. I think institutionally, both the FBI and the C.I.A. put a lot of protocols in place that prevent individuals from playing this game that people played before 9/11, so I think we're, we're in a way better situation. And, and again, I mean, most of the people in the FBI, most of the people in C.I.A., were not involved in this. They didn't even know about this. And they were as shocked as all of us were shocked on September 12.

01:00:34 It was a small little amount of, small little group of people, in the U.S. government-- not only in the C.I.A., in the U.S. government-- who knew about this, and they decided not to share it to us, even though we were asking about it. It's not like we were not asking about it. We were asking about it. I, I believe now the situation is a lot better in the intelligence community. I think that there is more cooperation, people are working very closely together.

01:00:59 They have the same assessments of many of the threats that's facing our nation, and I think that's, um, you know, hopefully, you know, one... one thing good that happened after 9/11, and that's why we've been able to basically work very closely together to disrupt a lot of plots and threats and we don't see another 9/11 happening, because, or, you know, knock on woods-- there's no wood here. (laughs) I'll knock. You know, nothing, uh... I have to give a lot of credit to the intelligence community, and the way they are working together now.

01:01:35 Clifford Chanin: Another question. In the middle there.

Man: Good evening. Two themes that emerged, one of them being educating younger people who have no memory of that day or perhaps no conception of that day, and also the reference to, to politicians and fear, which foments distrust, particularly in younger people. And now they have the capacity, of course, to look for counter-narratives on the Internet, and live in those counter-narratives for extended period of time.

01:02:11 And I'm wondering if, if that dynamic played any part in, in portraying this story as it was portrayed-- beyond the story itself, but the audience, those who might be struggling to understand what truth is, particularly in the time that we're living in, and how profoundly important it is for younger people to be able to trust in a narrative like this that's appearing on the screen.

Ali Soufan: That's for Larry.

01:02:38 Lawrence Wright: I'll talk a little bit about it. Uh, the, uh... The 9/11 truthers, you know, they used to follow me around when I was making talks and that sort of thing, and it was really, it's interesting, because I've written a lot about cults, and, you know, people that believe things based on nothing, no evidence, but on beliefs, you know, that are in the ether or on the Internet.

01:03:05 And it's, it was always the case that, you know, they believed it for... with... They wouldn't, they wouldn't look at alternative, real explanations. That was the thing that drove me nuts. They didn't read the 9/11 Commission Report, they didn't read my book, they didn't... You know, they, they had an ideology, and they didn't want it assaulted, but they were... They felt free to come to my talks, and, you know, and try to persuade me that the government planted explosives inside these buildings, 'cause they knew al-Qaeda was gonna fail, and they didn't want them to fail. Totally lunatic stuff.

01:03:44 But I think that by putting this kind of story together in a real and persuasive way, that it will affect some of that thinking. At least, I hope so. Because this is terribly damaging for people to... for something, a tragedy as great as this, to be so poorly used to support theories about what kind of government we have, what kind of people we are. It, it... Yeah, you know, I can hardly talk about it, 'cause it makes me so mad.

01:04:17 But it's... This is a very powerful medium. And I don't, I don't think anybody can put up a story that is as comprehensive as we are trying to put up as convincingly as we're doing in this series. And I think it's gonna change a lot of minds.

Clifford Chanin: It also strikes me-- and maybe Ali wants to say something about this-- that, you know, the failures are both failures that are unaccounted for to some degree, as you describe, but also the failures undermine this whole notion that government can actually function properly, so...

01:04:49 Lawrence Wright: Right, yeah. They have a much higher opinion of government's ability to operate than we do.

Clifford Chanin: So, you know, an alternative answer, which, you know, you won't be surprised to hear we encounter some of that here, but an alternative answer is also a response to lack of accountability or transparency about what happened, and the fact that real failures did occur.

01:05:09 Ali Soufan: Yeah, absolutely, and sometimes, we just want to cover it up, and we were gonna, you know, just, "Let's not talk about it," and that's, that's one of the problems, and that's, you know, when you don't have answers, you're gonna-- as you correctly mentioned-- you're gonna look for answers somewhere else.

Clifford Chanin: See if we have one more. Over there, please.

01:05:29 Man: So I have, uh... There it goes-- so I have a question. After '93, everything that happened, after you-- the—everyone looked into Yousef, why did it take from '93 to '98, when we made Osama bin Laden wanted? Was there no connection between bin Laden and Yousef, or what kind of happened, between then?

Clifford Chanin: So just to... the '93 bombing happens in February 1993, and Osama bin Laden is not...

Ali Soufan: 25 years ago.

Clifford Chanin: ...is not indicted until 1998, though there were investigations underway. So what's that-- how do you explain that timeframe?

01:06:01 Ali Soufan: Well, Osama bin Laden had nothing to do with the 1993 bombing. The 1993 bombing, more a cell, former jihadis that were in Afghanistan. Yes, they were trained probably with al-Qaeda. There is some indication that bin Laden, maybe, funded Ramzi Yousef for a little bit, but Ramzi Yousef was not a member of al-Qaeda.

And the time, al-Qaeda was operating totally different. Bin Laden was in Sudan, and his goal was to create a lot of jihadis to go and fight in, in jihadi wars, so his main goal is to send to people to fight in Somalia, and before that in Bosnia, during the Bosnian War.

01:06:40 So al-Qaeda was different, and after he left from Sudan to Afghanistan and, and joined with the Taliban, al-Qaeda mutated to more of a terrorist organization. Even Ramzi Yousef did not, uh-- sorry, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the uncle of Ramzi Yousef-- did not join al-Qaeda until after the East Africa embassy bombing. He did not want to be part of the organization. He wanted to be an "independent terrorist." And I think the, the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings made him believe that bin Laden is not only talking the talk, but also walking the walk.

01:07:17 However, just to put everything in perspective, we actually indicted, in a sealed indictment, indicted Osama bin Laden before the East Africa embassy bombing, here in the Southern District of New York. Him and many of the top leadership in his organization. But we indicted him for his work against our interests, what he's doing in Somalia, what he was doing in other places, for his fatwa of 1996, for the fatwa of 1998, also, so he was indicted before the East Africa embassy bombing. The East Africa embassy bombing was the very first overt attack against U.S. interests, and then the gloves were off. But unfortunately, you know the rest of the story.

01:08:02 Wrenn Schmidt: I feel weird saying this on a panel of experts, but wasn't he also noticed for the money that he was funneling into all of these different organizations?

Ali Soufan: Yeah.

Wrenn Schmidt: I mean, that was, like, a big thing I learned that was fascinating was, oh, the reason he was on the C.I.A.'s radar was because of his, like, his financial reach, and what he was supporting, and that that was when people were...

Ali Soufan: Right, and, and this is one of the things that he was funding, a lot of these groups that sending people to Bosnia, or to Somalia.

Wrenn Schmidt: Mm-hmm.

01:08:33 Ali Soufan: But also there was another dimension to the funding. The funding was definitely accurate, and a lot of times, if you look into the terrorism reports from 1996 and 1995, it says Osama bin Laden is a financier, rather than a, you know-- but during our investigation, we knew that there are more, there were more to that.

Wrenn Schmidt: There was more to the story.

01:08:57 Ali Soufan: You know, he was... For example, al-Qaeda operatives are the people who took Black Hawk down in Somalia. It wasn't Somalis-- they shot it down. They were behind what happened in Somalia. We have names of people, we have their photos, you know, all the individuals who were in Somalia to train and to aid the Somalis. The same thing in Albania. Many of the operatives that you see in Guantanamo today, people who were involved in 9/11, people who were involved in the U.S.S. Cole, were involved in the Bosnian War, and they fought in Bosnia.

01:09:27 So you have to put all these things together in perspective, and that's why indicted Osama bin Laden before the East Africa embassy bombing. Specifically, for these kind of things, we went way beyond the, the financier element, and especially in 1996, after a guy-- we call him Junior, al-Fadl-- came over, and he started providing more intelligence and more

information to the FBI about the organization of Osama bin Laden in Sudan and other places in East Africa.

01:09:56

Clifford Chanin: You know, it's really remarkable that the series, as successfully as it does, brings together this drama with this very real story, so I think, for all of you, it's a great, great accomplishment.

We're gonna close our program with just one reminder: We're going to announce the second half of our spring program schedule on Thursday for members, next Tuesday for the public, so there's an incentive for those of you who aren't members to become members.

01:10:20

But, you know, that said, we really have to thank our panel, particularly someone who was a really critical actor in all of this, and very generously and, you know, with reason for hesitation, came to the museum tonight to be part of this. So please join me in thanking Larry Wright, Wrenn Schmidt, and Ali Soufan.

Wrenn Schmidt: Thank you.

(applause)