CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Ethics Matter: The Future of War, with Andrew Exum

Ethics Matter

Andrew Exum, **James Traub**

Transcript
Introduction

JAMES TRAUB: Good evening. I'm Jim Traub. Welcome to our Ethics Matter series.

Our guest tonight is Andrew Exum, whom I think I should describe by the venerable term of warrior/scholar, though he actually is now something more modern, which is a warrior/scholar /businessman.

Andrew led units in Afghanistan and Iraq. After he did that, he then went to Beirut, learned Arabic, got his master's degree. After he did that, he got a Ph.D. at the Department of War Studies at King's College London.

He has worked with some of the leading think tanks in Washington. He has worked at the Pentagon. He has advised Stanley McChrystal, the former chief military officer in Afghanistan. He has taught a class of mine, where he was a smash hit. He now is working in the private sector at Boston Consulting Group.

So we're really delighted, Andrew, to have you here this evening.

ANDREW EXUM: Thanks.

Remarks

JAMES TRAUB: When you went into the military, it was the 1990s, a time of peace. From what I can tell from reading your book, which is called *This Man's Army*—and I recommend it to any of you—you didn't sign up because you were itching to kill bad guys. And then 9/11 comes, and suddenly it turns out you have entered into what turns out to be an extraordinarily dangerous occupation.

How did you feel when you realized that the world had changed in that way?

ANDREW EXUM: Yes, you're exactly right. I got an Army scholarship. I'm from East Tennessee, so joining the military at a young age was not anything that was completely out of the ordinary. I got into the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the question was how to afford that. So it's just natural that I took an Army ROTC [Reserve Officers' Trainings Corps] scholarship. I was one of two ROTC graduates in my class of 2,200 my senior year.

JAMES TRAUB: Really? I guess even at Penn—any Ivy League school—ROTC is not exactly going to be a big thing on campus.

ANDREW EXUM: I think that has changed somewhat over the past few years. I think since the September 11 attacks, ROTC has come back on campus. But many parties are responsible for this.

The Ivy League schools took a step back from the military after Vietnam, and the military took a step back from the Northeast and the Acela corridor. It just made a decision that it was easier to recruit officers and enlisted both from the Southeast and from the West.

But yeah, that's exactly right. I joined the Army thinking that probably the most exciting thing I was going to do over a four-year stint was maybe do a peacekeeping rotation in Bosnia or Kosovo or something like that, and that would be really hardcore.

I graduated from the infantry course, from the Ranger course, and took over my first infantry platoon in April of 2001.

I was just coming back from a five-mile run with my platoon the morning of September 11. I had just gotten back. It was a hot day in upstate New York. I was in the 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum. We had just gotten done with this lengthy five-mile run. Then I found out that we had a mandatory urinalysis later that morning. So I was studying for the urinalysis by drinking canteens of water, one after the other, when I got the news. I watched the towers fall with my platoon. They still made me do the urinalysis. I was like, "That's not the most important thing going on right now."

But, yeah, it was obvious that the world had changed. So my four years that I spent in the Army were completely different than I thought they were going to be.

JAMES TRAUB: One thing that struck me in reading your book is you describe almost kind of de-Christianizing yourself, if I can use that word, that you realized that you had to not be the person you had raised yourself to be in order to do the terrible things you had to do as a soldier. Could you talk about that a little bit?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, absolutely. I think my faith hit a real low point when I was in the Army. I had grown up going to church and a strong believer. It wasn't until really several years after my time in the Army that I really kind of clawed back.

I think what had struck me was at a somewhat young age, even though I was blessed with this great critical thinking education, I wasn't ready for—strike that. Perhaps because I was blessed with this great critical thinking education, when—I remember in 2002, during Operation Anaconda, I killed a guy for the first time. Coming back to Bagram Air Base, maybe two days later after this mission, I was fine. This guy had a machine gun, so I did not particularly mourn his passing or question what I had done.

But then, when the battalion chaplain came to me and told me, "In the Old Testament the word is 'murder' not 'kill,' and you didn't commit murder," I was thinking, "Look, pal, if you're trying to make me think that Jesus wanted me to shoot somebody, you're probably not going to—I'm fine with what I did."

Then I think that he got really worried. He was kind of an awkward guy. He told the brigade chaplain about this. The brigade chaplain came to see me and I hid from the brigade chaplain. I think he was like, "Oh, we've really got a problem with Lieutenant Exum."

So they got the division chaplain to come down. My first sergeant, who was from Red Bank, Tennessee, which is adjacent to my hometown in East Tennessee, he caught me hiding behind a big pallet of meals-ready-to-eat, MREs. He said, "Sir, what are you doing?"

I said, "I'm hiding from the chaplain, first sergeant."

He said, "Sir, you just need to tell him you're a bad son of a bitch from East Tennessee and you do this for sport."

I said, "First sergeant, I don't think that's a wise idea. But thank you so much for your concern for my personal morality."

You know, for the next two, three years I went back to combat several more times with the U.S. Army's Ranger regiment. I just had the real honor to lead those men in combat.

But I was never really comfortable with this kind of easy morality of everything that we were doing was right. I think I left the Army in 2004 kind of America'ed out, kind of very down on my faith, certainly at a low point. It was actually spending those years abroad, worshipping abroad in churches all across the Middle East, that made me become more attached to my faith of my childhood and made me love America again. Nothing makes you love America more than spending a lot of time outside of America, and you begin to appreciate all the great things about this country.

By the way, I know this is being recorded. But if I ever run for office I'm going to deny that I ever said that I didn't love America at any point.

JAMES TRAUB: That tea you drank before may actually have been hallucinogenic. Somebody probably laced it with something.

ANDREW EXUM: It may have been. That's exactly right. I have always loved America 110 percent. [Laughter]

JAMES TRAUB: I'm going to back you up on this one.

ANDREW EXUM: Thank you, Jim.

JAMES TRAUB: You were a classics major in college.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: I think one thing that people who live in place like the Northeast, where there's almost no military presence whatsoever, so nobody grows up knowing military people, one thing that people here have discovered that they didn't know before is that the military is full of highly educated, deeply thoughtful people, as well as not highly educated and not deeply thoughtful people.

So I'm curious about your experience going into the military as a guy who had received an Ivy League education.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, I think that's right. There is this popular—again, probably in the Acela corridor. It's one of those thing where both parties are probably responsible for alienating military from society. The military looks for really cheap real estate wherever it goes, so it puts its bases where there is a high proportion of sand and there aren't any cities nearby. That makes the military very separate from places like New York City and Boston and Washington—to a lesser degree

Washington—these places that are kind of intellectual and business and academic capitals of the country.

So we get this idea that, "Oh, you know, it's only the poor people that go into the military, people that have no other options."

But the reality is that, especially the military officer corps tends to be middle class to upper middle class. The enlisted corps in the military tends to be still pretty middle class. For the most part the people that joined the military, both enlisted and officers, come from pretty stable environments, not this idea that everybody grew up either barefoot in Sill Creek, Tennessee—nothing wrong with Sill Creek, Tennessee; that's where my family is from—or from housing projects in the Northeast. These are myths. The military and the people who are in the military come from a broad cross-section of society. You often find extremely well-educated folks.

I would venture to say that military officers, often because they are the sons and daughters of military officers, are more likely to have lived abroad, more likely to speak a foreign language, more likely to have a college education.

JAMES TRAUB: So, Andrew, when you went back the second time, you were leading a Rangers unit in Iraq and Afghanistan.

ANDREW EXUM: Right.

JAMES TRAUB: I think our notion of that is, "Ooh, targeted killing." Is that what you did?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. I think in any war, especially, one of the great tactical innovations, I think, that we have been able to really hone over the past 10 years has been our use of direct action, special operations, and combat. I didn't much care for the movie *Zero Dark Thirty* for the way in which I think it inaccurately and immorally portrayed enhanced interrogation techniques or torture. [*Check out Carnegie Council's Ethics on Film review of* Zero Dark Thirty.]

JAMES TRAUB: Because you thought that it didn't actually happen like that, or what?

ANDREW EXUM: Oh, no. I think it may have happened like that, but I thought the way in which the movie created the cause and effect—

JAMES TRAUB: Oh, the idea that torture is necessary?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. We wouldn't have been able to get Osama bin Laden unless we had done these things. I thought the movie was in many ways repugnant for that reason and for that cause and effect that it drew.

But I will say this. The last scene of that raid in Pakistan, that was the real deal. That looked very, very familiar. Those skills were developed over a 10-year period. When we first went—

JAMES TRAUB: Were you doing night raids?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, absolutely, in Iraq especially.

JAMES TRAUB: Maybe you could just describe, give a sense of what it was you were doing.

ANDREW EXUM: Well, as part of operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there are kind of broader

daylight-type operations where you are really trying to protect the population and trying to establish some sort of security. You're doing aggressive patrolling. But at the same time you're trying to be very discriminate in how you kill.

There is a real danger that you can exacerbate the drivers of conflict in any civil war environment if you begin to kill the wrong people. So that type of discriminate violence I think is something that the U.S. military has gotten very good at over the past 10 years, which is not to say there's not collateral damage. I think right now we're not quite sure whether a U.S. drone killed a wedding party or killed an al-Qaeda convoy in Yemen. These questions continue to be front and center.

But as part of our operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan, part of what we are doing is trying to degrade the insurgent infrastructure and the insurgent command and control. The degree that we can do that effectively depended as much on good intelligence as it did on the guys at the pointy edge of the spear.

It was a great privilege to lead those guys at the pointy edge of the spear. The mission is very important. Doing it wrong and using those instruments as a blunt instrument can have catastrophic consequences.

JAMES TRAUB: Did you have terrible moments where you think you did something wrong?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. I think that in 2003, certainly in Iraq, in part because our intelligence was so poor, I would venture to say that we exacerbated the drivers of conflict in Iraq.

JAMES TRAUB: You were there how long after the initial invasion began?

ANDREW EXUM: The summer after.

JAMES TRAUB: The summer of? It was 2003, right? So a few months after the March beginning of the war.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. Until January.

It was almost—if you've ever seen the movie *The Battle of Algiers*, they have a set list of who's on their target list, and they're just kind of ticking guys off. At the end of ticking those guys off, then they realized that they've got a list that's twice as long. That was very much us in 2003. We very much thought that we just had these—the vice president called them "dead enders"—that we just had to take care of. And as soon as we did that, then we were like, "Well, as soon as we get Saddam Hussein the insurgency will be over."

But probably the worst firefight I was in was four days after we got Saddam Hussein. That was kind of a wakeup call that the conflict wasn't going to end just because we got one or two guys.

I don't want to overplay our role, either the negative things we did in 2003–2004 or the positive things we did in 2007–2008, because even though we had violence ramp up between 2003 and 2005, it plummeted in the first eight months of 2007.

JAMES TRAUB: You're talking about Iraq now, not Afghanistan.

ANDREW EXUM: Exactly, Iraq.

A lot of that had to do with what we were doing and what we did well. But there were a lot of factors

that were out of our control.

And in 2003 the same thing. I think we made a lot of mistakes. I'm not sure that even if we had been perfect that the war would have—

JAMES TRAUB: But since later you became one of the leading exponents of and theorists of the idea of counterinsurgency doctrine, was that based in part on your sense of what the U.S. had gotten wrong in both Iraq and Afghanistan in the early years?

ANDREW EXUM: Half and half. I think halfway it was based on my own experiences, I think my interest in it. Half was I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the Israelis in southern Lebanon in the 1990s, so half was based on studying that.

When I went back to Afghanistan in 2009, I think I had two frames of reference. I had my own military experience in both Iraq and Afghanistan and kind of understanding of what we were able to do, but also a better understanding of kind of the limits of what we were able to do and the folly of some of what we were trying to do, and then also the understanding of what our Israeli partners did very poorly in southern Lebanon in the 1980s and 1990s.

JAMES TRAUB: Let's talk about that for a second. McChrystal invited you to come and give him advice.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: This was at the crucial moment in early 2009 when Obama was being told by his generals "Afghanistan is way worse than we think." Obama had been hoping just to add 17,000 more troops and that would be it. But in fact, clearly, it was going to require much deeper treatment than that.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: So was your sense then, as I think both McChrystal and Petraeus wound up telling the president, that this thing could be solved with both a big increase in troops and also a big change in doctrine toward this military-civilian thing that we call counterinsurgency?

ANDREW EXUM: I think what we were doing in 2009 was a little bit different than that. So if you remember, in the fall of 2008 people started raising warning flags. The Bush administration got in both campaigns, the Obama campaign and the McCain campaign, and basically said, "Look, things are going south in Afghanistan. You need to be prepared to take immediate action when you come in. We don't care which of you gets elected, but when you become elected you are going to have very limited time to respond to this worsening situation."

In January, the Obama administration comes in and starts an immediate review of the war effort and kind of sets the policy objectives, and also sets a series of strategic goals. This is all in the March 2009 White Paper, if you want to go back and read it. It was a series of pretty expansive goals, the things we were going to do in Afghanistan—build up the Afghan government, defeat the insurgency, build up relations with our Pakistani partners on the other side of the border.

JAMES TRAUB: It was an early counterinsurgency plan, before it became more full-blown.

ANDREW EXUM: This was like the policy and the strategy. If war takes place at four different levels—the political, the strategic, the operational, the tactical—that March 2009 paper and the

president's speeches really set both the president's policy and then his strategic objectives.

They decided that they did not have their optimal commander in Afghanistan, and so they replaced General McKiernan with Stan McChrystal. I think what McChrystal had to do was he had to think through—this was his starting point: "Okay, if these are the president's strategic objectives, how are we going to develop an operational plan that's going to meet those objectives?"

The first thing they had to do—and this is really what we worked on and this assessment was later leaked to Bob Woodward at *The Washington Post*—but we did the—

JAMES TRAUB: It's got a hell of a minute analysis of the conversations that happened at the time.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. So we did the initial assessment and really tried to determine how the conflict was going. The answer was not well.

What scared us more than anything else was how little we knew about Afghanistan. I first went there in the winter of 2001–2002. I think I arrived in February 2002. What scared me was how little we knew about the country.

So if I asked an intelligence officer on the ground in southern Afghanistan, "Tell me about your area of operations," he or she could give me kind of the answers that you would expect a good intelligence officer to give: Here's the enemy, size, disposition, composition, the most likely course of action, the most dangerous course of action.

But if you were to take a step back and think, "Well, maybe what's driving the conflict is corruption, not the presence of the Taliban." Well then, who controls the water in this district, who's the governor, how did the governor get appointed, where is the governor from, who did the governor have lunch with yesterday, who are his business ties, what are his ties to the insurgency? At that stuff we were just completely blank.

What was scary more than anything else was the fact that we really didn't know whether we were in control of Kandahar, which is the second most important city in Afghanistan, and arguably the most important to the Taliban. We had very poor intelligence on the city then.

Going back about a year and a half later, I was amazed at the turnaround and how much smarter our intelligence officers had gotten. But the scariest thing in 2009 was just how little we knew.

JAMES TRAUB: So part of that conclusion was that you also needed to have a much bigger civilian presence in Afghanistan. So this idea is this combined military and—

ANDREW EXUM: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: So that was actually a really—I mean there's historical precedent for this, which you know very well—but that was a big decision, which Obama then spent months stewing over, because he asked himself: "Can we make better governance in Afghanistan? Can we reduce corruption? Can we increase the economy?" Was that just not possible for us?

ANDREW EXUM: I think the president did the right thing in the fall of 2009. In the fall of 2009, I think two things happened. First off, he gets that initial assessment that we worked on. It was like, "Holy cow, we're losing this conflict." Then, the second thing that happened were the Afghan presidential elections in September, which were most certainly corrupt.

JAMES TRAUB: Rigged.

ANDREW EXUM: Well, Karzai probably would have won anyway.

JAMES TRAUB: Yes, absolutely.

ANDREW EXUM: It probably didn't need to happen. Nonetheless, there was widespread—

JAMES TRAUB: Nobody's ever satisfied with a 55 percent win if you can get an 80 percent win.

ANDREW EXUM: That's right.

So I think those two things gave the administration some pause, and I think they began to look at what their assumptions were going into that March 2009 paper.

If your planning assumptions turn out to be false, then you have to go back and revise your plan. That's when I think the president came out, and on December 1 of 2009 he gave a speech to West Point. The policy was the same, about degrading al-Qaeda and making sure Afghanistan wasn't going to be an al-Qaeda safe haven. But the strategic objectives below were much reduced.

I don't think the military ever really came to grips with what the president said in December of 2009.

JAMES TRAUB: What's the part you think they didn't get?

ANDREW EXUM: That we weren't going to do counterinsurgency, or that we were going to do counterinsurgency but in a very limited time.

JAMES TRAUB: That's a very interesting point, because I certainly think that—I mean not just the military; I think it was widely believed that Obama said, "Okay, I bought this thing that Petraeus and McChrystal were saying. We're going to do this big counterinsurgency." Though, in fact, if you talk to people in the White House, they would say, "No, no, no, no, Obama wants to do something much more limited."

ANDREW EXUM: I think that's right. This is where it gets really fascinating and General McChrystal's subsequent dismissal gets really fascinating. The civil-military relations—and again, I think both parties have some blame here—you know, the White House was never completely explicit about this. And even you see now, as the military is trying to plan for what a potential stay-behind force would be in Afghanistan—and it took forever.

They'd say, "Well, how about 10,000?"

"Ahhh, I'm looking at something different."

It's kind of the go-find-a-rock drill. They would say, "Ahhh, nope, that's not the rock I'm looking for." So you come back and find another rock.

I think that's in some ways what the military has had to do with the White House. They've never wanted to be explicit about how few troops they want to leave. But I think they're probably getting there. I don't know. I haven't worked on Afghanistan in a while.

But overall I think that the guidance that was given to the military was pretty poor in terms of not being explicit enough. And I think the military did a poor job of kind of reading the tea leaves in

Washington and really trying to read the president as well.

JAMES TRAUB: Well, you had Stan McChrystal, as I recall, going to Marjah and talking about setting up this "government in a box" and so forth. So all that language made you think that this very complicated, subtle idea, where you really have to recreate governance in a place, was just so alien to the military culture, and indeed to our entire political culture, that we wouldn't have known how to carry it out if we truly were dedicated to carrying it out.

ANDREW EXUM: I think Rajiv Chandrasekaran's book *Little America* on Helmand Province is brilliant in terms of the way it lays out what actually did and did not happen.

First off, there were some fantastic civilians, Carter Malkasian being one of them, who wrote a great book, *War Comes to Garmser*, a Pashtu-speaking Ph.D. who spent two years on the ground in Garmser. There were some fantastic civilians who did go to Helmand.

The bigger questions of whether or not we should have been in Helmand in the first place, whether or not we should have been in Kandahar—we were kind of committed to go into Helmand. These are operational details. But we committed to go into Helmand years in advance.

JAMES TRAUB: These are the two southern and southeastern provinces in Afghanistan where the Taliban was at its strongest.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. And there were really good reasons to go into Helmand. The Helmand river valley is a lush valley to the west of Kandahar. Over time the Taliban had begun to make inroads in there and it had begun to press into Kandahar. There were good reasons to go there. Whether there were better reasons for going there than Kandahar—

JAMES TRAUB: But I don't want to get—

ANDREW EXUM: These are minute—

JAMES TRAUB: Right. The bigger question I want you to answer for us is, since you were a well-known advocate of this stuff—and I wrote lots of positive things about counterinsurgency myself, and I feel kind of chastened by how badly things have turned out, above all on that civilian governance side—is the inference that it's just vain to think that the United States, with the kind of powerful but clumsy tools it has at its disposal, can really do something transformative inside countries that are as deeply damaged as Afghanistan?

ANDREW EXUM: I don't think so. One of the conclusions that you come back from Rajiv's book with is that, first off, you can do it and you can have an effect on both the security and on the positive developmental, whatever metrics that you choose. Whether or not that is enduring depends on a lot of factors that are outside of your control.

So I think that one of the lessons that I take from it is that the U.S. military, State Department, USAID [United States Agency for International Development] is actually capable of doing pretty awesome things on the ground.

JAMES TRAUB: So why did things go so badly then?

ANDREW EXUM: I'm not sure they have gone badly.

JAMES TRAUB: Oh, really?

ANDREW EXUM: The point that I would make is that they have gone really well. How much money it took and whether or not it's going to be enduring, I think that's the key issue.

So in Iraq, for example, Iraq is now experiencing levels of violence that are back to the pre-surge days. We have reached the worst-case scenario in Iraq. Did the surge work? Absolutely. It was able to reduce those drivers of conflict and was able to buy the government of Iraq time and space in order to have a peaceful political process. Was it enduring? That was on the government of Iraq.

JAMES TRAUB: If the premise of this thing is you have to be able to change the place that you're operating in so that when you leave it will be able to stand on its own two feet, then you are describing a failure.

ANDREW EXUM: I think we're talking about two different things. I think what I'm saying is that you can be successful in the things that you have control over, but ultimately the limitations that you face when you do this as a third party, so on behalf of the host nation—

JAMES TRAUB: Right. You're the colonial power.

ANDREW EXUM: Right. You have to be realistic about what you can and can't get. I don't think we did a very good job of thinking through at the same time we were doing this great stuff on the ground how we were going to affect the political process, and in Afghanistan as well.

So we had a great military strategy and I think we had a decent development strategy. I think we had a really poor political strategy. When you look at both Iraq and Afghanistan, many of the issues in Iraq and Afghanistan—I think that our U.S. Marines and our USAID folks on the ground in Helmand Province did a great job, and I think they were able to effect real, tangible change. But whether or not that change is enduring depends on factors that are ultimately outside of their control.

And so I think where we stand to be chastened is when we are in these environments and when we commit to these environments in the first place. The wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan, for me at least, have made me much more conservative about intervention, period, because once you decide to commit, then you really are at the mercy of—as Clausewitz would say, you've got your rational/irrational/nonrational forces that comprise this experience of war.

The fog of war is often something that is often out of your control. There are a lot of factors that you may not have direct control over. You have control over one side of that pyramid, which are those rational factors that the commanders—

JAMES TRAUB: I want to come back to this in term of Syria. But let me first ask you about your own choices.

When you left the military, you moved to Beirut to do a master's and learn Arabic. What was your thought about what you wanted to do with your life that caused you to do that?

ANDREW EXUM: I had just invaded my second country and I knew nothing about the language, the culture, the people, or the country I had just invaded.

I always thought that I was going to go into the military and then move back home to Tennessee and be like some country lawyer. I remember sitting there on the hood of my Humvee in Iraq and talking to my—and this is a great example of the type of people that are in the military. This guy right now works in the White House in personnel. He's a fantastic soldier. He was a sergeant, an enlisted

soldier in the Rangers. But he was captain of the baseball team at James Madison and got like a 178 on the LSAT, which is a very high score, and decided, "Nope, I'm going to enlist in the Ranger Regiment instead of going to law school." Just a remarkable character.

I was saying, "Colin, do I really want to go to law school next year?"

He said, "Sir, do you really want to study torts next year?"

The answer to that was definitely no.

But I was very curious about this region that I had been plopped into and that I was engaging with from behind body armor and a weapon. So I made the decision in the spring of 2004 to leave the military and I matriculated at the American University of Beirut, lived in Cairo a little bit, and then went back to Beirut to do the field work for my dissertation.

JAMES TRAUB: So how long did you actually spend living in the Middle East?

ANDREW EXUM: Probably about three years.

Yeah, that's another thing. When I came—and this is relevant because by the summer of 2009, when I went to Afghanistan, if I were to fault myself in some things, I had spent most of the past decade not living in America. I think one of the things that a lot of us got wrong in 2009 in thinking about what the strategy should be in Afghanistan was we got the politics wrong. America was tired of war.

JAMES TRAUB: The domestic appetite for this.

ANDREW EXUM: That's exactly right.

JAMES TRAUB: You lived for three years in Middle East. How would you say that changed you?

ANDREW EXUM: We already spoke about one way, in the sense that by the time I came back to America I had fallen back in love with my country. First, I loved the Middle East, so it wasn't as if there was opposition there.

But it was also an incredibly broadening experience. I think that sometimes, for me at least—and I'm speaking at the wise old age of 35—but sometimes the best broadening experiences entail going very deep into something. I think those years that I immersed myself specifically in Lebanon and in my doctoral dissertation, it opens up the world in a different way, because when you go to other places, if you really take the time to learn a region, study the languages, really immerse yourself in a different culture in a different region, and different histories and peoples, then you know what you don't know when you go to other places.

So you can plop me down in—I don't know—Colombia, and I don't know anything about Colombia, but I know a lot of what I don't know. I know I haven't spent the time in the region.

So I think it taught me humility in a way, which is a thing that I think every young man in his twenties should learn. I'm still working on it.

JAMES TRAUB: A fair amount of time in Afghanistan and Iraq will teach a person humility as well.

ANDREW EXUM: That's exactly right.

JAMES TRAUB: So, given that you have spent all this time in the Arab world, then suddenly the Arab Spring breaks out soon afterwards, have you been surprised and dismayed by the negative turn the Arab Spring has taken, or is it kind of what you expected?

ANDREW EXUM: First off, what happened wasn't something that I expected.

JAMES TRAUB: Nor anybody.

ANDREW EXUM: There are people in this room who know much more about—I'm looking at Elijah Zarwan, who knows more about Egypt than I think Hosni Mubarak. There are people in this room who know the region better than I do.

But I think very few of us anticipated what was going to happen. I think we anticipated elements of it. So you could see, for example, during the 1990s—I think Marc Lynch did a very nice job talking about this emerging Arab public sphere and the emergence of satellite newspapers, where you could have a newspaper that was written in London but then published in Tangier.

JAMES TRAUB: Marc Lynch, by the way, is the professor at George Washington whom you should all read on foreignpolicy.com.

ANDREW EXUM: He also wrote a book. That led to then his study of Al Jazeera. Suddenly, people in Tahrir and Cairo could see what was going on in Tunisia; people in Damascus could see what was going on in Tahrir. And so even though the local drivers of conflict and of revolution in all those places were different, and explaining why we haven't had revolutions elsewhere, and why the revolutions that we have seen in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Egypt have differed, I think there has been a broader regional phenomenon.

That has made it really difficult for us as U.S. policymakers, because trying to come up with a coherent regional policy when our interests differ from country to country, has been really difficult.

JAMES TRAUB: I'm just curious whether your general take on the whole phenomenon is more downbeat or more hopeful?

ANDREW EXUM: In general, I think I'm more hopeful.

JAMES TRAUB: You are?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. I think that we are not done with upheaval. You can look at, for example, Saudi Arabia. The price of oil is going to have to be—I think Greg Gause did a study—$300 by 2030 in order for it to meet its entitlement obligations to its people. Saudi Arabia, I think, produced 2 million private sector jobs over a 10-year period, but 90 percent of those jobs went to expatriates.

And oh, by the way, we are getting ready to go through this transition from the second generation of Saudi leaders to the third generation. Nobody's really sure how that is going to take place.

So, even though Saudi Arabia has been very stable over the short term because it's got lots of cash and because it's got secure patronage networks and good local security, who knows what that looks like in 30 years?

However, I'm hopeful as you see governments hopefully become more responsive to the public weal. Mona El-Ghobashy is a great scholar of Egypt at Barnard College. She wrote a couple months after the revolution in Egypt and talked about the challenge of those state institutions becoming more

responsive to the public weal. It is going to be difficult for Egypt, as we are seeing.

In other places, in post-civil-war Syria and Libya, where state institutions have always been weak, you're looking at state formation out of nothing.

JAMES TRAUB: Let's talk about Syria. Syria has been so many different things over the last few years—an Arab Spring-style uprising, a violent uprising, an increasingly sectarian civil war, and now quite possibly a new front in the war on terror. So has your own thinking about what should be done in Syria changed over time? Maybe you could just talk a little bit about what you would have said if we had had this conversation in early 2012 and what you think now.

ANDREW EXUM: No, I don't think—and maybe this is a poor reflection on me, because one of the things we did when I was at the Department of Defense, we often went back and looked at policy options that we had dismissed a year earlier—"Maybe, just because it was wrong in 2012, maybe it's right in 2013." I think that's a healthy thing to do. But I don't think my own stance would have changed that much.

Unfortunately, James Fearon—speaking of a plug for *Foreign Policy* again—a professor at Stanford who is arguably America's foremost theorist on civil wars, wrote a great piece on why the conflict in Syria will likely go on for quite some time.

I hate drawing analogies. We participated in a peace game at the U.S. Institute of Peace on the conflict in Syria a couple of days ago, and I think people compared Syria to Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Lebanon, every civil war.

JAMES TRAUB: Bosnia.

ANDREW EXUM: Bosnia, absolutely.

Every single war that had ever happened we were able to find. But if you just kind of look at a big large-end perspective on civil wars, it seems like the conflict in Syria will last for quite some time.

JAMES TRAUB: So, Andrew, would your view then be that the U.S. should just keep as far away from this as possible because there's just not a whole heck of a lot we can do?

ANDREW EXUM: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: That has consistently been your view?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. I think that the Obama administration has been prudent. I think that they have not articulated that prudence. I think rhetorically we have committed ourselves to the conflict, but in no material way have we committed ourselves to the conflict.

JAMES TRAUB: For a lot of people this is a profound moral issue, and here we are having this Ethics Matters conversation. So these are all big moral questions. But certainly for a lot of people they would have said, and especially a year and a half ago, which is why I talk about the way the conflict has changed, that there was an opportunity. President Obama was committed to the idea of preventing atrocities. There was the possibility of being able to help the rebels in a way that might have brought the conflict to an end and also brought it to a more just conclusion. Is it your sense that that was kind of an illusion?

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. For a lot of the reasons that we just discussed, I'm very skeptical of our

ability to decisively intervene in civil wars, especially the types of civil war that we are seeing in Syria.

We decisively intervened in Libya. That was a pretty linear battle. And of course that instability has continued.

JAMES TRAUB: Would you say that the instability shows that the intervention was a mistake or no?

ANDREW EXUM: I don't know.

JAMES TRAUB: So that one may have been the right thing?

ANDREW EXUM: It's tough for me to say. Certainly, I think we have seen what at the Department of Defense we would call the bleeding coming out of Libya, the bleeding of armed personnel, weapons, illicit goods. You can look at a map of North Africa and see the smuggling routes all across North Africa and you can see in some ways the movement of not terribly nice personnel and really not nice weaponry out of Libya.

JAMES TRAUB: That's a very diplomatic and delicate way. Your mom would be very proud of you.

ANDREW EXUM: These people have mothers too, so I don't want to insult them.

JAMES TRAUB: Exactly right. And then they run for something.

ANDREW EXUM: That's right.

I think you can see the consequences of the intervention. In Syria, if you intervene, I think you have to intervene in a very decisive and big way if you want to have an effect on the conflict dynamic. I think that our abortive intervention in Lebanon in 1983—again, I hate historical analogies, but since it's right next door it may be worth looking at—we ourselves, kind of unwittingly, became partisans to the conflict in 1983. That should be a cautionary tale.

I think Iraq and Afghanistan, and the way in which we were able to decisively intervene in both places—we were able to have a decisive effect on the ground, and our soldiers, our aid workers, our diplomats were successful in many ways. Whether or not their efforts will be enduring I think is something quite different.

JAMES TRAUB: This has been a great conversation. I'm sure a lot of you have questions.

Questions

QUESTION: I'm James Starkman.

You have basically discussed the future of war vis-à-vis counterinsurgency, intervention, or lack of intervention. Do you want to comment more on the possible nuclear issues? We had a speaker here not long ago who basically said that most probably no president of the United States would pull the nuclear trigger if it involved the killing of millions of noncombatants in neighboring countries or whatever. I just thought you might want to comment.

ANDREW EXUM: I'm not a specialist. Nuclear weapons are on the very high end of the spectrum. I've spent a lot of my time in my life at the very low end of the spectrum, which is a very fancy way of saying that I can't really say much of consequence.

I would say that in the 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s in academia you saw a proliferation of thinking on the use of nuclear weapons and on deterrence and on game theory revolving around when nuclear weapons would be used.

Meanwhile, as my friend Chris Chivers would point out, the weapons that were actually killing people in the 20th century were small arms. The AK-47 is probably the most deadly weapon in the 20th century and continues to be today. Eighty-four percent of the conflicts since the Napoleonic Wars have been small wars or insurgencies. They haven't been large state-on-state conflicts.

So when I think about the future of war, I think a lot about the present and what the conflict in Syria looks like, what the conflict in postwar Libya looks like, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq again. That to me looks much more like the future, looks much more like the past.

I agree that I think in terms of whether we would use nuclear weapons—it's hard to see an environment in which we would, but if we're ever weighing whether or not to lose one million soldiers in an invasion of mainland Japan, then we may rethink that option. I think that there was a complicated moral calculus that led to that first use of nuclear weapons. So I think if we ever saw that again, then we would probably reconsider their use.

JAMES TRAUB: If you think about small wars, because that's really your specialty, what's an example? Would Yemen, for example, be an instance? Do you think this is what it is going to look like in the future?

ANDREW EXUM: I do not support using thermonuclear weapons in Yemen, no.

JAMES TRAUB: Absolutely. In Yemen we're talking about some combination of drone warfare, training the military, economic development assistance, political guidance. Is that what war is going to look like in the future?

ANDREW EXUM: Well, I would love for us to get to the point where we are not viewing a country like Yemen solely through the perspective of counterterrorism.

JAMES TRAUB: Which you would say right now that's your sense of the Obama administration's strategy?

ANDREW EXUM: Absolutely. And there are other countries where we don't look at it that way. We've got plenty of bad guys running around Lebanon, for example, and yet we have a much more comprehensive strategy or more comprehensive efforts in Lebanon. In Yemen, I think we have been very taken with a counterterrorism focus to the conflict.

JAMES TRAUB: And you think that's self-defeating at some level?

ANDREW EXUM: Well, I think it's at best incomplete. I think you touched on it yourself. Yemen's got other issues. But you can see in our Middle East policy from country to country oftentimes—we've got five interests in the Middle East. We've got the security of the State of Israel, access to hydrocarbon resources in the Persian Gulf, counterterrorism, counter-proliferation. Those are the two ones that we added after 2001. And then, in the president's speech in 2011, his remarks on the Arab Spring, he added political and economic reform—not democracy, but the promotion of political and economic reform.

And yet, if you go around the region, you can see in each region we have stacked those interests.

You have to prioritize somewhere, and often those interests are in conflict with one another. I think certainly Yemen is a great example where counterterrorism has kind of trumped everything else.

QUESTION: My name is Kim Gantz Wexler.

Let's say President Obama calls you tomorrow and says, "Andrew, I need your help." Which of the president's foreign policy initiatives would you change?

ANDREW EXUM: That's a very good question. Let me think.

In general, after coming out of the government after a year—and I was not a political appointee, so I was there on a fellowship from the Council on Foreign Relations—I think what that experience gave me is that even when I disagreed with the policy—for example, on Egypt I thought we kind of took the middle route on Egypt; we took the lukewarm option, the Goldilocks option, rather than choosing one side or the other. Even though I might be critical of that, I could always see—and it's a remarkable thing, when you sit in a deputies' committee meeting and you hear really smart people debate these issues—coming out of there, I would often disagree with the conclusions, but I would always understand how they got from point A to point B, and I respected the logic that went behind it.

I think I'll become sure of myself in all things policy-related, I'm sure, at a later date. But I've been so far, I think that I'm pretty sympathetic towards a lot of the decisions that the administration has made on a lot of big issues. But let me answer your question a little more fully because I didn't really give you anything.

I think the big issues going forward, I think I would spend a lot more time on stuff that's really boring, like the federal workforce. Over the past summer, I watched our foreign policy workforce, the Foreign Service officers, the Department of Defense bureaucrats, just get absolutely demoralized by furloughs and by the shutdown and being told "you're not essential" or "you guys are just mooching off the taxpayer." I think you've got a demoralized national security workforce now. That I think would be a priority. Boosting that workforce would be the first priority.

Second, this administration is very centralized in its decision-making. Especially, it seems like a lot of the expertise is all in the departments and agencies, but you've got a very small group of people within the national security staff who make a lot of the main decisions. I think that has led to some misguidance or to some oversights.

That's a really boring answer to a very good question.

QUESTION: Reed Bonadonna. I work at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point. We're a lonely little island of military uniforms in the Northeast.

The topic was the future of war. I wonder if you have done any thinking about the future of the military profession. Two things about that.

First of all, as a classics major, do you think that the military profession needs to be looking to its past to consider the future?

ANDREW EXUM: In what way?

QUESTIONER: Well, I was just talking to my students in a class today about the Roman army, which in its time certainly had plenty of blood on its hands but was a civilizing force, and civilization followed the flag. Light after dark, roads, baths, things to read—these things followed the Roman

legions. So I think some of these historical examples are worth pondering.

I actually brought a notebook in with me here today, which I note has George C. Marshall on the cover, a Nobel Prize winner, career soldier, secretary of state, secretary of defense—

ANDREW EXUM: Never voted. Refused to laugh at Roosevelt's jokes because he thought that that would be a violation of military—

QUESTIONER: Right. "Call me General. I am not George to you, sir," something like that.

ANDREW EXUM: That's right.

QUESTIONER: So looking to its past, and also maybe making a distinction between the military profession—and by that I don't only mean the profession of arms, people who wear uniforms and carry weapons, but the larger military profession, which might include some civilians who take a professional interest in armed conflict.

ANDREW EXUM: I haven't done a lot of thinking about the military profession. I've done a little bit of thinking about the officer corps. I'm worried that you're coming out of this environment where over the past 10 years you've given these young junior officers tons of freedom and an ungodly amount of power in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and you're going to bring them back in and they are going to live in a world of PowerPoint slides and MTOEs [table of organization and equipment] and all kinds of stuff that I think is going to just absolutely drive a lot of our talented officers out of the Army. So I worry a little bit about keeping talent within the military.

In the same way, one of the big success stories of the past 10 years has been the endurance of the all-volunteer force. If you had told us in this room on September 11 that we are going to fight for 10 years, we're going to have lengthy invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, an all-volunteer force is not going to descend into Vietnam 1969—heroin addiction and listening to Jimi Hendrix in the barracks—you would have been shocked.

And yet, I think we have obviously been doing something right, because we've put our military under tremendous stress and it has endured in a great way.

I worry, though—and we talked about this a little before, and thank you for being this island of uniforms in the Northeast. The U.S. military has largely divested itself from the Northeast and from the North. I think Chicago has maybe two ROTC programs for—how many people are in greater Chicago? Like 10 million. I think the state of Alabama, which has about 5 million people, has something like 29 ROTC programs. The military has done very effective cost/benefit analysis, like: "Look, that's where the officers are; that's where we're going to recruit our officers."

But you've ended up with an officer corps that is disproportionately white Southern and largely divorced from the financial capital of America, the political capital of America, the intellectual capitals of America.

I worry about that not so much for the officer corps. I think the officer corps is pretty worldly and our officer corps is really educated. I worry about what that does for people living in New York. A shocking number of people, even after a decade of conflict, don't know somebody who has fought in Iraq or Afghanistan.

JAMES TRAUB: New York is a very diverse place except for that.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes, that's right.

And so I worry about that in terms of civil-military relations. I think that then leads towards an environment where you have a president right now who—nobody wants to do a poor job; nobody wants to have a poor relation with their generals. I think this president has had good relations with some generals.

But in large part I really find a civilian political corps in Washington that really has a lack of familiarity with the military. It has a tough time speaking to the military. It doesn't really know what makes the military tick. And both sides are responsible for that.

So in terms of the future military, I would love to see a military that is both of the people and by the people and for the people, and a people who recognize that, who know the military.

JAMES TRAUB: I wonder if the all-volunteer force is part of the problem, in the sense that there is no opportunity for service for all but a small fraction of people, and therefore no exposure to the military.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. And I love Stan McChrystal. He has proposed some sort of draft or service corps. I don't think that that would be wise.

JAMES TRAUB: That may not be a good solution.

QUESTION: My name is Brian Jones. I'm a Marine Corps veteran here, going to Columbia.

I wanted to revisit something that you said about Iraq and the decrease in violence that occurred in 2007. One more foreignpolicy.com plug—General Petraeus wrote recently "How We Won in Iraq," kind of revisiting that question of whether or not it was surge tactics or the Anbar Awakening. He said that it was largely the Awakening, but they were able to duplicate that beyond Anbar because of the surge. I was just wondering what your take on that is.

ANDREW EXUM: Look, I think everybody gets to be right on Iraq. You know, victory has 1,000 fathers.

You were in Iraq?

QUESTIONER: I was in Afghanistan.

ANDREW EXUM: I think people that downplay what the U.S. military did—my good friend and a great military historian named Gian Gentile says we didn't do counterinsurgency right, and we were doing all that stuff in 2006 and it didn't have the effect. I think the folks that downplay it miss a lot of what was going on in 2007.

But, without question, there were other factors that took place, some of which we had no control over, some of which, if we did have control over, we would have tried to stop. For example, there was a really bloody civil war in Iraq between Sunni and Shia Arabs in 2005 and 2006 after the Samarra bombings. If you look at a lot of that violence, that was not Iraqi-on-U.S., that was Iraqi-on-Iraqi. If we could have stopped that violence, we would have.

JAMES TRAUB: That was nationwide. That was all across Iraq.

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. But one of the effects of that was that by 2007 you had a lot of

neighborhoods that weren't ethnically cleansed but were—those mixed neighborhoods, you had fewer of them, so they were easier to divide in 2007, A.

B, the Sunni Arabs knew they lost by 2007, and they knew that their future couldn't be in opposition to the United States. I think General Petraeus put 300,000 people who had formerly been insurgents on U.S. payrolls in 2007, which was just remarkable.

JAMES TRAUB: By the way, should we give George W. Bush, who deserves credit for doing nothing but damage in Iraq—should we in fact give him credit for having authorized Petraeus to go ahead with the surge in 2007?

ANDREW EXUM: Let me get to that in a second because that's a separate issue.

Muqtada al-Sadr stayed on the sidelines for part of 2007.

JAMES TRAUB: Shiite leader in the slums of Baghdad.

ANDREW EXUM: This man is my footnote, so I appreciate it. [Laughter]

We didn't have anything to do with that. But it was really good that he did. So I think there were a lot of factors that were largely out of our control in 2007 that broke our way, and I think we have to be somewhat humble about what we were able to accomplish.

That's not to say that General Petraeus and the soldiers on the ground in Iraq shouldn't be very proud of what they were able to do and the way in which they were able to nimbly change how they did business in 2007. So I take everything that General Petraeus said and say "You're absolutely right—and you got really lucky too," in a way that he didn't in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2010.

With respect to Bush, I think we are absolutely right to criticize the Bush administration for its decision to go to war in Iraq. However, I think if you look at that administration from 2007 and 2008, I think it does two things really well which were of huge consequence. Its decision to surge, to double down in Iraq, I think is to its credit; and then, the way it handled the financial crisis, where it kind of threw ideology out the window, ended up bailing out banks, which was not the dominant ideology of the time.

JAMES TRAUB: The evil TARP [Troubled Asset Relief Program], despised by people on the right, was a Bush program, not an Obama program.

ANDREW EXUM: That's exactly right. So I give the Bush administration credit for those two things.

QUESTION: Ben Homer. I'm a grad student of international affairs.

I'm curious about two things related to the future of war. On is civilian contractors. I know a number of friends of mine who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. There's two sides. Some say, "If I go back to the military, I'm going to be in the military." The other side is they can make probably three or four more times as much if they go and work as a contractor.

The other is drones. There has been a lot of outcry in various countries about this and about whether it's actually productive in terms of military programs.

ANDREW EXUM: Let me take the second first. With respect to drones, I have been very critical at various times of the drone program in Pakistan and wrote an op-ed that was not very appreciated in

Washington in 2009 about that program.

But drones are like using direct-action special operations. It's a way to do discriminate killing, keeping in mind that there is no such thing really, ultimately. You very rarely get only the person you are going after.

When that type of discriminate killing takes place as part of a larger strategy, within a broader political/economic strategy, I think that there is a place for it. I worry that drones have been used more as a tactic in place of a strategy.

And they're easy. You can fly them from Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. That makes them ultimately very seductive to especially civilian policymakers, who just don't want to put guys like I used to be on the ground.

JAMES TRAUB: It's also worth pointing out that there are many places where the people in those countries don't want to have somebody on the ground, and so one of the appeals of drones is that in a place like Pakistan or Yemen, where you can't have American boots on the ground, you can have a drone in the air.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, that's exactly right. And certainly I would say our Pakistani partners have been much more aware—let's put it that way—of a lot of our actions in Pakistan than perhaps they have let on in the public sphere.

JAMES TRAUB: Do you want to just briefly address the civilian contractor question?

ANDREW EXUM: Yes. I kind of feel the same way about civilian contractors. When you talk about contractors, the vast majority of those are not trigger pullers. The vast majority of those are the people who are running your dining halls and things like that. That's fine. If that saves the U.S. taxpayer money, that makes more sense economically, that's fine.

Private security corporations and private military corporations are another thing. It's remarkable —usually, occupied people often don't distinguish between people wearing uniforms and people in Blackwater. So in Iraq, when a Blackwater contractor kills a person at a traffic intersection because their incentives are just to get that diplomat, or whoever, from point A to point B safely, and forget the broader construct, that then becomes an issue politically, strategically.

So my worry about private military corporations is that often the incentive structures aren't right. If you think about it as economists, they are not rewarded for how they fit into the broader strategy for what we are trying to do in an Iraq or an Afghanistan. They are only worried about their very limited mission, fulfilling the terms of their contract.

So we have seen quite a lot of incidents that have had strategic effect. That would be my concern. So I am much more concerned actually about private military corporations than I think I am about drones. But both of them have to be within a broader construct.

QUESTION: My name is Hunter Gross. I'm a student at Hunter College.

You mentioned kind of a disconnect between civilian leadership and the military and the lack of understanding of the military. Do you think that, especially given the high level of education in the military, that perhaps in 2009 there was more of a responsibility to kind of advise Obama on what such a commitment that Afghanistan would be, especially when the country is hoping to get people

out, advising that to be successful it will take a long time and lots of resources, and not just give the military perspective of the plan of action?

JAMES TRAUB: I think the military, to sharpen that slightly, should a little bit blame McChrystal and Petraeus for the advice they gave Obama in 2009, given where things stand today.

ANDREW EXUM: I think they did exactly what you asked, though, what this gentleman was talking about. So if you set those broader strategic objectives, then it is up to the military to think through how they would operationalize that and what resources they would need. I think that the military was quite blunt with what resources it needed. So I actually think they did what this gentleman asked. I thought the military did a good job there of explaining what resources they would need.

The military should have done a better job. There is an idea that when you walk into a principals' committee meeting at the White House—you've got the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and you've got the secretary of defense—there's an idea that—and the civilians and the military and the Pentagon always mention this to one another—"When we walk into that meeting, if we agree, we've got two votes; if we disagree, we've got no votes."

I think there was an effort in 2009 to have one recommendation from the Department of Defense: "This is what we are recommending and this is what we are saying we are going to need."

What the administration was really looking for was more options—"Hey, can we do this any other way?"

It's the responsibility of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He is the principal military advisor, not to the secretary of defense, but to the president. So one could ask Mike Mullen, "Was there room to do that differently? Should you have been developing other options for the president?" From a bureaucratic perspective, you kind of get committed to one recommendation because you know that that's going to give you the most heft in an interagency discussion, whether it be a deputies' committee meeting or a principals' committee meeting or a National Security Council meeting. In retrospect, "Did you owe the president more options?"

JAMES TRAUB: Give him three, right—way too few, way too many, and then the number that he wanted, which is what Obama chose?

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah. There's this idea that the military—I think Dick Holbrooke said this: "I'll tell you what the military is going to do. They're going go high, medium, and low, and their medium is what they are going to want."

To a degree that's somewhat true. But in the sense that that's kind of the sweet spot for the strategy to be successful, I think you had to actually, paradoxically, go either high or low, low for an extended period of time or high for a limited period of time.

I think what the president did was, in some case, the worst option, by taking that middle route, by taking the medium number of troops for a limited period of time. It was too few troops to have a real effect on the campaign overall or the country overall. I think if I were to go back, I think you'd have to start thinking about, "Well, if you can only give me troop numbers or time, I'll take time." I think that probably would have been a better option.

JAMES TRAUB: Now you have also answered the earlier question about where you would differ with Obama.

ANDREW EXUM: Yeah, four years later, right.

JAMES TRAUB: Thank you so much. This has been a great conversation.

ANDREW EXUM: Thank you.

Audio

Andrew Exum is a scholar, author, and former U.S. Army officer. In this revealing talk, he describes, in vivid detail, his days leading platoons in Iraq and Afghanistan; insights gained while working at the Pentagon; the successes and failures of America's counterinsurgency efforts; and the growing civilian-military divide, especially in the Northeast.

Video Clip

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